

## Spotsy changes special-ed designations

Starting this fall, Spotsylvania County students ages 5 to 8 who are classified as developmentally delayed will move to another special education category or to the general classroom

[By Karen Bolipata](#)

*Date published: 6/18/2008*

By Karen Bolipata

Starting this fall, Spotsylvania County schools will no longer classify students ages 5 to 8 as developmentally delayed.

Those students will be placed in another special education category or mainstreamed into standard classrooms. Students ages 2 to 5 still are eligible for the program, which includes individualized instruction, often in addition to traditional classes.

Special Services Director Jane Rice said there are children in the program who don't need to be there, particularly African-American students.

"It doesn't take a great deal of delay to qualify, so, consequently, we've seen a lot of children labeled with that label who don't have that disability," she said.

### THE LABEL

Developmentally delayed students have a disability in physical, cognitive, communication, social, emotional or adaptive development, as determined by school officials.

In the last school year, Spotsylvania had 16 full-time teaching positions in developmental delay. Next year, four of those teachers will be at Cedar Forest Elementary School, which is opening in the fall, and the rest have gone to other teaching positions or school districts. No one was laid off, Rice said.

Eliminating the developmentally delayed classification for children ages 5 to 8 saves the county about \$1 million. Rice says the money wasn't a factor in eliminating part of the program.

Federal regulations allow states to use the category for children ages 3 to 8. Virginia extended it to 2-year-olds, although the Virginia Department of Education is now proposing to cut the program at age 5.

DOE has held nine public hearings around the state and is accepting input via e-mail, mail and fax, until June 30. It will then make revisions to its proposal, if needed, before presenting them to Gov. Tim Kaine.

Rice said the state's proposed change was a factor in Spotsylvania's decision to modify its program. Critics say the move will keep much-needed services from young children when they're most vulnerable.

Sue Sargeant, a speech therapist for the school division and an officer of The Arc of Rappahannock, says putting children into "hard" labels, such as learning disability or autism, will lower expectations.

"Even if one Spotsylvania County child has been mislabeled as having mental retardation during the past year, that is one child who will not succeed because he has lost access to the flexibility in team planning that comes with the developmental delay disability category," she said.

'GIVE US A YEAR'

Spotsylvania has used the "developmentally delayed" program for nearly 30 years.

In Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William counties, the program ends at age 5.

In the 2007-2008 school year, there were 203 developmentally delayed students in Spotsylvania.

Students who were in the program and don't fit in any of the existing special education categories will be placed in the general classroom, where they still may work with specialists or take remedial classes.

Starting this fall, Spotsylvania County students ages 5 to 8 who are classified as developmentally delayed will move to another special education category or to the general classroom

"We don't envision any child being left out," Rice said. "Special education isn't the only way a child gets help."

Superintendent Jerry Hill said his staff will present the School Board a detailed analysis of the students affected.

"I would just say to the parents, 'Give us a year. Give us a chance to see how this goes,'" he said.

Some question whether those students will thrive in regular classrooms.

School Board member Linda Wieland, who taught in Spotsylvania County schools for 30 years, says a majority of the tests available for classifying students do not give an accurate reading of a child's ability until age 8.

"The developmental delay program offered, in my mind, the least restrictive environment for these children because they're little," she said. "If you threw them in a class with regular education students, they're drowning."

She wonders whether teachers in traditional classrooms will have enough support to give these students the attention they need.

Craig Williams said his children have flourished under the developmentally delayed program and worries how his 6-year-old will fare under the new system, where the child may be given a "harder" label.

"There are diminished expectations for those kids, so my son would languish in that class," he said.

Karen Bolipata 540/374-5418  
Email: [kbolipata@freelancestar.com](mailto:kbolipata@freelancestar.com)

<http://fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2008/062008/06182008/388192>

Comment on the department of education's proposed changes to the developmentally delayed program by June 30.

Mail: Special Education Regulations Revision Process; Office of Dispute Resolution and Administrative Services; Virginia Department of Education; Box 2120; Richmond, Va. 23218-2120

E-mail: [ReviseSpedRegs@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:ReviseSpedRegs@doe.virginia.gov).

Fax : 804/786-8520