

Slight increase seen in special education students in Alabama

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The nation is seeing a rise in the number of special education students it serves in public schools, as is Alabama.

Nationwide, the number of students ages 6-21 with disabilities increased from 5.67 million in 2011 to 5.83 million in 2014, according to U.S. Department of Education figures. In Alabama, more than 84,000 students with disabilities are served by public schools. In 2010, the state served 82,000 students with disabilities. In 1989, that number was more than 99,000.

Special education services in the public school system cover a wide spectrum of students.

“You have students with mild speech problems to students with severe disabilities,” said Crystal Richardson, Alabama State Department of Education program coordinator for special education.

Richardson said the number of students with disabilities has stayed in the 82,000 to 84,000 range for several years. Richardson said that within that demographic, the number of students with severe medical issues or who have autism has increased in recent years.

Richardson said improving medical technology has led to longer lives for medically fragile children and has allowed many of them to attend school. Richardson said that the uptick in students with autism can be attributed to improved diagnosis of the condition.

Malissa Valdes-Hubert, a spokesperson for the Alabama Department of Education, said the department had increased its efforts in recent years to dialogue with parents to ensure their children were getting the best possible services.

“Everyone wants their voice heard,” she said.

David Sewell, interim Houston County School superintendent, said the county’s number of students in special education programs has held steady for the past few years. Sewell said in 2015 10.7 percent of the district’s students had special needs. In 2016 the figure was 11.3 percent.

Sewell said the county system had followed state trends in seeing an increase in medically fragile students and students with autism.

Sewell said the Houston County Schools have seen an increase in the cost of providing care to special education students in recent years. He said the system has had to hire more nurses to care for medically fragile students.