

New special ed rules to allow smaller classes

By Tim Richard
staff writer

New special education rules, which sailed through the State Board of Education last week, are "designed to last into the next century," in the words of one administrator.

The end of a two-year working process was a unanimous vote by the state's highest elected policy board.

Board members raised only two questions — about a possible six-year age range in special ed classes and about higher costs due to smaller teacher loads.

They seemed satisfied the rules won't hurt Michigan's 160,000 special ed students.

"THE CURRENT special education rules were passed in 1973, when special ed was a new mandate," said Dr. Edward Birch, state director of special education services.

"Over the last 13 or 14 years, we've seen drastic changes," Birch said, citing two:

First, kids who used to be taught in separate rooms are now mainstreamed as much as possible. Half of our kids in special ed spend less than half their time in special ed classrooms."

Second, court decisions have forced school officials to put kids in "the least restrictive environment."

DOROTHY BEARDMORE, a new state-board member who served on both the Rochester and Oakland Intermediate boards, won approval for her request for a periodic review of the rule allowing children from as many as six elementary grades to be taught in a single "resource room."

That change had stirred concern and some opposition from Oakland County parents. The current rule is four years.

The change was made, Birch said, because "you'd need two classrooms in every building to have a four-year span."

How revised special ed rules affect Oakland schools

Of the state's 124 special education rules, exactly half were revised by the State Board of Education. Dr. Richard Baldwin, policy development specialist, said only 17 would have any cost impact.

Here are the four major cost changes and how they would affect Oakland Intermediate and local school districts:

• Severely mentally impaired — Current rule allows a maximum of one teacher, four instructional aides and 24 students.

In a real life situation dealing, for example, with math, he added, it's unlikely first and sixth graders ever would be mixed. And the mixing would occur only with mild cases.

He called fears of inappropriate mixes "a worst case scenario."

HOW LOCAL and Intermediate school districts will pay for the changes — many of which reduce class and teaching loads — bothered two board members.

"What I hear from the local districts is, 'Where will the money come from?'" said Cherry Jacobus of East Grand Rapids.

Dr. Phillip E. Runkel, state superintendent of public instruction, said the "worst scenario" would cause \$3 million of increases — less than 1 percent of the \$600 million spent statewide on special education. See separate story on this page.

Those cost increases would be offset by efficiencies and reductions in other areas, although no dollar amount could be put on the savings, Runkel and Birch said.

"It's pretty much a wash," Birch added.

The change sets a ratio of either a) one teacher, two aides and 12 students or b) a ratio of one teacher, three aides and 15 students. Statewide, the cost increase will be \$15,000 for 23 districts.

In Oakland County, Bloomfield Hills would have to add one teacher and one aide for a total of \$36,000; Pontiac the same; and Farmington, two teachers for a total of \$52,000.

• Educable mentally impaired — Present rule sets a teacher's caseload at 18 students.

RUNKEL SAID some rules could be implemented as early as next fall. Birch added districts need to make changes, however, until they are in effect.

Next, said Runkel, the rules must be reviewed for form by the attorney general's staff. Then they go to the Legislature's Joint Administrative Rules Committee.

"The rules committee can't amend them," Runkel said. "It can reject them. It can send them back and tell you what parts they don't like. The committee will have a hearing on this."

"The State Board of Education has final approval," he said.

BEARDMORE SAID the state board passed emergency rules during the 1979-83 fiscal crisis.

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The new rule reduces the caseload to 15 at the elementary level and requires an aide whenever the teacher has 12 or more students in the classroom at one time. Total cost statewide is projected at \$1.5 million.

Rural districts with high caseloads seemed most affected. Oakland is unaffected.

• Physically and otherwise health impaired — Current rule sets a maximum of 15 full-time equivalent students for each teacher.

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The new rule sets maximums of a) 15 different students and b) no more than 10 at a time. Total statewide cost to 13 intermediate districts would be \$373,000.

Oakland Intermediate would have to add a single staff member at a cost of \$44,000.

• Speech and language impaired — Current rule sets a maximum caseload of 75 pupils. New rule cuts this to 60. Total state cost is estimated at \$169,000.

Oakland, with an average caseload of 36, is unaffected.

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The two-year process was marked by many suggestions, negotiations and compromises. In the final months, Runkel sat down with a coalition called CAUSE — Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education.

It represented all special ed organizations plus the state associations of school boards and school administrators along with the two teachers' unions. The panel voted 13-1 to support the new rules, Beardmore said.

THE OAKLAND Parents Advisory Committee was angry they weren't part of the negotiations, she said.

"The feeling of the rest was that CAUSE was representing parents and providers. I don't think they (Oakland PAC) objected to the final result as much as the fact that they weren't a party to the way it was done," she said.

"I've met with individual special ed teachers, and they say it's wonderful. There might have been a few concerns, but a lot of the fears have been built on worse possible cases."

"The complaint procedures have been improved."

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GOP picks finance chairman

Thomas L. Schellenberg, a Birmingham attorney and certified public accountant, is the new finance chairman of the Oakland County Republican Committee.

His appointment was announced by Joe Knollenberg, county chairman.

Schellenberg is a member of the Republican Leadership Committee and county finance committee. He most recently was recruitment coordinator. He is president of Schellenberg & Bucciero, P.C. a tax and business consulting firm.

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