

Special Needs, Part 2



During my time in office, I saw a distinct difference between the way Republicans and Democrats approach public problems. One party tends to default to top-down, big-government solutions. The other looks first to innovation, free markets, and private-sector problem-solvers.

Ronald Reagan captured that contrast with his famous line: “Government is not the solution. Government *is* the problem.” Taken literally, it overstates the case—Reagan was no anarchist. But his core insight remains relevant: when bureaucracy becomes our primary strategy for solving complex challenges, we rarely get the results citizens deserve.

Nowhere is this more evident than in education, especially special education. Idaho’s special education teachers face an overwhelming federal paperwork burden; some districts now hire full-time staff just to complete IDEA paperwork. One teacher described the load as “a drowning factor.” As regulations expand, so does taxpayer frustration with a system in which bureaucratic bloat directly competes with students for time, resources, and attention.

This is not simply a budget issue; it’s a priorities issue. A special-education aid recently told me he was required to teach algebra to a nonverbal student instead of building basic communication skills. Another veteran teacher knew exactly what her students needed but simply couldn’t deliver individualized support and still complete the mandated paperwork. When she raised this concern, she was told to “prioritize the paperwork.” When funding models reward box-checking over meeting real-time student needs, something is fundamentally misaligned.

Fortunately, better paths exist. Funding matters, but meaningful improvements will come from innovation and flexible, market-driven models that expand our capacity rather than layering on bureaucracy.

My own experience showed me the power of a different approach. The National Association for Child Development (NACD) trained my family to implement an individualized developmental program, multiplying the reach of their expertise. When seeking to develop new pathways in the brain, frequent repetition is key. Because our family could provide several short sessions every day instead of being limited to two weekly appointments, our son was able to reach what physicists call “critical mass”—the point where progress becomes self-sustaining. The model was effective; and it was financially accessible.

In 2007, NACD partnered with a Utah charter school to implement this same model. Evaluations were done; programs were created; and staff trained. Within one year, students with disabilities increased the criterion-referenced test scores by 10 percent. The teacher leading the program was named Utah Charter School Teacher of the Year.

Another Utah clinic, Breaking Barriers Therapy, serves students through insurance and partners with schools. Their innovative model benefits children with autism, ODD, ADHD, and more. Through the Collaborative Care Institute, which they founded, they bring care-providers and families together. They are preparing a program to train high school students in their interventions and place them in internships working with special needs students.

Imagine if Idaho encouraged high school students to become therapists—helping us address a long-term shortage—while simultaneously directly meeting the needs of today’s special needs students?

Each of these examples underscores the same point: private innovators, free from the burden of bureaucracy, are finding ways to overcome the barriers that create drag in public schools.

With flexibility, creativity, and the right resources, many special needs students could reach “critical mass” academically much earlier—ultimately needing fewer services long-term and freeing up taxpayer dollars to serve other students with severe ongoing needs.

Do I have all the answers? Of course not. But experience has shown me that solutions exist—and that they are often found outside traditional bureaucratic frameworks.

Idaho’s special needs programs must be adequately funded. But Idaho’s most meaningful solutions will be dollar-supported, not dollar-driven; paperwork-supported, not paperwork-controlled. They will magnify the expertise and multiply the resources available to our special needs educators. They will be innovative, student focused, and often pioneered in the private sector before making their way into our public system.

Ironically, expanding educational choice and embracing private sector partners—steps some have painted as threats to special education—may actually be among the very best ways to serve our special needs students. This is not merely a “Republican” approach to problem-solving. It is a deeply American way to change lives and make the world a better place.