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How a School in Florida Got Mainstreaming Right

Grades Rose Amid Push To Include the Disabled; Adam Nystrom's Test

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FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla. -- Adam Nystrom remembers being taunted by classmates in middle school for needing so many special-education courses.

"They'd say, 'Oh, that's the retard class,' and everybody would laugh," recalls Adam, who suffers from a learning disorder that impedes reading ability. "I wouldn't really say anything because there isn't anything funny about it."

Adam, now 20 years old, spent a tumultuous 13 years in the local public-school system. He played pranks on teachers and disrupted lectures with a talking pen that delivered punch lines from the movie "Napoleon Dynamite." At Choctawhatchee High School, he struggled to pass Florida's mandatory graduation test, taking the exam six times. Once, he drew a suspension.

Adam Nystrom

But Adam's academic journey ended in success. He became a varsity wrestler and was selected three times to be a part of the homecoming king and queen's royal court. After graduating in 2006, he joined the Army, fulfilling a childhood dream.

A major force behind his turnabout: the school district's program for mainstreaming special-education students into regular classrooms.

As the momentum for such programs has accelerated across the country, many have faced serious obstacles. Special-education students account for a disproportionate amount of discipline problems and sometimes commit violent acts. Teachers say they often lack the training and resources to handle them. Many parents have fought to keep schools and classrooms segregated, saying school administrators have used mainstreaming, also known as "inclusion," as a pretext for cost cutting.

Here in Okaloosa County, the experience has been different. Since its aggressive inclusion push began in 2001, the Okaloosa district has become one of Florida's top academic performers, with 32 of its 36 schools receiving A grades on the most recent state assessments. The ranks of disabled students who pass state achievement tests have grown, while discipline problems among them have diminished: 2% have faced out-of-school suspensions so far this academic year, down from 11% before the reforms began.

Okaloosa has managed such progress even while spending less than other districts across Florida. According to the most recent state data, Okaloosa spends just over $9,400 a year per special-education student in state and local funds -- nearly $1,300 less than the state average.

A CLOSER LOOK

Read more about trends in integrating special-needs students, at WSJ.com/Mainstreaming.

The system's efforts illuminate one path toward successful mainstreaming. "We are not the richest district or the poorest," says state Sen. Don Gaetz, who oversaw Okaloosa's changes as the former superintendent. "Much of what we have done has legs and can be applied in districts around the country."

By slashing administrative costs, the district was able to push more resources into classrooms. From there, it began pairing up general and special-education teachers to work together in integrated classrooms. So-called social promotions -- which let elementary-school students advance to the next grade even when they failed standardized tests -- were eliminated.

Last year, a federally funded study that examined inclusion programs nationwide held up Choctaw, as Adam's high school is known locally, as a model. Researchers were particularly impressed by the unusually high degree of coordination between special- and general-education teachers at the school.

Pressure for Mainstreaming

Children with disabilities account for about 14% of all the nation's students. Since 1975, federal law has required school districts to educate them in the least-restrictive setting possible. The pressure for mainstreaming increased in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind Act. That law requires public schools to test both special- and general-education students under a single curriculum standard.

Nationwide, about 54% of all students with disabilities were considered fully included in 2005, up from 33% in 1990. Educators deem such students fully included if they spend 80% or more of their day in general-education classrooms. Research shows many students with disabilities make social and educational gains when they are integrated into mainstream classrooms with adequate supports and accommodations.

In the 30,000-student Okaloosa district, which serves three military bases and a touristy stretch of the Florida Panhandle, the behavior and academic progress of special-ed students is monitored in unusual detail. Pupils' grades, for example, are tracked as often as daily by computer. And unlike many districts that are more restrictive, Okaloosa also has a policy of encouraging students with disabilities to sign up for Advanced Placement and honors courses.

The district has found that even small gestures can go a long way. Each year, a troupe of Choctaw High students stage a puppet show for local elementary schools. The performance stars

puppets with and without disabilities -- an effort to get the younger children to accept the idea of mainstreaming early.

Chelsea Clemmons, a Choctaw puppeteer this year, attended special-ed classes in elementary school because of a learning disability that makes it difficult for her to mentally process the written word.

Today, Chelsea attends only mainstream classes. She has managed to keep up by reading her textbooks over and over -- sometimes listening to recordings of them in tandem. Encouraged by her special-education advisor, the 17-year-old signed up for an Advanced Placement class in American history last year. She regarded her grade, a high C, as a personal victory.

Chelsea Clemmons

"I may have struggled, but I made it," says Chelsea, who plans to study drama at a local community college and dreams of becoming a movie actress.

About 16% of Okaloosa's students qualify for special-education services. The district began moving more of them into the mainstream in the 1990s. But Mr. Gaetz says that, when he became district superintendent in late 2000, there were still too many students getting diluted course work in separate classrooms.

"We tried to eliminate special-education ghettos and stop the segregation," he says.

In the mainstreaming landscape, observers say Okaloosa stands out for its unusual push to get special-education students to tackle more challenging class work and provide extra help and training to general-education teachers.

"They really provided that support," says Cheryl Liles, director of the Florida Inclusion Network, a state-funded organization that advises Florida school districts on inclusion issues. Within six months of graduation, about 68% of Okaloosa's special-education graduates are either employed or pursuing additional education, according to the most recent state data. Statewide, the figure is 57%.

To free up funds for his special-education overhaul -- which initially focused on elementary-school reading -- Mr. Gaetz began by making deep cuts in central-office spending. He eliminated more than 40 administrative positions, saving the district about $6 million a year. Some displaced personnel took special-education positions in the schools, which were given additional funds and broad latitude to hire more psychologists, social workers and special-ed teachers as they saw fit. Educators say such site-based management of mainstreaming programs was rare at the time.

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Remedial Courses

Since banning social promotions, the district has relied on results from the state achievement test, known as FCAT, and other standardized exams. All students who fail FCAT reading and math assessments are required to take remedial courses in those subjects in addition to their regular ones.

Okaloosa has occasionally come under fire from supporters of even fuller inclusion. Among them: David Miller, chief executive of Horizons of Okaloosa County, an advocacy groups that represents children with disabilities. Mr. Miller says he has sometimes argued with Okaloosa to keep students out of the separate school the district maintains for about 130 children with severe learning disabilities and low IQs. He says he doesn't think the education they receive in such a segregated facility "does them justice in the long run." But, he adds, "for the most part they have done a good job of trying to include" special-education students in the mainstream.

These days, about 65% of Okaloosa's special-education students are fully included in mainstream classes, up from 55% in 2000. At Choctaw High, the figure is closer to 80%. Each of its 220 students with disabilities is also assigned to a special-education teacher who tracks their daily academic progress and makes sure general-education teachers are fully apprised of their disabilities and needs.

In fifth grade, Adam Nystrom was diagnosed as having attention-deficit disorder and a "specific learning disability," which refers to dysfunction of the basic mental processes used to acquire, organize or express information. In Adam's case, it meant difficulty reading and responding to oral instructions.

Adam had talked about joining the military since he was a little boy. But he says his middle-school teachers sometimes told him that, unless his state test scores improved, he could forget about enlisting.

Attending mostly general-education classes at Choctaw high school made Adam feel as though a weight had been lifted. But he tried hard to keep his learning problems hidden from classmates. "It wasn't something he would bring up," says Maggie Peterson, a longtime friend.

Buoyed by remedial classes in math and reading during the school day and long study sessions with his mother at night, Adam maintained a C grade average at Choctaw. But he annoyed some teachers with misbehavior that included talking in class and using fake names with substitute teachers.

"I never considered Adam a problem, he was a joker," says Don Arthur, then Choctaw's dean for discipline, who spent hours talking to Adam in his office and counseling him on schoolwork. "I think maybe some of the things he did were to cover up for his inadequacies in the reading area."

Sue Kruger, the special-education teacher charged with tracking Adam's progress during his first two years at Choctaw, would sometimes walk up behind him in a class and gently squeeze his shoulder to let him know she was paying attention.

Along with the extra math and reading classes Adam was required to take because of his poor FCAT scores, he signed up for remedial courses during the summer. Ms. Kruger served as his tutor after school and on weekends.

"How many kids are going to get up on a Saturday morning and go to tutoring?" she says. "Adam and one other student were the only ones who never missed."

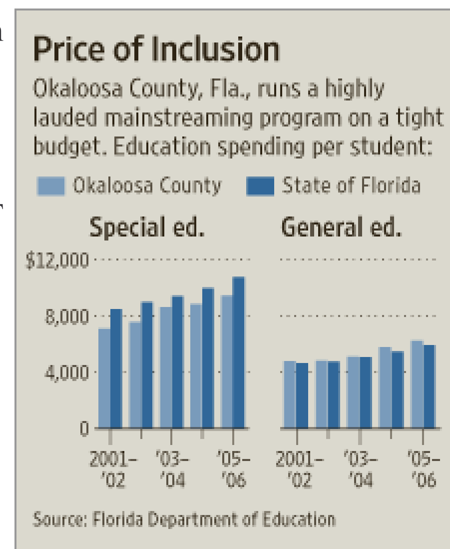
Once aware of Adam's attention and learning disorders, other teachers took steps to help keep him on track. American history teacher Noble Wyninegar moved Adam's desk up next to his and made a point of talking with the teenager about military life.

Brainstorming

Carol Bernich, a special-education teacher who co-taught English and history classes, reviewed lessons that Adam didn't understand and helped him come up with ideas for writing assignments. "I would sit there with him for three or four minutes and just brainstorm," Ms. Bernich says.

Still, Adam couldn't pass the state-mandated graduation tests in reading and math, which Florida students begin taking in the 10th grade.

Educators say that regardless how much help and remediation they get, some such students will never be able to pass tests like the FCAT and that their failing scores are more a reflection of their learning disability than of what they know.



Indeed, because of concern over the level of failures of FCAT graduation tests by special-education students, the Florida legislature enacted a related law in 2003. It allows districts to waive the FCAT requirement for disabled students who take the test at least three times, maintain a 2.0 average on all required courses and take advantage of all available tutoring and remediation courses.

The waivers are still relatively hard to come by in Okaloosa, where just 8% of special-education students graduated with such a waiver in 2005-06, compared with 18% statewide.

As Adam's senior year began, Barbara Nystrom, his mother, feared her son was losing hope. Even though he was making better than a 2.0 average and had been taking remedial classes, he

couldn't seem to clear the FCAT hurdle. She went to talk about a waiver with Kaye McKinley, a deputy superintendent who had been Okaloosa's special-education director.

Ms. McKinley wrote Adam a letter recounting all of the remedial work he had done and telling him that, if he needed and qualified for a waiver at the end of his senior year, she would approve it. "As a young man with a learning disability, you have had to work harder and longer than 85% of your peers," she wrote.

Adam carried the letter in his wallet but didn't mention it to anyone outside the family. Embarrassed, he told some friends he'd already passed the FCAT. Secretly, he was still determined to do so.

But he failed for the sixth and final time in March of 2006. Then, that May, a prank nearly sabotaged his chances to get the promised waiver.

Shortly before graduation, Adam was captured on a school surveillance camera as a buddy grabbed a raw egg from the home-economics room and lobbed it into another class. Even though he was just a bystander, Adam was suspended for five days. He missed his class's senior breakfast and other end-of-year traditions. The school allowed him to make up his final exams, which he needed to pass to maintain his grade-point average. He did. District officials granted the FCAT waiver, albeit only two days before graduation.

Despite earning a diploma, Adam's scores on military-aptitude tests were too low for him to qualify for the Marines and, at least initially, the Army. Months after graduation, a recruiter called to say the Army would grant Adam a waiver to enlist. Cook and truck driver, however, were among the only positions available to someone with his scores.

These days, Adam drives forklifts and heavy trucks at Fort Eustis, an Army transportation center at Newport News, Va. Juan Puentes, Adam's first sergeant, says his performance has been stellar. "You give him a mission and you know that mission is taken care of," says Sgt. Puentes, who adds that he plans to do what he can to help Adam win a promotion and achieve his goal of being a combat infantryman or a paratrooper.

Adam says Choctaw educators made him feel his disabilities didn't resign him to isolation or failure.

"Even though I am just a truck driver, I am proud of what I do and what I have become," he says. "I believe deep down inside that I have succeeded already."

--John Hechinger contributed to this article.

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