

Guest Column: State funding for special education schools remains vital

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As I read the recent news about an increase in the number of young people with autism, I thought of the complicated challenges so many parents will face.

My 16-year-old son has autism; his ability to process the things he hears is extremely poor and he struggles to communicate and interact with other kids and adults.

His first several years in the Anne Arundel County Public Schools were successful. But as he entered the sixth grade, my son experienced major difficulties and the decision was made to seek help elsewhere.

With the support of the Anne Arundel schools, Evan was enrolled in the Hannah More School, a special education school in Reisterstown equipped to work with kids with autism and those with a range of serious emotional and physical disabilities.

Classes are small and the school offers the therapy and support he needs. Most importantly, the school is completely geared to children with special needs. The staff and teachers want to work with these kids and appreciate the challenge. In short, you feel the love and commitment every time you walk through the doors.

My son is making good academic progress, and he plays the piano in the school's music program. The self-esteem and confidence he gains every day will serve him well throughout his life.

New research shows that more children are being diagnosed with some form of autism. According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention researchers, about 1 in 100 of the nation's 8-year-olds has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder - a 50 percent increase from two years ago. For boys, the new research shows that 1 in 58 has been diagnosed with some form of the disorder.

This dramatic rise poses serious challenges, not just for kids with autism and their families, but for all of society.

We need more public awareness of autism and its effect on children and families. We need support for those with autism as they move into adulthood.

And it is critical that we fully support special educational facilities that focus on autism and other serious disabilities to make sure students like my son have a place to go when the public schools don't meet their needs.

Hannah More is one of nearly 100 of these special education schools around Maryland. If you don't have a child with a disability chances are you don't know much about them.

But they quietly play an enormously valuable role by taking on the education of kids with the most pressing needs. They are supported with state and local funds, as the state is required to provide educational services to all children in the most appropriate setting. They are cost-effective and should be viewed as vital partners with the public schools.

Gov. Martin O'Malley has said recently that despite the state's budget problems, he intends to maintain funding for public education. It's critical that he and the General Assembly do just that by avoiding cuts in funding for these special education schools. Cutting their budgets will mean some students with major disabilities will not be getting the services they need in the school best-suited for them and their families.

This should never happen. Placements for kids with autism, physical burdens and severe emotional problems should be made based on what is best for the child - not for short-sighted budgetary reasons.

Sometimes as a parent of a special-needs child I feel alone. But the truth is that an incredible network of schools and their staffs of committed professionals is in place to help families like ours.

As a state we must make sure we fully support these schools and their vitally important mission. The kids are an essential part of our future, and we need to do our very best to ensure they become productive adults.

The writer is a resident of Annapolis.