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No more denial in special-ed scandal

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No school system should ever rob any student of their ability to reach their full potential in life – and none should ever let down children as massively as the Sarasota County Schools District did in poorly operating its exceptional student education program.

Recently the state Department of Education – after a year-long investigation – concluded that the Sarasota County schools haphazardly placed students without significant cognitive disabilities into Access Points, an alternative program specifically designed for children who do have severe learning challenges.

More: State says Sarasota County schools likely caused irreparable harm to students

The state’s investigation was sparked by a case involving “DJ,” a student whose improper placement in Access Points led to a legal fight that ended with the school district reaching a \$250,000 settlement with the child’s family.

Unfortunately, “DJ” was not alone: according to research done by local special education advocates Sue Memminger and Susan Magers, the child was among more than 100 students who had been steered into Access Points for apparently no justifiable reason.

In a letter detailing the state’s findings, Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran declared that the Sarasota County School District’s actions had “likely caused irreparable harm to the students” wrongly placed in the Access Points program.

The temptation is to dismiss Corcoran’s assessment as overwrought hyperbole. But the tragedy is that Corcoran wasn’t exaggerating: students who earn Access Points diplomas aren’t eligible for college or military service – and they may also face extremely limited employment opportunities as adults.

Given these stark actualities it's not just alarming that scores of children had their futures put at risk by Sarasota school officials who were inattentive or incompetent.

It's unforgivable.

That’s why regardless of how difficult it will be for the Sarasota County schools

to implement the numerous post-investigation sanctions that Corcoran's department has placed on the system – which include submitting to two years of strict state oversight regarding the Access Points program – the district must make an immediate and unquestioned commitment to carrying out each one.

And if they truly want to take the proper lessons from these sadly deserved sanctions, Sarasota County school officials must show a greater sense of accountability than has been displayed so far.

For example, there are indications that some district officials were more interested in dismissing questions about the Access Points program than addressing them.

Their state of denial needs to end.

They need to come to grips with the cold, hard truth.

There are also indications that when concerns were raised about students being recklessly pushed into the Access Points program, some individuals in the district bureaucracy weren't as forthcoming as they should have been when answers were sought.

Their state of equivocation needs to end.

They need to come clean with the cold, hard truth.

Our school systems have an obligation to protect and nurture the ambitions of the children they are charged with educating – not to hinder and hobble those dreams in a potentially irrevocable manner.

The Sarasota County School District has woefully failed to meet that basic responsibility with the 100-plus children it put in a program that clearly did not fit their educational needs.

It is now incumbent on district officials to do whatever must be done to prevent such a breathtaking act of irresponsibility from ever happening again.