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## **Autism diagnosis rises as research about disorder grows**

**By Heather Woodward**

The Olympian

Ten years ago, fewer than 1,500 students in Washington's public schools were classified as having autism.

□ Today, there are more than 3,000.

It's a relatively small number, considering Washington has more than 1 million students enrolled in public schools and that autistic students total about 2.5 percent of all students in special education programs.

But it's a jump that's been dramatic in South Sound and across the country that's sparking changes in classrooms.

Those increases mean schools are hiring more special education staff to help autistic students and seeking additional training for teachers.

"As the diagnosis grows, so does the knowledge of effective treatments," said Doug Gill, the state director of special education.

Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by "impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and unusual, repetitive, or severely limited activities and interests," according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS).

Scientists don't know exactly what causes autism, but according to NINDS, it's likely that both genetics and environment are factors.

The skill levels of autistic children vary greatly, falling onto what is called a spectrum of autism disorders. Some low-functioning autistic children don't speak at all. Some high-functioning students can read, do math and are better able to communicate and interact socially.

There's also what's known as Asperger syndrome, a developmental disorder that also falls on the autism spectrum. The syndrome typically involves some impairment of a child's language and communication skills as well as "repetitive or restrictive patterns of thought and behavior," according to NINDS.

"The most distinguishing symptom of AS is a child's obsessive interest in a single object or topic to the exclusion of any other," according to NINDS.

The autism spectrum disorders usually can be diagnosed by the time a child is 3 and sometimes as early as 18 months, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

Children are being diagnosed with autism in greater numbers across the country, although experts disagree about exactly why that's happening. Some say it's because of earlier and better diagnosis. Others say there might be an actual increase in the number of children with autism.

Nationally, one in every 166 children is born with some form of autism, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Locally, numbers also are on the rise.

North Thurston Public Schools had 67 students classified as autistic as of March 2006. The prior year, the school district had 55.

"As awareness about autism disorder increases, we expect to see growth," said Courtney Schrieve, a North Thurston spokeswoman.

By comparison, the Olympia School District has as many as 60 students with autism and related disorders, and the Tumwater School District has 17 students labeled as autistic.

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