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Learning Together: Lessons in Inclusive Education in New York City

A report by the Least Restrictive Environment Coalition, October 2002, printed with permission

Editor's note: While this report comes from New York City, parents from across the country may use the findings to evaluate the education their child is receiving wherever they happen to live. What follows is a condensed executive summary. The complete report is available at <http://www.insideschools.org/vm/LRErep10-2002.doc>

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Coalition is made up of 17 groups serving New York City school children that advocate on behalf of individual children with disabilities and their families with the New York City Board of Education, the New York State Education Department, and the United States Department of Education to enforce the LRE requirements of New York State and federal law. The LRE Coalition was formed in 1999. The coalition's mission is to assure that all students with disabilities are educated in the LRE appropriate for each child so that all students can learn to their fullest capacity. They seek to insure that, whenever appropriate, students with disabilities are provided with the supports, services, and physical accommodations they need to progress in the general education curriculum in general education classes in their neighborhood schools.

Federal and State laws mandate children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) — that is, alongside their typically developing peers whenever appropriate. But last year, more than half of all students with disabilities in New York City spent most of their time in segregated, special education classrooms, where they had little-to-no contact with non-disabled peers. Comparing segregation rates for the country and N.Y. state indicates that New York City is over-segregating its children with special needs. Last year, New York City placed 54 percent of its children in special education outside the regular classroom for more than 60 percent of the day. In 1999, 38 percent of children with special needs were placed outside the regular classroom throughout New York state and 24 percent were so placed nationally.

While the nation and state are proclaiming their commitment to improving educational outcomes and opportunities for all children, outcomes for children in segregated special education classrooms remain extremely unsatisfactory. Children in special education classrooms do considerably worse than their peers receiving services in integrated classrooms on standardized testing and graduation rates. The percentage of elementary students with disabilities who attended general education classrooms for 40 percent or more of the school day, and who scored at least on level three (proficient) on the New York state standardized English Language Arts and Mathematics tests was over three times as high as children in more restrictive placements. Less than nine percent of children educated in segregated settings graduated after four years, compared to half of all students in general education settings (including both regular education and special education students). Even after seven years in high school only about a third of the students in self-contained programs had graduated — half had dropped out.

School system personnel constantly tell families that their children cannot participate in more integrated educational environments because they will not be able to keep pace with other children. Sometimes they say the students' needs are simply too great. While inclusion may not be appropriate for all children, parents and advocates and some exceptional educators know that is simply not true for most children with special needs, who can, with appropriate supports and services, succeed in inclusion.

We propose the following recommendations for achieving greater integration of children with disabilities into general education classes in New York City public schools.

A. Schools and districts must create optimal conditions for integration

1. Reasonable special education to general education student ratios are essential. To succeed, the ratio of children with disabilities to typically developing children in an integrated class should approximate the proportion in which these disabilities occur in the population. Across the country and in New York City, children with disabilities represent approximately 10 percent of the whole student population. All schools we visited emphasized the value of a heterogeneous class that represents or approximates the occurrence of disabilities in surrounding community.
2. Class size must be reasonable. For integrated classes, smaller is better, particularly in lower grades. Reasonable class size makes it possible for each child to receive teacher attention. In the successful elementary schools visited, integrated class size ranged from 21 to 25 students.

3. Planning must be flexible and revisited repeatedly. Administrators, teachers and parents stress effective schools perform child-centered, flexible planning. If a child is not receiving appropriate benefit from his/her educational plan, the plan must be revised to provide whatever works. The programs should be regularly re-evaluated and revised to meet changing community needs or try more promising models or techniques.

4. Integrated programming to assure inclusion through the course of a student's education must be consistent throughout the years. The program must provide appropriate integrated classes and inclusion opportunities consistently for children as they progress from grade to grade. If a student is educated successfully in inclusion one year, the opportunity must exist in each year that follows for that student.

B. Schools must build strong instructional teams

Administrators of effective programs stress the importance of tapping their best teachers and paraprofessionals to work in integrated classes. These classes require teachers and paraprofessionals with talent and a willingness to adapt curriculum and lessons to accommodate children with special needs. To the greatest extent possible, teachers should volunteer to teach these classes. All teachers must receive professional development, time for collaborative planning and appropriate classroom materials.

1. School communities agreed that teachers and paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms need effective professional development. They must learn to identify learning styles and disabilities through classroom observation and assessment tool use. They need to be able to address different learning needs and styles with research-proven techniques, to manage students' behavior positively, adapt curriculum and lesson delivery to accommodate all learners, and collaborate and develop each instructional team member's role.

2. Instructional teams must be compensated for meeting outside of school hours or provided classroom coverage by substitute teachers to permit them to meet during school hours.

3. Schools must provide appropriate classroom materials in order to teach to a wide spectrum of ability levels and learning styles. These materials must include books on different reading levels, assistive technology and other resources designed to teach students with multiple learning characteristics.

C. Schools must create a “culture of inclusion”

1. Inspire the school community. In every achieving school visited, parents and school staff stressed the most important school success factor was the school community’s whole-hearted belief in inclusion’s philosophy. The staff and parent body must be introduced to inclusion’s philosophy and benefits, how inclusion can be implemented in the school and specific services and interventions available. Finally, the school community, especially teachers and students, must also receive disability sensitivity training.

2. Train planners and administrators. Effective schools have knowledgeable, dedicated, dynamic leadership. To develop such leadership, principals, Pupil Personnel Teams (PPTs) and School Leadership Teams (SLTs) must also receive professional development on the legal requirement to provide mandated services and settings; inclusion’s benefits; how to create effective models to deliver services to children with disabilities in the LRE; and research-proven educational methodologies, prevention and intervention techniques.

D. Districts must provide effective program support

The relatively small District 75 Office of Inclusive Education (OIE) provides the most comprehensive model we found of district support for including children with special needs. OIE effectively creates and maintains programs educating students with the most severe disabilities in their LRE. The Board should consider expanding OIE and allowing other districts to contract with it for support. Alternatively, other school districts should emulate the multi-level structure of support and one-on-one technical assistance for instructional teams.