

SPECIAL ED STORY WAS A REHASH OF BLAME GAME

After closely reviewing your cover story regarding special education in Massachusetts (“Spending Spiral,” *CW*, Spring ’09), I was dismayed to find that it was a rehash of old, tired, and unfounded arguments and contained misleading information and unfair characterizations. It was not the more thoughtful reporting and offering of real solutions that *CommonWealth* magazine typically provides.

Much of the article focused on private special education schools and yet MAAPS, the state organization representing private special education and closely involved in special needs issues and policy for over 20 years, was not brought into the reporting. Had MAAPS been consulted, it would have pointed out that valid comparisons of private special education school expenditures to those in other states—which the article relies on for key findings—are not possible because

most other states rely on state-operated, not private, schools for the disabled. Therefore, various information and calculations presented were flawed.

The piece also portrayed parents as opportunistic abusers of the special education appeal process without providing any facts. It failed to report that 95 percent of the 160,000-plus education plans written annually are approved by parents, and less than 1 percent of them go to appeal. Of those, on average, parents win only 20 percent of the decisions.

Further, concerning rising special education costs, the article did not shed light on the fact that because of advances in neonatal medicine, premature and low-birth infants are surviving at far higher rates. This has resulted in an increase in the number of disabled children enrolled in early intervention services. From 1992 to 2007, enrollments rose from 5,787 to 25,897, an increase of 348 percent.

CORRECTION: A paragraph in “Spending Spiral” inaccurately portrays some of the changes the Legislature made in the special education law in 2000. Services such as speech and occupational therapies have consistently been available to special education students as an aid to help them in their learning. A legislative change in the law, included in the fiscal 2001 budget, broadened the definition of special education so that students who required speech and occupational therapies but who would not have been determined to have a learning disability under the old standard became eligible to receive Individual Education Plans, thus broadening the eligibility criteria for special education. That is also the context in which Marcia Mittnacht, state special education director, commented on the changes. She was not classifying the services as unnecessary; rather, she was making an observation about the fact that qualification for services expanded under the legislative changes in ways many other states did not allow.

NOTE: For more feedback on “Spending Spiral,” visit the online version of the story and the accompanying readers’ forum. Go to www.massinc.org, click on the magazine cover, and then click “Back Issues.”



Special education has an enormous, positive impact on families and our state. By providing children with disabilities with critically needed education and treatment, we give them opportunity for hope and achievement, and they can become productive members of society and our economy.

It is regrettable that *CommonWealth* squandered an opportunity to identify real problems and offer solutions. We have wasted enough time on the blame game, and it is time to start working on ways to prevent the heartache of disabilities and provide adequate funding for special education.

James V. Major
Executive Director
Massachusetts Association of
766 Approved Private Schools
Wakefield

AUTISM BILL DOES NOT ERASE SCHOOL SERVICES

I am writing to respond to a statement in your recent article on special education that referred to proposed legislation requiring health insurance plans to replace schools in covering many of the treatments for autism. There is a proposed bill, ARICA, requiring health insurers to cover treatments for autism (which are largely

excluded from most plans), but this is specifically not intended to replace services provided by schools.

IDEA, the legislation that governs special education, is not affected by this legislation. Private insurance coverage, whether for services delivered in the classroom or outside, does not diminish a school system's obligation to provide a "free and appropriate education." There are provisions in IDEA addressing this, and ARICA includes language that specifically protects against loss of services mandated by law under an Individual Family Service Plan, an Individualized Education Plan, or an Individualized Service Plan.

The reality is that with legislation requiring private insurers to cover treatments for autism, individuals diagnosed with autism would receive appropriate treatments that are currently inaccessible to most today.

Research has shown that effective treatment can significantly improve the functioning of many people with autism. Studies of young children who receive early intensive behavioral interventions, which would be covered under ARICA, have shown dramatic improvements—and a large percentage could subsequently go on to attend regular education classes and grow up to become taxpaying citizens.

While insurance coverage for autism treatments won't replace school requirements, it will result in many more children with autism entering school needing less or, in some cases, no additional services. It will also help alleviate some of the costs to towns that experience a disproportionate influx of families with special needs students. We believe there will be a substantial savings over the long term, and a substantial benefit to society overall, as individuals affected by

autism receive appropriate treatment and are able to realize their maximum potential.

*Amy Weinstock
Chair, Insurance Committee
Advocates for Autism in
Massachusetts
Waltham*

BLUE CROSS MADE FALSE COMPARISONS WITH GIC

John Coughlin, writing on behalf of Blue Cross Blue Shield, for many years the health plan of choice for many municipalities, seems intent on preserving that business by trashing the Group Insurance Commission, which is now an option for communities looking for ways to stem the tide of double-digit rate increases in their premiums. His Perspective piece ("One Size Doesn't Fit All") asserts that the GIC's purchasing power is a fiction,

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and that the only way the GIC cost increases have consistently been lower is by cost-shifting to employees.

First of all, Blue Cross may be larger than the GIC, but that is a false comparison. Blue Cross is not a purchaser. They are an insurance company and should be comparing themselves to other insurance companies. The GIC's better record is a function of a strong negotiating posture, constant monitoring of performance, adoption of innovative programs to provide better quality as well as cost savings, and, yes, trying to keep a fair and reasonable balance between rising costs and employee share. [We do not engage in] constant and heedless cost-shifting.

I cannot end without picking up on one sentence in Mr. Coughlin's article. He says that the GIC option wouldn't work for municipalities with "employees who tend to file fewer claims." Blue Cross as well as its competitors could all look good if they only had to insure people who "tend to file few claims." But that's not what insurance is for. What you want is a carrier that sticks with you when illness forces you to file many claims. The municipalities of the Commonwealth deserve no less.

Dolores L. Mitchell
Executive Director
Group Insurance Commission
Boston

A BUILT-IN BIAS TO PRESERVE THE STATUS QUO

I can't figure out why MassINC allowed Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBSMA) to basically write itself an advertisement in *CommonWealth*. Surely we can do better. BCBSMA is an esteemed insurer, to be sure. But as the insurer for many municipalities, it has done comparatively little to help them control costs and to offer them compelling value. It obviously has a built-in bias to keep the status quo, and they should not be the authors of a

piece regarding whether municipalities should pool their purchasing power behind the GIC. Yes, there are pros and cons, but let's not have them solely debated by an organization that is inherently biased.

Note: The author, now working on projects around health care innovation in California, worked as a benefits consultant to several Massachusetts communities (and the Massachusetts Municipal Association) as recently as 2005.

Garen Corbett
Newton

FILM TAX CREDIT ALSO GENERATES JOBS IN TV

Thank you for Alison Lobron's thoughtful Conversation with Hollywood producer Lynda Obst ("On the Set"). Still, an important aspect of the Massachusetts film tax credit was not addressed in the article. It's the impact on television producers, such as Powderhouse. The credit has enabled us to triple in size, and we now employ 104 producers, writers, directors, graphics artists, and support staff. These are full-time, long-term jobs with benefits, all in the Boston area. We have been able to invest in new equipment that will allow us to keep growing. And we've rented out three times the office space we occupied just two years ago.

Powderhouse now produces four prime-time nonfiction series for national cable networks including Discovery, Science, Animal Planet, and the History Channel. We also do work for National Geographic Channel, PBS, and others, and we've opened our first Internet TV channel, www.shoetube.tv. The tax credit

has enabled us to stay in the state, and we want to stay here.

We anticipate continued growth, and not just because of the tax credit. The "Massachusetts advantage" is not simply the credit; it's also the presence of all the talented young graduates in the TV and film programs in our universities and colleges. If we can keep providing good entry-level jobs to these folks, we can strengthen the TV industry in the state. Also, the subject matter of many of our stories—the research being done at our universities, the work of high-tech entrepreneurs—is often here in Massachusetts.

Perhaps *CommonWealth* might explore this lesser-known part of the film/TV tax credit story. Powderhouse is an example of the way the credit is supposed to work.

Tug Yourgrau
President
Powderhouse
Somerville

SOMETIMES GOOD NEWS IS JUST GOOD NEWS

Sometimes the glass is half full. Yes, Massachusetts's population gains (see "End of an Exodus," State of the States) could be attributable to a sinking economy, including a poor housing market and rising gas prices, but there could be another reason: It's a good, progressive, tolerant place to live. It's just a thought.

MassINC for years has been the pure voice of gloom and sometimes doom. You are going to make yourself ill. Cheer up.

Jim Miara
Needham

We welcome letters to the editor. Send your comments to editor@massinc.org, or to Editor, *CommonWealth* magazine, 18 Tremont Street, Suite 1120, Boston, MA 02108. Please include a city or town, as well as a daytime phone number. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.



**“Blue Cross has definitely kept
our teachers in the classroom!”**

John Siever Principal, Plymouth South Middle School

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