TODAY'S

Special Education

By Janie Scheffer

Conversations happening within school buildings today about special education are essential. We are called to be reflective decision makers, in pursuit of what's best for our students. There's no doubt that key topics like "labeling" and "inclusion" and "IEP" stake their prominence within discussions among school staff. Current research, varied perspectives, and emotional tugs surface quickly. And rightfully so. Today's special education topics are important matters to consider within a school building. Let's face it, educational stakeholders have wrestled for years with issues in special education programs.

Progress is being made to better the services we provide students. A mindset shift and embracing a new belief system are key components to enacting change, specifically inclusion.

It's important to reflect on the perspective in which you view special education students and programs. What if we as classroom teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and even bus drivers zoomed out? Meaning, we look at the larger picture of today's special education and the true heartbeat of our schools—the "why" behind education. Ultimately, at the end of the day, our work is with and for kids—kids of all different abilities, uniquely made up of different skills and interests, fears, and dreams. It is our job to do what is best for each and every student…every day…with no exceptions.

It's important to ground today's special education conversations—and all of their hot-button issues—in an asset-based, positive, student-centered perspective. In doing so, we can better collaborate as professional teams on the action steps that need to be taken to lead to special education programs effectively impacting our students. To put it simply, our final focus needs to be on meeting each student's needs—before the label, after the label, in the absence of a label, and every moment in between. This is certainly not profound or new, but a concept that can be forgotten in the sometimes murky waters of IEP paperwork and child study meetings.

LABELS: THE **GOOD** AND THE **BAD**

Do we dare journey down the label discussion? Yes, we do because our students and much of their success depend on it. Let's state the facts first. Special education labels happen. It's the way our educational system and government have been operating for years. Does that mean we as teachers, administrators, and even lunchroom paras should dwell on the frustrations we have with the system? No. We can enact change. If we go back to the "why" of education and maintain that perspective, a label should not command dominance over the ways in which all educational staff service all students. Again, shouldn't student needs be met no matter the existence of a label? Joyce Carr, supervisor of special education and student support services in the Elmira City School District, sums it up well: "Students can get the services they need without the paperwork." Carr believes the control that classroom teachers have in terms of what they can and can't do should change the philosophy of classifying—and in some cases overclassifying students—in order to service students properly.

But what about the funding aspect? As Carr points out, it's a "double-edged sword." The paperwork provides the funding and the label can, at times, create what she likes to call "a life sentence" for the student. In fact, many educational leaders believe the label can be a hindrance to our students. Peter DeWitt, a former K-5 teacher and principal and current author, keynote speaker, and workshop facilitator, stated, "I'd like to see less students labeled," and Carr echoed this statement. Perhaps you do, too. Essentially, a label does not hold all the power or solve all the challenges teachers face in meeting students' needs. Even more, Carr believes "a life sentence" label is a detriment to students, hindering them from reaching their true potential.

In fact, John Hattie, director of the Melbourne Educational Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia, professor, and author of *Visible Learning*, has devoted much time and attention to the impact of special education labels. DeWitt, also a colleague of Hattie, explains Hattie's research findings in his 2018 blog post *Are Labels Preventing Students from Succeeding?*

"In Hattie's research, which involves over 251 influences on learning, not labeling students has an effect size of .61. That is significantly over the .40 that equates to a year's worth of growth for a year's input. What the research shows is that providing a label to a student in many cases creates a glass ceiling, which means that the student works to their label, and not always above it."

Much can be said about a special education label—the good and the bad. Hattie's philosophy about the glass ceiling, backed by thorough research, should stir reflection and thought in the hearts and minds of all professional educators. If labels are creating lower expectations for our special education students and hindering their success, then we need to consider our true advocacy for our students. And what about the quickness to label in our schools? DeWitt's honest wondering, "Do we have a higher number of students labeled than other countries?" is a fair curiosity.

When a label is given, the perspective revolving around the label is crucial. A mindset shift is needed. Rather than allowing the label to steer us into deficit-based thinking, maintaining an asset-based approach in which the student's strengths are then coupled with necessary instructional strategies is key. Hattie states: "On the one hand, great diagnosis is powerful, but too often in education we use labels as an explanation why a student 'cannot' learn, etc." Instead of the label declaring what a student cannot do, it should ignite the conversation among school staff to determine a logical plan of learning strategies, supports, and resources to be implemented.

All of this is to say that special education labels should not be feared or even avoided. Sometimes the need for a label is strong. Good has come from labeling students in certain cases, but the important piece of it all is recognizing our work is not complete when an IEP declares a label

on a student. DeWitt goes one step further to caution general education teachers from falling into the thought process that a label is good because it simply provides another adult in the room to address the student's needs. Labels, often given in a well-meaning manner, should propel school staff to determine and implement which instructional techniques and supports have been and will be successful in servicing the student, helping the student break beyond that glass ceiling. Therefore, labels are not a means to an end, and this should be apparent in the ways professional educators come alongside special education students with high expectations and logical, systematic supports. Hattie emphasizes the teacher's role in setting special education students up for success: "A key is teachers collaborating together to devise optimal interventions, sharing successes, and continually evaluating their own impact on these students." Referring back to Carr, teachers hold a lot of power. Their role in today's special education is crucial.

Perceiving the label as a launch pad to appropriate instructional supports and believing in special education students by setting high expectations should be at the foundation of an inclusive environment. The good news is, many school buildings in New York and nationwide are undergoing a mindset shift, moving away from self-contained classrooms, and striving for fully inclusive environments where appropriate.

INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

The shift from self-contained classrooms to inclusive school communities takes a collective effort and commitment. Its success depends on the united mindset of all school personnel and families. Carr provides an essential reminder: "We really want people to understand that special education services are not a place, they're portable. So what that student needs, should be able to be embedded in the general education class." A "why wait" mentality should be in place, too. According to Carr, it is most beneficial to integrate as early as the pre-K setting because "the gap just gets larger before third grade." As schools grow out of traditional self-contained classrooms and into inclusive models, issues with educational gaps have surfaced. In some cases, it has been found that special education teachers were not teaching higher level content, but rather, teachers were teaching within their own comfort levels. Consequently, the issue of the glass ceiling occurs, revealing the need for most special education students to be alongside their general education peers, receiving exposure to the rigorous general education curriculum. Beyond the academics, Carr points to special education students' low graduation rates, high dropout rates, and lack of relational bonds as a result of some self-contained classroom environments.

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That said, some higher needs students are thriving in self-contained environments for portions of their day. For these particular students, full inclusion looks a bit different, but requires the same mindset and perspective from all educational leaders. Heidi McCarthy, the vice president of the New York Council of Administrators of Special Education and director of pupil personnel at Chappaqua CSD, talks about a skills and achievement cohort at the high school level and its successes with inclusion: "There are necessary skills they need to develop to be successful after school. And so, for this particular group of students, instruction is best provided in a separate class. However, we always ensure they remain in the life and body of the high school." While attending high school through the age of 21, these students are often enrolled in the Pathways and/or BOCES program to help prepare them for work out in the community. In regards to inclusion within the school building, these students are provided many different opportunities to be integrated alongside their general education peers. For instance, when they are ready to work, they often begin working within the high school, such as in the cafeteria, to gain the necessary skills. Even more, as part of the "life and body" of the school, these students attend the same extra-curricular activities, eat in the same cafeteria, and are enrolled in the same general education elective courses alongside their peers. Rather than separate events, extracurriculars, and elective courses, McCarthy says, "Adult support is provided to these students when necessary." Fully inclusive, therefore, means that these students are alongside their peers for as much time of the day as possible. The exception to this is their academic time in a separate classroom that focuses more heavily on functional skills. Beyond the school culture, McCarthy explains that these students go on to work within the community, alongside a job coach. For students who do spend portions of their day in self-contained classrooms due to learning or behavioral differences, it is crucial to hold the belief that they must remain a part of the "life and body" of the school in all other circumstances.

Schools nationwide are at a varying degree of inclusion. Bradley Strait, the principal of The Learning Community and former special education teacher, celebrates the successes of their current direct consultant teaching model and the ways in which their director of special programs has established a collective inclusive mindset amongst the staff. Pivotal to the suc-

cess of their inclusion is their hiring process of the grade-level consultants. Strait explains how interview committees have grown in numbers and how the standard for these consultants has increased: "Thinking about such an important member, when you're hiring somebody who you have a lot of expectations for, I think you want to get all those people together who will be working with them on a daily basis." Beginning with the hiring process, carefully chosen grade-level direct consultants have been one important factor in The Learning Community's success. Which begs the question, do our schools have the right experts in place to carry out the vision and mission of an inclusive environment?

Similar to the work being done at The Learning Community, Chappaqua CSD has been polishing their inclusive model. McCarthy explains that their model provides co-teaching, consultant teachers, and teaching assistants for their special education students within the general education classrooms. In doing so, she explains how their inclusive model is "providing our students with opportunities to truly reach their potential." Significant to Chappaqua's success is holding their special education students to high, appropriate expectations. McCarthy goes on to say: "When we include students in a general education classroom we are presuming a level of confidence in them that may not be presumed if they were in a segregated setting. We are raising the bar for them and they are jumping over the bar because they are showing us that they have incredible strength that may not have been discovered if they were in a traditional segregated setting." High, appropriate expectations that foster a growth mindset in all students are a predominant principle.

While special education is "not a place, it's portable," the physical space of an inclusive environment is important, too. And this is true for both special education and general education students. A bond passed by the Chappaqua community has provided the funding to redesign learning spaces. The physical space of their inclusive environment fosters things like small group work, project-based learning, and active, energized learning, and this enriches the learning for all students.

Inclusive environments involve more than exposure to academic rigor and high, appropriate expectations, though. Special education students also need authentic relational bonds with classmates and school staff. Social integration programs, such as Best Buddies and Unified Sports, have worked toward fostering relationships among special education and general education students. Carr has witnessed some success with a Unified Sports basketball and cheerleading team, commenting that "it's a start but not an end." Similar to strides being made with academic integration, many of the social integration programs are doing good, valuable work, but there is room for growth, especially with the goal being genuine inclusion. McCarthy celebrates the success that Chappaqua has found with their Unified Sports basketball team and the ways it's enriched student relationships through camaraderie and team building. She makes note of the impact it had on students without disabilities, as it fueled conversations about what they learned from being involved with the team. Social integration is important to keep at the forefront of inclusion discussions, right alongside the academic chatter. Let's also not forget that social integration within inclusive environments can happen organically within the day-to-day interactions of a school building. We must not only rely on programs to socially integrate the hearts of special education students.

ADMINISTRATOR'S ROLE

It's clear that an inclusive environment can not and will not be achieved through the work of one committed individual. Inclusion demands a district-wide, building-wide collective mindset that is driven by the desire to meet the needs of all learners—both special education and general education students. While the focus here will be placed on the administrator, we must not look past the responsibility that teachers, interventionists, bus drivers, lunchroom paras, office staff, etc. have in creating and maintaining an inclusive environment. The upper hand administrators have is their position of leadership. Not simply managers of the school, administrators can mold and model the beliefs and perspectives for all school personnel and change the culture.

DeWitt, who facilitates competence courses on instructional leadership, poses the question: "What do we value? Do we actually trust each other enough that you're going to tell me as your school leader, "I really don't know how to put scaffolding in place in my classroom, and have me be able to say 'let me help.'" Deeply rooted in self-efficacy and collective efficacy, DeWitt argues there needs to be a level of trust established between the administrator and school staff to foster

the conversations and professional development necessary to establish and maintain an inclusive environment. Strait echoes the need for open, consistent conversations amongst all

educational professionals working with special education students. PLCs, flipped faculty meetings, classroom observations, and organic hallway "check-ins" are all opportunities for administrators to get conversations rolling about data findings and necessary instructional strategies.

The important role of administrators is creating intentional time to focus on reflection and refining as schools wade through the complex waters of inclusion. In the Chappaqua Central School District, McCarthy explains the importance of the administrator's role in creating strong teacher leaders. She believes her role is to "support and strengthen" their special education program. One way she does this is through facilitating a professional development fellowship program. Teachers have the opportunity to focus on an area of study for two years, complete their own action research, and then share their data and findings with their colleagues. Opportunities such as this intentionally offer school staff deeper learning and ways to refine their skill sets. It's in the hands of the administrator to set the tone for trust, conversation, collaboration, and growth, so that the mindset of inclusion can flourish into a learning environment for all students.

Hattie believes in the collaboration of teachers and their own reflection in regard to the impact their work has on students. He explains further: "Hence the important role of leaders to create environments of high trust where teachers are given the time, resources and support to critique each other, improve their impact, evaluate the learning of these students, get outside professional help to work with the teachers…" Similar to McCarthy's perspective, Hattie's insight reveals schools' need for strong teacher leaders.

Lastly, Carr reminds of the importance of keeping families involved in these pivotal conversations, too. With the shift from self-contained classrooms to inclusive environments for most of our special education students, she argues there needs to be trust built back up with families. They need to know the "why" behind the shift and be reassured that at the end of the day, we as educational professionals are doing what we can to best meet the needs of all learners.

Today's special education is filled with a lot of good work and progress being made. It's important to stop and recognize the small successes made along the way. We must keep in mind the "yet" that hangs in the forefront of a growth mindset. Perhaps your school's inclusive model isn't there "yet" but the daily commitment to meeting the needs of all students—responding to the heartbeat of our schools—will propel your building forward. Together, let's create spaces where all special education students will be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and relationships to successfully thrive in the culture of school buildings and post graduate life.

BIOGRAPHIES

Carr, Joyce. *Supervisor of special education and student support services, Elmira City School District,* in discussion with author, September 2019.

DeWitt, Peter. *Former K-5 teacher and principal, author, keynote speaker, workshop facilitator,* in discussion with author, September 2019.

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RESOURCES

DeWitt, Peter. (May 13, 2018). Are Labels Preventing Students from Succeeding? *Education Week* (blog). May 13, 2018. Accessed September 13, 2019. https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2018/05/are_labels_preventing_students_from_succeeding.html.

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