VIEWPOINTS FROM ACROSS THE STATE

Education reform is necessary. 

Correctly diagnosing autism early is more important than ever

by James Major

The Massachusetts Association of 766 Approved Private Schools (maaps) represents 91 private schools that have been approved by the Commonwealth’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the education of students who have special needs. Our members provide highly specialized education and treatment to approximately 6,000 public students with special needs.

Our students are the most diverse group of young people in the Commonwealth. School officials seek an approved private school only when the public school cannot provide the appropriate education for a student. Our students are required to pass MCAS to receive a high school diploma, yet the expectation is that they should perform at the level of their non-disabled peers, and yet these students do not benefit from the same level of educational resources as students in public schools.

In 1993, the state legislature passed the Education Reform Act with the appropriated billions of dollars in additional state aid for public schools to pay for the cost of compliance. As our membership has grown, our school boards have also been responsible for implementing the Education Reform Act, and yet until this day, there is no state funding to pay for the cost of compliance.

Compounding the problem is the fact that the federal government has increased its expenditures set by the Operational Services Division (OSD) have not even kept pace with the rising costs in the classroom, well below what it costs our members to educate Massachusetts’ public school students. As a result, our schools were required to raise over $26 million to subsidize public education. Since 1993, which is nearly $200 million.

We have been successful in obtaining money through private donations, fundraising, and charging higher tuitions to private and out of state students. Our members bring over $165 million per year in out of state tuition payments into Massachusetts’ economy.

So, while our schools have been contributing to the state economy and subsidizing public education, they have been asked to make changes in their curriculum, to reform requirements with little additional funding from the Commonwealth. As a result, our members cannot pay staff salaries that compete with those offered by traditional public schools. The average salary of a teacher in a traditional public school with a master’s degree is $54,160 in FY 08, compared to $41,563 in our member schools – and our teachers work with a much lower pupil-teacher ratio. It is important to note that our teachers and other staff work an average of 250 days of the year, compared to 180 days in public schools. Many of our schools operate 220 days. In other words, our staff work longer hours for less pay, yet pay less than half of the real price. Our schools are only able to retain 65% of their teachers each year, compared to 80% in traditional public schools. Even more troubling – the average rate of teacher licensure in a traditional public school was 96%, compared to 95% in public schools.

We are happy to be able to report that we have begun to resolve these disparities. In November of 2006, the OSD adopted a new pricing policy: Special Circumstances for Salary Upgrades. This new pricing policy in the OSD is a tool for tuition rate adjustments that provide more competitive salaries to teachers and make our schools more affordable. The new OSD pricing policy to support teachers and education resources to pass MCAS, but it is not the whole solution. It can be revolved at any time, for any reason.

Assistant Majority Whip Patricia Haddad has filed legislation H.415 that would provide more funding for private schools. The OSD is considering teacher and license renewal and retention rates and educational resources in our member schools when setting tuition rates are discussed. We ask the legislature to support H.415 and ensure an equal education opportunity to all students.

James Major is the executive director of the Massachusetts Association of 766 Approved Private Schools (maaps).

by Walter P. Christian

Eight years ago, as a result of the autism crisis, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data indicating that the increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder was a national concern and a renewed call to action.

New statistics place the prevalence rate of autism at 1 in 110 children. Further emphasizes the critical need in this country to effectively tackle this disease. The Obama administration has proposed a coordinated national strategy to address the challenges of ASD, including a significant increase in funding for autism research. But research, however critical, is only one piece of the equation.

Families grappling with the complexities of autism spectrum disorders are more than answers. Future information on the best practices can literally change the trajectory of the life of an individual with ASD. What are the specific requirements that we do we do not know. Do we diagnose a very young child with an autism spectrum disorder? Do we continue to support a loved one with ASD across the lifespan? While we have not yet discovered a cure, we do know a tremendous amount about autism. It is imperative in the implementation of effective treatment options. How can we help families with individuals with ASD requiring lifelong care? How can we ensure that we can afford life-saving costs of lifelong care by two-thirds. The debate has been one that should focus on providing the best care for the individuals who need it. One of the most critical areas involves treatment.

In the last eight years, practitioners are inundated with claims of “new and improved” treatments, most of which have little evidence behind them. Most of them are for-profit organizations. The ASD community requires well-researched and evidence-based treatments that will help children to reach their potential.

For-profit organizations, which can be financially further encouraged by the number of legislators who are currently supporting a broad range of legislation to our knowledge, have not addressed many of these issues related to ASD.

Walter P. Christian is the president and CEO of Mag Institute.