

Archdiocese of Denver Office of Catholic Schools Special Education Update 2014

The Office of Catholic Schools receives requests to establish special education programs within Catholic schools each year. It is a subject that we have studied and revisit regularly in our office. The following provides information about special education, the present services offered to students with special needs in Archdiocese of Denver Catholic Schools, as well as some of the barriers our schools face in serving a greater special needs population.

The federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), provides funding for the cost of educating students with disabilities in public schools within 13 disability categories. The categories are very broad and the extent to which a student is limited by a particular disability determines the amount of intervention they are entitled to receive in the public schools. The following chart identifies the 13 categories of special education as listed in IDEA.

Categories of Disability in Federal Special Education Law

Federal Term	Alternative Term	Brief Description
Learning Disability	Specific Learning Disability	A disorder related to processing information that leads to difficulties in reading, writing, and computing; the most common disability, accounting for half of all students receiving special education.
Speech / language impairment	Communication disorder (CD)	A disorder related to accurately producing the sounds of language or the meaningful use of language to communicate.
Mental Retardation (MR)	Intellectual disability, cognitive impairment	Significant limitations in intellectual ability and adaptive behavior; this disability occurs in a range of severity.
Emotional disturbance (ED)	Behavior disorder (BD), emotional disability	Significant problems in social-emotional area to a degree that learning is negatively affected.
Autism	Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	A disorder characterized by extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness; this disability occurs in many different forms and may be mild or significant.
Hearing impairment	Deaf, hard of hearing (DHH)	A partial or complete loss of hearing.
Visual Impairment	Low vision, blind	A partial or complete loss of vision.
Deaf-blindness		A simultaneous significant hearing loss and significant vision loss.
Orthopedic impairment (OI)	Physical disability	A significant physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities.
Traumatic brain injury		A medical condition denoting a serious brain injury that occurs as a result of accident or injury; the impact

		of this disability varies widely but may affect learning, behavior, social skills, and language.
Other health impairments		A disease or health disorder so significant that it negatively affects learning; examples include cancer, sickle-cell anemia, and diabetes.
Multiple Disabilities		The simultaneous presence of two or more disabilities such that none can be identified as the primary disability; the most common example is the occurrence of mental retardation and physical disabilities.
Development delay (DD)		A nonspecific disability category that states may choose to use as an alternative to specific disability labels for identifying students up to age 9 needing special education.

Current Reality

The bishops of the United States have issued three pastoral statements over the past 30 years that call for the full participation of people with disabilities in the Catholic Church community. One of the most recent statements from The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops was issued in the circular letter, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* (2005) in which they stated:

A 2002 study of Catholic school students with disabilities conducted by an independent agency, the Center for Educational Partnerships, found that 7 percent of children enrolled in Catholic Schools had disabilities identified in the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act*. We applaud the increasing number of our school administrators and teachers who have taken steps to welcome these children and others with special needs into our Catholic schools.

The Archdiocese of Denver Catholic Schools should be counted among the schools which are applauded by the bishops in their effort to welcome students with disabilities in our schools. Responding to the pastoral call to try to serve students with special education needs our schools operate under the policy that schools should enroll any child seeking a Catholic education that can successfully complete the educational program. This policy is designed to encourage individual schools to consider enrolling students with special needs while allowing the school to determine whether or not they have the resources to ensure the child's success at that school. The majority of the Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Denver have enrolled or presently enroll students with mild and moderate disabilities. The following is a partial list of identified (IDEA) special education needs that have been or are presently being served in various schools:

- Learning disabilities: dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, auditory processing disorder, ADHD

- Emotional disturbances
- Speech and language: delayed language development, selective mutism, speech impediments
- Autism: high functioning autism, Asperger’s syndrome
- Hearing disabilities: auditory processing delays
- Visual disabilities
- Physical disabilities: cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy
- Orthopedic impairments
- Other health impairments: cancer, diabetes

The schools support students with moderate special needs in a variety of ways depending upon resources available at the local level. Several schools provide resource teachers that work with both the faculty and students to support them in the academic program. A few of the schools employ a school counselor to assist students with the social issues that might be associated with their disability. The majority of schools offer the following accommodations and modifications to students with identified special needs when recommended through testing:

- Additional time for work / tests
- Reduced work
- Exemption from the study of foreign language
- Preferential seating
- Oral testing
- Tutoring
- Use of assistive technologies
- Providing teacher notes for study guides
- Extra textbooks for parent use at home
- Untimed standardized tests

While it is true that we do serve many students with moderate special needs, we recognize that still many other students with special needs do not have access to our schools at this time. There are significant challenges in serving students with special needs and we have not arrived at solutions for some of the barriers we presently face.

Barriers

The greatest barrier to providing a special education program is the spectrum of needs associated with special education. The thirteen categories listed in IDEA are diverse and within each category there exist a significant spectrum of needs. This wide spectrum creates a challenge in designing quality programming for the many different needs presented in special education. Quality programming includes expert development of individual education plans and progress assessments for those plans. The plans must be individualized because the spectrum of needs in each of the categories is so immense that one curriculum or learning plan could never meet the needs of each student identified with a need in that category. The demand for the

specialized labor force to deliver such plans and the access to program materials for special education limits the services most Catholic schools can provide.

Appropriate staffing in special education is a barrier. Special education teachers are specially trained and in high demand throughout the country. Maintaining appropriate staffing in our regular education programs with qualified teachers can be difficult, it is not clear that a Catholic school would be able to attract special educators. Additionally, special education classrooms have a much lower pupil to teacher ratio. Depending on the severity of the disability, there may be a need to have a full-time aid working with an individual child. The Archdiocese of Denver Office of Catholic Schools recommends that regular education classrooms in our Schools be staffed at a 25:1 ratio to ensure financial stability. A special education classroom may have a ratio as low as 7:1 depending on the needs served in that class. The more significant the decrease in the per pupil ration, the more significant the economic impact to the school.

The final barrier naturally follows from those listed above and that is the financial challenge of supporting a special education program. The present average per pupil cost for a child in an Archdiocese of Denver Catholic school is \$5,600.00. The majority of that cost is recovered directly from tuition paid by parents. The reduced pupil to teacher ratio, additional paraprofessional staff, individualized education plans and possible building renovations will substantially increase the per pupil cost in a special education program. Charging a tuition rate that would cover the per pupil cost to families with special needs children will limit the number of people that could access a Catholic school for such services, especially in light of the fact that the area public schools must provide free and appropriate education to all student with special needs, without cost to the parents. It would not be possible for a parish to subsidize such a program, there would need to be some type of system-wide funding mechanism. The present funding mechanism for the regular education programs in the Archdiocese of Denver Catholic schools presents challenges for sustainability of those programs. It would be a challenge to find appropriate and on-going funding for a new special education program for students with more pronounced needs.

In summary, the Archdiocese of Denver Catholic Schools recognizes the unique gifts and dignity of students with special education needs. We also recognize our responsibilities to work for the inclusion of all students seeking a truly Catholic education in our schools, that responsibility includes providing quality program that is at least as distinguished as any offered in the area public schools (CIC, 806, §2). The Archdiocese of Denver Catholic Schools will continue to enroll students with mild and moderate special needs that can be served through the existing resources of the school. The Office of Catholic Schools will continue to research opportunities to include students with more profound special needs as they are presented.

Resources

Bursack, F. (2010). *IDEA Disability Categories*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.com/topic.special-education>.

Code of Canon Law, c. 279, sec. 1, in Code of Canon Law: Latin English Edition (Washington D.C. Canon Law Society of America, 1999), 89. CIC, c. 806, sec. 2. Code of Canon Law: Latin English Edition. Washington D.C. Canon Law Society of America, 1999.

Grams, E., Powell, M., Todd, S. (2009). *Access in Catholic Education*. National Catholic Partnership on Disability Webinar. (Washington, DC. 2009)

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. (2012). *Categories of Disabilities Under IDEA*. Retrieved from <http://nichcy.org>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2005). *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005)