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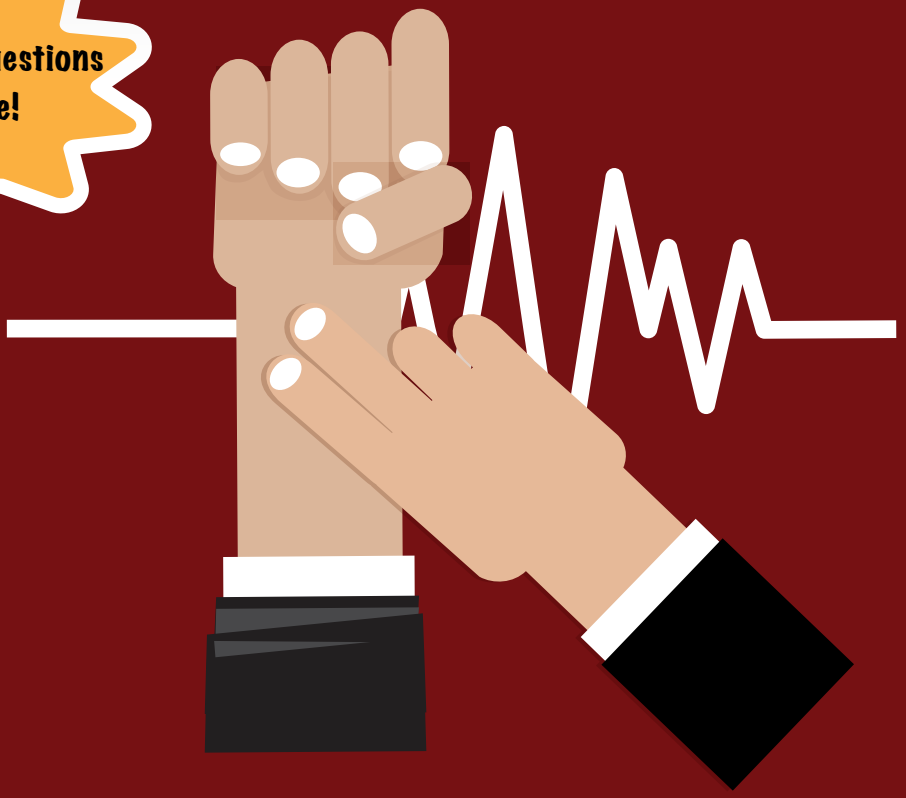

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School Administrators Association of
SAANYS
New York State

Special Education

A message from
Dr. Regina K. Huffman
SAANYS President 2018-2019

For many years and sometimes even today, special education has been viewed with a negative lens, and mere association has often stigmatized children and their families. According to historical information gathered by the faculty of Arkansas State University, prior to 1961, children who needed instructional modifications to meet their needs were not served in public schools. However, after parents began the processes needed to secure a public education for their children, in 1965 Lyndon B. Johnson began signing acts designed to expand public education and its funding purposes. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was signed into law and is now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. Lawmakers have amended this act several times over the years to incorporate information designed to assist schools and families with strategies needed to best serve their children with special needs. The No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top initiatives advanced these legislative initiatives by ensuring that these unique groups of students were being educated. Over the past nearly six decades, in the United States, children with special needs have moved from being at home to isolated classrooms to inclusive classrooms where children of all abilities can learn from and with each other.

This brief historical overview leads me to ask, "What is special education today?" Some describe special education as a form of learning provided to students with exceptional needs. There are others who argue it is educational programs and practices that may require special teaching approaches, equipment, or care within or outside a regular classroom. Yet others state it is classroom or private instruction involving techniques, exercises, and subject matter designed for students whose learning needs cannot be met by a standard school curriculum. I believe the following description is more encompassing: "Special education is the practice of educating students in a way that addresses their individual differences and needs." In a perfect world, this process contains the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted equipment, and materials in an accessible setting.

As educators, our goal is to educate all of our students. Therefore, we ask, "What should special education look like in today's modern school system?" One of my colleagues, Nadege Allison, who has made it her life's work to meet the needs of and advocate for children with special needs, stated, "In a modern system, special education should look like best practices in any classroom. Observers should not be able to identify students with special needs. Rather, all strategies of specially designed instruction, including differentiation, scaffolding, modifications, accommodations, etc., are utilized to meet their needs and should be implemented in a way that benefits not only our special needs children but all students. It is important to state: it is not a watering down of instructional material and a lessening of expectations but rather ensuring that all students are provided with the supports needed to be successful."

This is not only a powerful statement but also a sound philosophical belief of anyone who sincerely believes all children can learn given the proper support. How do we as administrators and teachers create learning environments where these beliefs are actualized? How do we ensure our special needs students all feel valued, included, and ready to give it their all? These are simple questions. I believe we should start with the unpretentious fact that special needs students are people. Yes, people, not just modifications and accommodations. They have feelings, aspirations, and dreams. They want to be cared for, respected, and appreciated for their contributions just like everyone else. As educators, we must educate the whole child even if they learn differently. Teachers can make certain that when planning and implementing instructional activities, tasks, assignments, and roles, it is evident that it is for everyone. In the event that more in-depth clarity or support is necessary, it should be delivered in such a fashion that all students could benefit. All instructional faculty and staff, who are fully aware of these concepts, will ensure that every student has a role in which they meaningfully contribute and feel successful without marginalizing anyone's input or effort during the instructional periods. We must also create opportunities outside the classroom for our special needs students to contribute to the school community. We live in a global society with people of very diverse backgrounds. We have to make sure that all students learn to appreciate the differences of others, and it is that diversity that makes our world so great.

In order to support educators in their quest to assist special needs students to reach their optimal potential, there are various tools and strategies available. Many professionals in this field would agree that the greatest proven method of instruction is inclusion. Time after time, it has been demonstrated that students with disabilities learn better when they are being taught alongside their nondisabled classmates. This requires that teachers be highly trained and possess skills in various instructional practices, as that allows them to be genuinely effective in their implementation of differentiated instruction. There are also many technologies in the form of apps that will read text aloud and aid with mathematical calculations. There are also devices that assist with audio, visual, and mobility impairments. Technology is a valuable tool and resource in so many areas; however, it does not replace the need for sound instruction and the authentic relationships educators build with their students.

Every educator who works in a public school setting has heard the term "special education." We have been exposed to IEPs (individual educational plans). We have written some progress reports or attended a CSE. Most of us are aware that there are laws that guide special education and that is the extent of our knowledge base. It is important to know that in our classrooms today, with special exceptions, there really is no longer a strong dichotomy between special education and general education. We must utilize various pedagogical strategies that will ensure the success of all our students. I hope that as the readers of this edition of *Vanguard* peruse through each article, they enhance their knowledge of this very important component of education.

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A message from
Christopher Suriano

Assistant Commissioner, New York State Education Department
Office of Special Education

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is committed to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality inclusive programs and activities in their schools. For far too long, New York State has not met the federal and state benchmarks for our students with disabilities. This simply cannot continue. As such, NYSED has placed a renewed focus on improving outcomes for the state's students with disabilities. To accomplish this, our learning environments must be equipped with a variety of supports and interventions to meet the wide range of academic and social-emotional needs of our students.

As part of NYSED's focus on inclusion, the Office of Special Education (OSE) is also taking a renewed approach to supporting the implementation of the Blueprint for Improved Results for Students with Disabilities. The blueprint is designed to ensure that students with disabilities are educated to the maximum extent appropriate with their general education peers; have the opportunities to benefit from high-quality instruction necessary to reach the same standards as all students; and leave school prepared to successfully transition to post school learning, living, and employment. This statewide framework is grounded in practices to support inclusion of all students and is intended to clarify expectations for administrators, teachers, policy makers, and practitioners to improve instruction for students with disabilities. The blueprint focuses on seven core principles and practices supported by research for all students with disabilities.

To support implementation of the blueprint, NYSED created a coordinated and cohesive network focused on enhancing services and supports for students with disabilities ages birth to 21. The network is called the OSE Educational Partnership and will increase district capacity using an intensive team approach to technical assistance and professional learning that is implemented with consistency across New York State.

This professional learning will focus on systems change through the provision of more efficient and streamlined services aligned to the priority work of NYSED and the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Embedded in this work is an increased emphasis on the need to ensure equity, access, and opportunities for all students as we strive to provide high-quality inclusive programs and activities. The OSE Educational Partnership is designed to:

- create a comprehensive, multidisciplinary team approach that is focused on the principles of the blueprint and supports our stakeholders;
- provide a structure that facilitates systems change efforts and sustainability of those changes;
- encourage and promote culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining educational practices that include families and communities as valued partners;
- promote greater efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of high-quality services to families and professionals; and
- rely on data-based problem solving and decision making as well as the use of evidence-based practices.

Through the work of the OSE Educational Partnership, NYSED will support schools in implementing classrooms that are built on the principles of multitiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS will ensure meaningful academic, social-emotional learning, and long-term life outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

MTSS is an evidence-based model of instruction and intervention built on the belief that all students can learn. One of the core values of MTSS is that all school professionals are responsive to students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Practices in MTSS are evidence based and reflect students' culture, identity, and language. Data from universal screenings and other assessments are used by teams on an ongoing basis to systematically determine the effectiveness of core curricula, make necessary adjustments to educational practice, and identify students for whom more support is needed. Students with additional needs will be provided supplemental and/or intensive supports, based on frequent monitoring of progress. Throughout this process, school professionals will collaborate with families and other stakeholders to maximize student success.

These underlying values and guiding principles of MTSS provide guidance for all program decisions and are used to promote consistency, integrity, and sustainability. MTSS ensures:

- **An Unwavering Focus on Student Growth:** All educational decision making is driven by ambitious student performance goals.
- **Cultural Responsiveness and Equity:** All students succeed when they have access to what they need when they need it. Schools and districts are organized in a way that recognizes, respects, and reflects the strengths of each student's culture, social identity, and community.
- **Engaged Stakeholders:** The voices of family, community, and school personnel (i.e., all faculty and staff) are actively solicited and used in decision making. All stakeholders are responsible and accountable for the decisions made.
- **A Whole Child/Whole School Approach:** Educators focus on supporting each student's cognitive, academic, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional development through systems of support that are aligned and integrated. All school personnel aim to educate and support children to be healthy, safe, engaged, and challenged, and receive ongoing professional learning to enable them to do this.
- **Proactive Problem Solving:** Prevention is more effective than intervention. Teachers and school leaders believe that success and failure in student learning are about the actions of teachers and school leaders. They adjust practices and policies to create strong conditions for student success by relying on data-based decision making.
- **Full Access for ALL Students:** MTSS is for all students. All students have access to and participate in the general education curriculum to meet state learning standards. Not every student who receives intensive supports is identified as a student with a disability, and not every student identified with a disability needs intensive supports in all areas.

We must improve the outcomes of our students with disabilities. The blueprint and OSE Educational Partnership are vehicles that can assist us in making the meaningful systems changes that will support administrators and teachers in implementing evidence-based instructional practices and systems. I look forward to working with you as we continue our collaborative efforts to provide high-quality inclusive programs and activities for all students across New York State.

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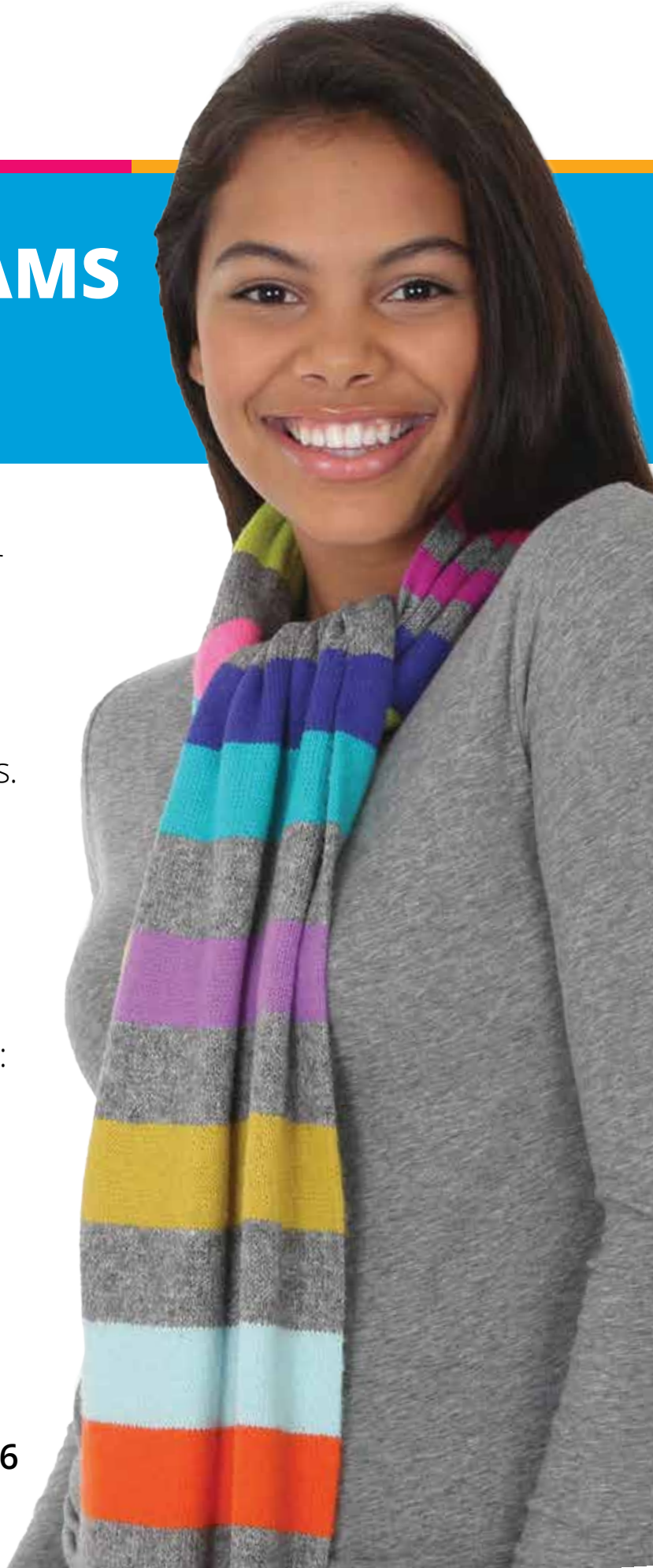

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TODAY'S

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.

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.

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.

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CO-TEACHING:

Transforming the Standard Classroom Experience

By Sarah Gonser

Inside the tidy red-brick building of Gouverneur Elementary—built just three years ago to accommodate three local elementary schools merging into one new facility—classrooms are generously proportioned and walls of windows bring in abundant light. The library is amply stocked with books and collaboration-friendly desks configured into compact pods. Foam cube seats nestle together like puzzle pieces, encouraging students to hunker down for cozy reading. The building and its furniture, however, are just one part of what's new at Gouverneur Elementary, which serves the surrounding Village of Gouverneur's 4,000 residents and is about 30 miles from the Canadian border. In a development that's been in the works for close to a decade, Gouverneur Elementary now offers a co-taught inclusion classroom at nearly each grade level.

"It was a lot of work; this definitely doesn't happen overnight," said Victoria Day, the school's principal. "It took us a good eight to nine years of getting the practice in, changing the philosophy and thinking of our staff—and even my own philosophy—so that we all understand: this problem won't go away unless we address it. Fundamentally, we had to really think about the special education continuum of moving scholars to the least restrictive environment so we could find a happy medium where all kids move up along that continuum, whether they have an IEP or not."

For Gouverneur Elementary, which has 650 students enrolled in pre-K through fourth grade, the hard work is paying off. Where some students grew just one or two reading levels per year prior to the school adapting an inclusive co-teaching model, many are now advancing much more quickly. "I have several examples where kids are now growing between six and nine average reading levels because they're finally getting more face time and guided skills practice work with two teachers in the room," said the school's co-principal, Charity Zawatski. "From the lens of achievement and growth, that's unheard of."

Collaborative team teaching, sometimes called co-teaching, involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together for the duration of the school day in one inclusion classroom. Though there are several co-teaching models, the gold standard is when both teachers share responsibilities and work as equals, their roles indistinguishable to their students. Co-teaching, when done well, allows more opportunities for one-on-one learning and small group work. For teachers, it encourages the type of close collaboration that, ideally, allows them to develop and deliver the strongest, most compelling lesson. Importantly, co-teaching is a way for schools to ensure that students who need special education services—children diagnosed with learning and attention issues, for example—are being taught in the least restrictive environment, an important component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The least restrictive environment, for many students, often means an inclusion classroom, a practice that research shows has positive short- and long-term effects for students. Many schools have inclusive classrooms, which can be set up in a number of ways, and the main purpose is for students who receive special education services to learn alongside students who do not receive special education services. While some inclusive classrooms, like those at Gouverneur Elementary, use a co-teaching model, others have special education teachers push into the classroom during the school day to teach only specific parts of the curriculum.

While co-teaching can be adapted to all grade levels, the practice is somewhat more complicated in middle and high school due to the structure of secondary education where each subject is taught by a different teacher. This means general and special education teachers pair up by subject and never have the benefit of working together for the entire school day. While this makes developing a cohesive team-teaching approach more challenging, research shows that there are ways to strengthen the practice. "One of the best approaches an administrator can take is to promote co-teaching by providing substantive information about this collaborative arrangement and encouraging teachers to proactively prepare for this before they actually start the process," wrote Wendy W. Murawski and Lisa A. Dieker in *Co-teaching at the Secondary Level: Unique Issues, Current Trends, and Suggestions for Success*. "As with most educational initiatives, schools differ in their awareness and readiness level for implementation, as do the individual faculty members within each school."

At Gouverneur, the decision to develop the inclusive practice of co-teaching for each grade level (the kindergarten class is still in development), came out of a tangle of practices that the administration and staff felt weren't serving students well. "Before any of this, we really had a haphazard mishmash model," said Zawatski. "We were essentially doing the old version of consultant teaching—where the special education teacher pushes into the classroom, and pullout resource room. But this only allowed us to support some students, not all students, and definitely not for the entire day."

Underscoring these challenges was data that showed students were not progressing academically. "We were looking at kids growing maybe one, or possibly two, reading levels per year. That's just not sufficient. Most kids need to grow between three and four reading levels on average each grade level," recalled Zawatski. "For students receiving special education services, they might need to grow even more because they're already behind the ball."

At the same time, Gouverneur, a onetime boomtown known for its lace and silk mills, lumber and dairy industries, and thriving paper and pulp mills, was experiencing ongoing population decline as residents moved away to find jobs and escape local poverty. Schools, therefore, faced steeply declining enrollment.

Once the decision was made to collapse three local elementary schools into one new building, Day and Zawatski got to work. "We looked at the number of special education students that we had—there were some large numbers—and we knew this would create future serious numbers and balancing challenges for us," Zawatski said. "As we collapsed buildings and got to create a new pre-K through [grade] four model, we watched the numbers and created a plan based on what we were going to need to support and balance classrooms with general education and special education that would be manageable for teachers."

Alongside convincing the school district that a co-taught inclusion classroom for each elementary grade would make fiscal and educational sense, one of the toughest administrative tasks was finding the right mix of teachers to collaborate in a classroom. "As administrators, the biggest challenge we have is how can we get the special education teacher and the general education teacher to mesh," said Day. "It takes two very special people to make this work for our kids."

Some teachers compare collaborative teaching to a marriage. "You're hoping you're compatible with the person you're paired with and it requires

getting used to not being the only adult making decisions in your classroom," said Carrie Hartle, a third-grade teacher at Gouverneur Elementary who has been teaching for 17 years. "The first year, I'm not going to lie, it was rough. I love my co-teacher, she's wonderful, but there was friction for both of us at first. But that's normal. Now, we finish each other's sentences and we're best friends. It's important for kids to see that kind of unity in their teachers."

An essential ingredient for making the model work is investing in ongoing professional development. Over the last six years, Zawatski estimates Gouverneur Elementary spent $40,000 on PD, including sending a team of teachers to Boston for a weeklong train-the-trainer workshop, and another team to Seattle for a train-the-trainer dive into differentiated instruction.

"That has made the difference in what we do," said Zawatski. "Two teachers take time out of their summer to go to Seattle, get the train-the-trainer experience, bring that back and each year not only lead summer PD but also run professional learning communities throughout the school year, supporting teachers at every level with differentiation. The value that we've invested in them has truly paid off. But you have to put the money up front and invest in the time and the people to have it keep paying dividends for you."

While the Gouverneur administration worked to put the pieces in place for this model to work at its new elementary school, it became clear that not everyone—including other teachers at the school and parents of students—understood why this might be a good thing.

"Early in the school year, we realized that parents and our students didn't understand that I was a certified teacher, with just as many certifications as my co-teacher. Everyone thought I was a paraprofessional," said Arleen Escadero, a fourth-grade special education teacher at Gouverneur Elementary who has been teaching for four years. "So we created a pamphlet to send home to parents, welcoming them to our [integrated co-teaching] classroom, explaining the benefits of co-teaching, how we accomplish our mission. And how, when it's done well, you can't tell who the special education and who the general education teacher is."

At the same time, the push toward collaborative teaching wasn't popular among some members of the school's staff. "Even this many years in, teachers in our school who aren't in a co-teaching pair still don't understand and embrace integrated co-teaching," said Zawatski. "We've done a lot of legwork educating our own professional staff members about what integrated co-teaching is, why it's beneficial, and what the teaching in this classroom looks like compared to their own classroom."

Ultimately, according to Day, successfully integrating the co-teaching practice at each grade level at Gouverneur Elementary required a rock-solid commitment that came from the top down. "The administrator is key: it's your belief. If you believe in it, it will happen," she said. "Is it easy? Absolutely not. Is it best for kids? Yes. So that's why you need to work really hard to get buy-in from your staff and from your administration."

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WHAT'S NEXT?

Life After High School for Our Special Education Population

By Pat Fontana

As juniors and seniors, high school students are thinking about their future in terms of whether they will attend college, which college they will attend, or whether they will pursue work opportunities immediately after graduating. Special education students are thinking about those same exciting adventures, with aspirations of what will become their next step after graduating. A number of high school and higher education programs throughout New York offer robust academic and life skills programs to help special education students make that transition successfully and to help them make their own dreams a reality.

Basic accommodations are required, of course, at all educational institutions. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), special education students are afforded the opportunity to take extra time with tests if they need it or to complete those tests and other assignments in certain environments that accommodate their particular needs.

However, there are many exciting and supportive programs that go well beyond those basic requirements, preparing special education students for work opportunities, encouraging them to get involved in their community, helping them to learn self-sufficiency skills, and exploring options for furthering their education. The emphasis across the board is on what the student wants to do, as questions about the student's goals and desires prevail among the programs designed to help them achieve those goals.

BOCES **LEADS THE WAY**

In Ulster and Orange counties, the BOCES Division of Special Education includes a transition planning area in which multiple professionals work "to remove barriers and create as many opportunities as possible," according to Transition Coordinator Sara Puccio. In fact, the transition process actually begins at age 12 for the students. By the time they are in high school, at age 15, the focus is on preparing them for the workplace or for college.

Kerri B. Stroka, director of special education for Orange-Ulster BOCES, says their previous school-to-work program offerings were relatively narrow. However, they have been "cultivating the program intensely over the past four years," since the birth of Including Communities. Now they have a better opportunity, through business partnerships developed over the years, "for students to have on-site and off-site work experiences aligned to their interests."

Including Communities is a program for 18- to 21-year-old students who have fulfilled their academic requirements for high school and who need to learn transition skills. They tend to work and get involved in the community of Goshen, learning how the public transportation system works and becoming valuable members of the workforce there. Puccio emphasizes that her work with these students is "beyond rewarding" as she relates that "in special education, we tend to be focused on what students can't do—when they get to this point, it's very focused on their strengths and what they can do."

The Goshen community has more than welcomed these students. While the transition team initially thought the students would have much to learn from the business people in the community, it turns out that the employers are learning quite a bit themselves. Including Communities has grown from an initial class of 12 located in a storefront classroom to today's group of 100 students going to work sites hosted by what Stroka describes as "multiple, multiple, multiple partners" in Goshen and beyond.

Students learn employability skills as interns in local stores, bike shops, restaurants, and even the local board of elections. One of the biggest champions is LEGOLAND New York, which is focused on being an inclusive employer. The program grows in part through word of mouth as the original partners of Inclusive Communities have become its biggest advocates. The Orange County Chamber of Commerce has been very involved in the program, with its president and CEO, Lynn Cione, stating that the Chamber gave its "intern real work which needed to be accomplished, and accomplished it was. We highly recommend this partnership to our member businesses."

The Orange-Ulster BOCES center-based programs are held at the Emanuel Axelrod Education Center, located on the BOCES main campus, serving students ages 5-21 with five special education programs. Students learn life skills, daily living skills, and eventually employability skills that will enable them "to be successful adults and contributing members of the community," Puccio says. She continues to emphasize that programs are focused on what the students want, not what people think they can do or even what their families may want for them.

HIGHER ED **OPPORTUNITIES GROW**

What the student wants may well be to pursue additional educational opportunities. By partnering with universities such as SUNY Orange, the Orange-Ulster BOCES transition program also helps prepare students to do just that. Colleges collaborate with the transition planning team, presenting at functions and hosting field trips. One of those functions is the Transition and Resource Fair held each year, which brings together around 35 agencies, organizations, and community resources including several colleges such as the College of Saint Rose.

Partnering with Living Resources, the College of Saint Rose created the College Experience program for special education students in 2005. The College Experience is a non-degree-seeking opportunity, even though the participants are considered College of Saint Rose students. They learn how to navigate the various buildings on campus as would any other freshman college student.

Rather than participating in the curriculum of the college, however, students in the College Experience at the College of Saint Rose participate in functional life skills courses taught on the college campus. They learn how to live independently and to maintain employment. College Experience students live in one of seven off-campus dorms, apartment-style houses equipped with kitchens, so they can learn how to develop a menu, prepare their meals, and clean their apartment.

In the first year of the two-year program, students focus on preparing for the internship they will take part in during their second year, including interview skills, resume and cover letter preparation, and other soft skills necessary for success in a job. Their internship, personalized to their specific interests and skills, involves going to work twice a week for one of the many business partners in the Albany region. Part of their College Experience training involves learning how to navigate the Albany transportation system to further enhance the students' ability to

live and work independently.

Colleen Dergosits, with Living Resources and the director of admissions for the College Experience, explains that while the program is geared primarily toward preparing students for work experiences, they can also audit Saint Rose classes. She says that they "try to make sure we are as integrated as possible" as students also have access to all the amenities on campus and can participate in college activities and clubs.

A transition program is available as a postgraduate, third-year option. During the transition program, students increase their employment to three days a week and work with Living Resources staff to find and maintain their own apartments. Dergosits says that 87 percent of graduates move on to the transition program after graduation. At that point, students have developed the life skills and employability skills necessary to gain their independence, typically requiring less than ten hours a week of transition support. Dergosits adds that "when students graduate, they're very comfortable and ready to get their own apartment."

The College Experience program started with four students in 2005. Today, there are 40 students enrolled. The program plans to open an eighth dorm in the fall of 2020. There have been 119 graduates to date and the majority of them still live in the Capital Region, as they have built community ties there. Dergosits reports that 67 percent of College Experience graduates are currently maintaining at least part-time employment.

The residential aspect of the College Experience program is a key element, encouraging special education students who are interested to "go away" to college and learn how to live independently. With minimal supervision, they are responsible for the upkeep of their own apartment and for planning and preparing their own meals.

For students who desire to pursue a credited degree, that option is available through a similar residential program, also offered in partnership with Living Resources, at SUNY Schenectady. Colleen Dergosits is also the director of admissions for CareerNext, which began in January 2019 with eight students.

CareerNext is a model program that assists special education students with moving into and succeeding in the college environment, recognizing that it is "very challenging for students to transition from high school to college." Staff works with the community college's ADA office to supplement their efforts and to give more support when it comes to the students' academics and the challenge of navigating their college world.

While students have to meet the admissions requirements of SUNY Schenectady to be accepted, CareerNext helps improve the students' ability to stay in school and earn their degree. Dergosits says that many high school special education students are "ready for more," ready to earn a certificate or degree, but just need a little extra guidance and support. In fact, the idea for CareerNext came from meeting with students and their families and hearing their concerns that they were looking for something more and couldn't find it.

Independence and employability are goals of CareerNext as well. The program works with students on time management skills, to make sure they're prioritizing, keeping track of their own schedule, and showing up for the extra assistance they are eligible to receive to complete tests and assignments. Students live in an inclusive dorm setting, in a suite across from the school. Here, too, they have a full kitchen instead of a meal plan so are responsible for their own menu planning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation.

As Dergosits explains, that residential component is extremely important. The CareerNext and College Experience programs are among the "few that offer a true residential experience for students." Learning how to live and work responsibly and independently, including managing their time appropriately to be able to complete their studies, is critical to the students' success in school and work.

The City University of New York (CUNY) is another answer to the question of "what's next" for special education students who desire to pursue a degree and to prepare for success in the workplace. Barbara Bookman, the university director for CUNY's Disability Programs, explains that their program is based on a grant partnership with the University of Rochester, AHRC NYC, the NYC Department of Education, and the JFK Jr. Institute for Worker Education. According to Bookman, the CUNY system currently has 11,000 students with disabilities, both visible and invisible.

CUNY Unlimited offers a credential program that combines academic classes and employability preparation. The classes students take as part of the CUNY Unlimited program are not for credit but are, as Bookman describes them, "similar to audit." Students participate in the college life, including clubs and activities, while also preparing for "next steps and employment."

> "...educating students and families as early as possible that these opportunities exist" is critical. She says that "many families don't realize that college is an option."

While the program is career oriented, it is also oriented toward self-advocacy and independence. Bookman

adds that "students tend to do better in an environment where the bar is raised," so the college environment helps them achieve their own goals. On graduating, students earn a CUNY Unlimited Achievement Certificate and are equipped with social skills, soft skills, and employability skills.

Support for the program is provided by the AHRC NYC Melissa Riggio Program for students participating at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, College of Staten Island, Hostos Community College, and Kingsborough Community College. CUNY Unlimited students on those campuses must be age 21 or older, must be eligible for services provided by the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), and must live in the borough of their campus.

CUNY LEADS is a program "linking employment and academic disability services," as Bookman describes it. Initially grant funded by Adult Career and Continuing Education Services — Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR), the program is now a permanent part of the CUNY educational experience for special education students. After the three-year grant ended, Bookman found that "70 percent of our students seeking employment were able to gain employment within a year" so they decided to continue the program.

Project REACH at CUNY is designed to serve the growing population of students on the autism spectrum. Resources in Education on Autism as CUNY's Hallmark (REACH) is currently grant funded and is focused on educating staff and faculty about the many issues unique to the autism population. The pilot program is available on five CUNY campuses and has already proven to help autistic students succeed in their college aspirations.

While all of these programs are effective in helping special education students go on to the next step, whether that is a career or higher education, the key to their success is the students themselves. CUNY's Bookman advises that students should "understand that the college search is no different if you have a disability." The services are "there for them. There is no more special ed, but they will be more successful if they take advantage of the opportunities."

Dergosits, the director of admissions for the College Experience at the College of Saint Rose and CareerNext at SUNY Schenectady, adds that "educating students and families as early as possible that these opportunities exist" is critical. She says that "many families don't realize that college is an option."

All agree that learning as much as possible about college programs and work prep programs, as soon as possible, is just as important for special education students as for any other high school students. Dergosits emphasizes that students need to start early to explore college options, that "more often than not they start the process too late."

In fact, programs that start earlier, such as the Orange-Ulster BOCES transition program, can help students and their families determine which opportunities best suit their goals and dreams. College fairs and campus visits can help students and their families determine the best fit for the student. Connecting with programs at schools such as CUNY, the College of Saint Rose, and SUNY Schenectady can help high school administrators learn more about the options available to those students after graduation, so they are better equipped to guide students through decisions about their next step.

After making that transition, it is critical for the student to learn the responsibilities of self-assessment, self-disclosure, and self-sufficiency. Orange-Ulster BOCES Transition Coordinator Puccio adds that these programs are designed to augment the basics of the ADA office, to help students develop the "skills they need to be successful adults and contributing members of the community."

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

There are many programs throughout New York that are focused on life after high school for special education students, teaching valuable life skills and offering quality workforce transition supports.

Most BOCES offer such programs, as do a growing number of colleges and universities, such as the program at the College of Saint Rose featured in this article.

Support levels and program options vary from college to college – here are a few others that can be found around the state:

- InclusiveU at **Syracuse University**, an initiative of The Lawrence B. Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Education, for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Career Ready Boot Camp and the Neurodiverse Hiring Initiative at **Rochester Institute of Technology**, for students with autism.
- The Program for Academic Learning Skills (PALS) at **Hofstra University**, for students with specific learning disabilities and ADD or ADHD.
- Vocational Independence Program (VIP) at the **New York Institute of Technology**, for students with learning differences and autism spectrum diagnoses.
- BRIDGES at **SUNY Orange**, an approved Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP) for students with ID, DD, and ASD.

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Top Assistive Technology Products for Schools

By Ellen Ullman

You may hear the phrase "assistive technology" and think of high-cost robots or high-tech wheelchairs, but the term refers to any device, software, or equipment that helps people work around their challenges. In a school environment, assistive technology can run the gamut from simple adaptive tools such as timers (for students who have difficulty pacing themselves) to automatic page turners, mobility aids, and voice-recognition programs.

Assistive technology provides a bridge to allow students to access the curriculum—without these aids, students won't be able to meet goals in reading, math, or any other subject. Thus, these tools are designed to level the playing field.

"Eyeglasses are assistive technology; without them, you can't see," says Cassie Frost, an assistive technology specialist for the Stevens Point Area School District. "Many tools that are beneficial, such as pencil grips, are assistive technology. There's a breadth of tools out there. Look for ones that hit on a wide area of needs and will cover a broader base."

Assistive technology is also about equity, says Luis F. Pérez, an educator and author of several books, including *Learning on the Go: How to Personalize Education with the iPad* (2016, CAST Professional Publishing). "As we move into more of an information-based economy, we don't want certain learners to be left behind. We need all the talent we can get."

One of the best things about assistive technology is that all students can benefit from it—whether or not they have an IEP. "We really ought to call it inclusive or universally designed technology," says Karen Janowski, an assistive technology consultant. "At its heart, assistive technology is about promoting independence. Let's identify the strategies and resources that will help students access grade-level content independently so they can demonstrate what they know."

Here are nine assistive technology products(plus a list of helpful resources) that all districts should know about.

1. **Texthelp's Read & Write**
   www.texthelp.com/en-us/products/read-write/
   This all-around-useful tool includes text-to-speech, speech-to-text, picture dictionaries, digital highlighters, and a grammar, spelling, and confusable words checker. Exam Mode lets teachers turn certain toolbars off during tests so that students can focus. Extremely helpful for English learners as well as students with dyslexia or learning differences. Frost calls it "a catch-all tool that our entire district can use."

2. **Co:Writer**
   learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/cowriter/
   Lauded by many in the assistive technology field as the best for word prediction, it also does speech-to-text, flexible spelling, and translation. "Co:Writer truly understands the spelling mistakes made by a child with dyslexia," says Jamie Martin, an assistive technology specialist for the New England Assistive Technology Center and a consultant for Understood.org. "Even better, its topic dictionaries bring in vocabulary related to a specific topic."

3. **The Pip**
   thepip.com/en-us/
   A handheld device that teaches students how to manage stress by helping them recognize the internal feeling of being calm. One of Frost's students struggled with emotional regulation; nothing seemed to help. When he held The Pip, he saw that laughing brought down his stress line. Some of Frost's other students will hold on to The Pip all day to see which parts are the most stressful.

4. **iOS 13**
   www.apple.com/ios/ios-13/features/
   "It lets you do just about anything with voice control: open an app, perform gestures such as swipe, or write and send a message," says Pérez. Martin says the iPad is especially helpful for students with learning disabilities. "It's a true multisensory platform, with built-in word prediction, switch access for people with motor difficulties, and hearing and sight accommodations," she says.

5. **Adapted board games, toys, instruments, and sensory products**
   Everything from a version of Hungry Hungry Hippos with wider pads (instead of the tiny levers) to special mice, to aromatherapy fans is available at websites such as Enabling Devices (enablingdevices.com) and enablemart (www.enablemart.com/).

6. **Voice Dream Reader and Voice Dream Scanner**
   https://www.voicedream.com
   Voice Dream Reader is an iOS app that offers text-to-speech, with more than 200 voices and 30 languages. Pérez recommends using it with Bookshare (www.bookshare.org/cms/), a massive ebook library that's free for qualified students and schools. Martin likes the extensive customization: You can speed it up, slow it down, and change the colors, font, size, and spacing. She says it helps with comprehension, focus, retention, and decoding. Voice Dream Scanner uses artificial intelligence–based text–recognition, works offline, and lets you export to the cloud. Students can take a picture of a handout or worksheet and Voice Dream Scanner will read it out loud.

7. **Learning Ally Audiobooks**
   learningally.org/
   "Because Learning Ally lets students see the text as it is read to them, my students can take time to understand and enjoy the story," says Jenna Ponx, a special education teacher at the Richard Ira Jones Middle School. "They get excited about reading and learn to read for fun. It does wonders for their self-confidence."

8. **uPAR** (Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading)
   learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/upar/
   A personal precision diagnostic that shows the text level a student can comprehend with a reading accommodation, uPAR is important for helping everyone understand who can benefit and by how much. "When students see the data—which we encourage educators to share with them—they see what their ability is and are able to turn everything around," says Ben Johnston, marketing director for Don Johnston Incorporated, the company that developed uPAR. "It lets schools

"It lets schools connect the dots between state tests and who needs reading accommodations."

9. **Snap&Read**
learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/snap-read/
This reading tool translates, offers text-to-speech, and lets students highlight and organize their ideas. The anti-distraction feature removes ads and images and formats text to make it readable, and the dynamic text leveling substitutes really difficult words for less difficult ones.

ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education technology since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Mass., and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.

Additional Assistive Technology Resources

Encourage your team to stay informed about products.
Here are some favorite websites and more.

- Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology (QIAT) website – qiat.org/ and listserv – lsv.uky.edu/scripts/wa.exe?SUBED1=qiat&A=1&SUBED1=qiat&A=1
- #ATchat on Twitter, Wednesdays at 8:00 pm EST
- AbleNet University – free professional development (PD) webinars www.youtube.com/channel/UCnqbFTy0VIQ6fVxXY2HiOJw
- The Center on Technology and Disability – www.ctdinstitute.org/
- Closing the Gap – www.closingthegap.com
a professional association that offers PD, articles, a database of 2,000+ assistive technology products and services, and an annual conference.

Apple Accessibility for All

From the beginning, Apple has been known for its accessibility features on its computers and devices. A recent Apple workshop event, "Access Abilities," demonstrated to a room of educators just how powerful, and sometimes life-changing, these features really are. Visit **https://www.apple.com/accessibility** to learn more. How can technology assist your special needs students?

Here are just a few of the tools highlighted at this Apple workshop that could help your students ...

Voice Control
Voice Control lets users who can't use traditional input devices control Mac, iPad, and iPhone entirely with their voice. **https://youtu.be/aqoXFCCTfm4**

Guided Access
Allows parents, teachers, or therapists to limit iPad or iPhone to one app at a time, and limit the amount of time spent in an app. A powerful tool for those with autism or sensory challenges.

Speak Screen and Speak Selection
Speak Screen allows users to read text from newspapers, books, web pages, or email on their iPhone or iPad by swiping down the screen with two fingers. Speak Selection can read highlighted text.
https://youtu.be/6GB-VntNWbY

itunes.com/specialed
A collection of apps that "help with everything from language development to life skills and daily planning."

For more ideas, get the free downloadable book, *iCan with iOS: Apps, Tools & Strategies for Students with Learning and Attention Issues.*

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>
> Shelley Rossitto
> *Executive Director, IT & PD, Monticello Schools*

Contact

For more information about this program, contact Karen Bronson, SAANYS director of professional learning at kbronson@saanys.org or Bonnie Tryon, SAANYS mentor coordinator at btryon@saanys.org.

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OPINIONS

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Congressman Elijah Cummings (1950-2019)

DisabilityScoop...

Feds Working To Expand Transportation For Those With Special Needs

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Stride Adaptive Sports

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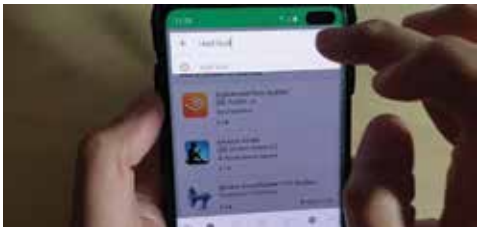
YouTube...Apple

Apple – Accessibility – Sady

Scan or visit: http://bit.ly/2JB8A68

YouTube...Understood



How to Use Text-To-Speech on a Mobile Device

Scan or visit: http://bit.ly/34i3xPJ

DisabilityScoop...

Schools Turn To Virtual Reality To Help Students With Disabilities

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SPECIAL REPORT: Special Education: Practice and Pitfalls

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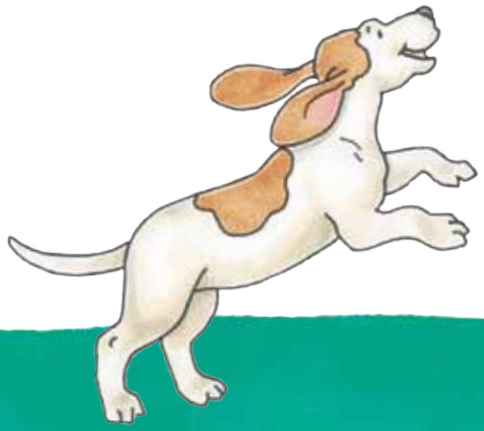

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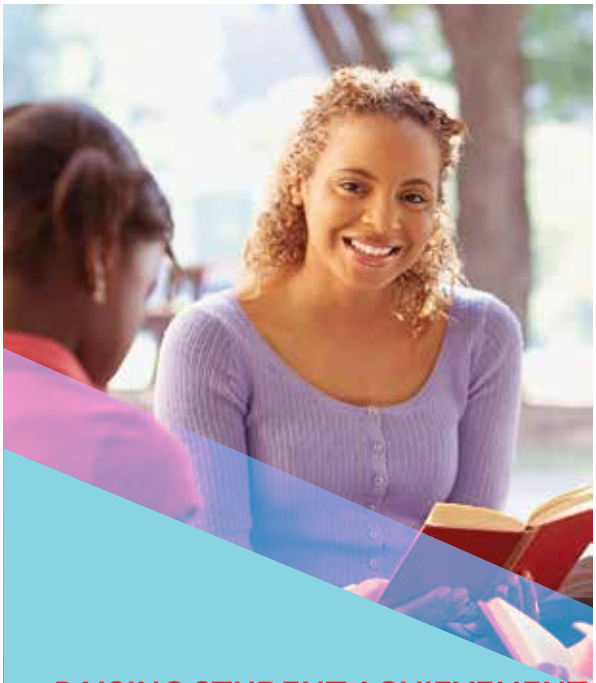

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A Comprehensive Approach to Inclusive Classroom

Team Teaching and Inclusive School Cultures

By Liz Daley

Though the co-teaching model has been in place for years, many practitioners aren't confident in this instructional model (Fowler, p. 17). Strengthening inclusive teaching partnerships needs comprehensive skill support, much the way strengthening an inclusive school culture requires a comprehensive plan. Much of what happens to hamper the growth of the co-teaching teams can be attributed to communication gaps between general education and special education teachers. Lively debates about the difference between accommodation and modification, or integrated co-teaching and consultant teaching, even inclusion and programming, are meaningful and often passionate. When faculty can't agree about the denotation and connotation of language that we use, how can we build the rapport needed to plan and instruct a diverse group of students? Let's start with the fundamentals. What do we mean by co-teaching?

CONSULTANT TEACHING VS. INTEGRATED CO-TEACHING

Here is the guidance from NYSED:

> Integrated co-teaching services means students are intentionally grouped together based on similarity of need for the purpose of receiving specially designed instruction in a general education class, usually daily for the identified class. In this model, a general education teacher and a special education teacher share responsibility for the delivery of primary instruction, planning and evaluation for all students. Direct CT services are specially designed individual or group instruction recommended for an individual student with a disability in his or her general education class, the purpose being to adapt, as appropriate to the needs of the student, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to support the student to successfully participate and progress in the general curriculum during regular instruction. The focus of services provided by the CT is to an individual student with a disability. (2013)

If we move beyond the differences, it's clear that both partnerships include specially designed instruction and both depend upon effective and timely collaborative planning.

INCLUSION

Inclusive classroom practices dovetail with the practices that support students whose learning is interrupted by trauma, poverty, weak social-emotional skills, even English language learners and students navigating an unfamiliar culture.

When facilitating training for co-teachers, whether those partnerships are consultant teachers or integrated co-teaching, whether the classroom or building considers this inclusion or not, I consider three domains of effective collaborative partnerships: rapport, instructional strategies, and student outcomes.

RELATIONSHIP VS. RAPPORT

As defined by Merriam-Webster, rapport is *a friendly, harmonious relationship especially: a relationship characterized by agreement, mutual understanding, or empathy that makes communication possible or easy*. It's fundamental to the partnership of professionals that they continually connect their practice to common and oft-stated goals. Most teachers hone their craft in relative isolation from their peers. While we mentor new teachers, create content area PLCs to support each other, rarely do we observe each other, reflect on what we see, and relate it to evidence-based practices expected by ESSA.

What might happen when teachers who have always worked in isolation begin or continue working with another professional in the room? At first, it's a relief to have some help with grading, and managing students with disruptive behaviors, making copies. But beneath the surface, we've opened ourselves up to criticism, and exposed our insecurities. It's best practice to address these possibilities by systematically reflecting on what brings us together and exploring professionally how to address any differences that might interrupt the synergy that our students deserve.

Many teams attribute their success to simply being together for years—having the time to build a relationship. Time spent together can build a relationship. But when we see ourselves as professionals, we recognize that rapport isn't left to chance, time, or experience, but we apply skills to strengthen rapport. We hold ourselves accountable to using targeted discussion and careful honesty to build rapport throughout the school year, for the entire tenure of our teaching partnership.

According to *High Leverage Practices in Special Education* (2017),

> ...collaboration is ethereal in that it is never an end in itself, instead operating as a culture or a means through which any goal can be reached. Collaboration often is indirectly fostered among members of a school work group by arranging time for participants to meet face-to-face, guiding them through the development of positive professional relationships, establishing explicit and implicit procedures for working together, and teaching them about school programs that rely on collaborative interactions (e.g., teams, co-teaching). Collaboration is not explicitly mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), nor is it generally part of formal policies related to educating students with disabilities, but the requirements of the law and established school practices strongly infer that it is through collaboration that the effective education of students with disabilities is achieved (McLesky, p. 28).

According to the NYS Board of Regents
(Promoting Inclusion of Students with Disabilities, 2015),

Defining High Quality Inclusion

High Quality Inclusive Settings Would Be Defined to Mean That:

- instruction and configuration of classrooms and activities include both students with and without disabilities;
- students with disabilities are held to high expectations for achievement;
- special education and general education teachers intentionally plan teaching lessons to promote the participation and progress of students with disabilities in learning and social activities;
- individualized accommodations, supports, and specially-designed instruction are provided to students with disabilities to participate and progress in regular education classes and activities; and
- evidence-based services and supports are used to foster the cognitive, communication, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional development of students with disabilities.

This proposed definition is consistent with the definition/components of high quality inclusion as provided in the **U.S. Department of Education policy statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs**.

HERE'S A STRATEGY TO **CREATE YOUR OWN TEAM RAPPORT BUILDERS:**

In order to support teams in creating these rapport builders the teams can scan teaching blogs, academic article abstracts, or NYSUT and NYSED links for articles about co-teaching. Then together develop a list of 10-15 topics/issues gleaned from that review and turn those topics into open-ended questions. Embed these questions into your planning format and save 15-20 minutes each month just to discuss these prompts. This exercise helps teams nurture rapport, avoid assumptions, and ground their practice in professionalism.

INSTRUCTIONAL **STRATEGIES**

The bulk of the special educator's impact on the students they're supporting in the inclusive classroom happens during planning. Unfortunately, most teaching partnerships report inadequate planning time, and most secondary teaching partnerships—consultant models or teaching assistants or aides—do not have scheduled collaborative planning time (McDuffie et al., p. 505). Regardless of scheduled time or lack of scheduled times, planning must be done. Some teams use shared documents and calendars to support planning, others use time in the classroom when students are working independently to collaborate. More take conference days, summer curriculum, or clubs and activities periods to plan. Either way it happens, it's imperative to plan your planning time and planning routine before the school year begins (Murawski, 2012).

When my 11th-grade English team approaches planning, we have to prioritize. We often start with our topic—for example, vocabulary. My teaching partner at Queensbury High School, Mrs. Kerri Bundy, describes our planning priorities:

"I think it is most effective to begin with the skill we are hoping students will take away from the unit or lesson. Then to break down who can do each part toward that end."

Then we tease out the KUDs—what students will know, understand, and be able to do—(Tomlinson, 2018) in a specific planning document format. We don't break until we have described our formative and summative assessments. If the time is up, we'll collapse it with technology applications, and collaborate about activities and the specially designed instruction via our shared planning form (Charles, 2012).

The reality for secondary classrooms is that the content area teacher is the curricular expert, while in both secondary and elementary classrooms, the special educator or ENL teacher tends to have practice in UDL and specially designed instruction (Scruggs, 2007). When discussing the activities and the elements of the learning environment that foster student learning, the give-and-take between the two teaching partners is where the real excitement and synergy are easiest to see. One of my teaching partners, Mrs. Mary Lillge, describes the impact on her when the special educator hesitates to take an active part in planning: "I want to know your thoughts on instruction and curriculum. If I know you feel passionately about something within the subject, I want you to plan it. I do not like doing all the planning and then handing it over to the SPED teacher. It makes me feel like a boss, and it probably makes you feel devalued, and then the whole cycle of frustration starts." When our collaborative planning is effective and timely, we take creative risks and notice that all of our time in the classroom can be spent in coaching learners and observing learners coach each other (Scruggs, 2007). No student is left unengaged, frustrated, or bored!

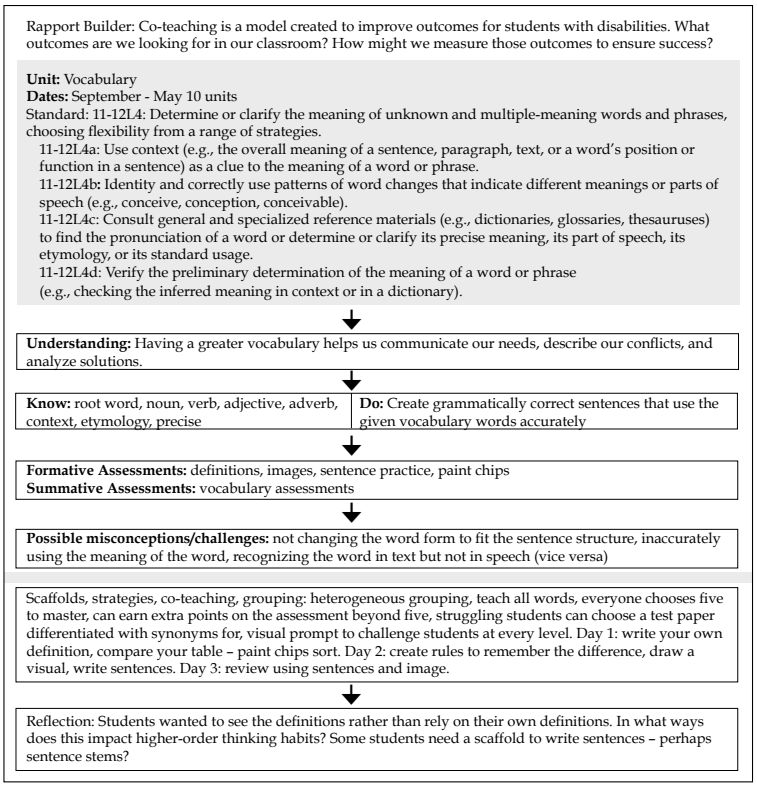
STUDENT **OUTCOMES**

While rapport is fundamental to successful partnering, and instructional strategies born of effective co-planning are the place where the special educator/ENL teacher has the greatest impact, student outcomes are the vision and why of what we do. Co-teaching is all about improving outcomes for all learners.

Before embarking on a co-teaching model, co-teachers need to know why they're co-teaching. And not just in a general sense, they should have the opportunity to state the outcomes and be able to use data to measure their impact.

We teach what we value. If we don't identify those values from the start, our students, parents, and communities may not understand why we spend the money to put two teachers in one classroom. The roles of the co-teachers can be confusing to students and to parents. Many of the parents of our secondary students didn't attend inclusive schools. Having a district vision shared with parents and all stakeholders in language that is clear and understood by all is supportive to the teaching partners, and to all students.

The elements necessary to support effective teacher partnerships in



teams are the same elements needed to strengthen inclusive practices in schools. These elements include sharing a vision for student outcomes, strengthening trust by using a shared vocabulary to describe outcomes, and professionalizing the partnerships that support those outcomes. Consider the parallels between effective teaching partnerships as a microcosm of inclusive communities. Professional development plans that support inclusive schools, like the instruction that supports an inclusive classroom, need to be comprehensive, with multiple points of access to content, and need to create opportunities for participants to individualize application of learning. Here is my plan for supporting inclusive schools in the North Country.

NORTH COUNTRY **INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS SERIES**

School communities are finding it a challenge to put in place sustainable policies and practices to create an inclusive school culture, with classrooms that are designed to welcome diverse learners and instruction that moves all learners toward achievement on the next generation standards. Parents struggle to understand why their child with a disability is expected to meet academic standards. Some parents wonder how the teacher is managing to teach all students when the classroom includes students who demand more attention. Teachers struggle to maintain high expectations, and keep instruction accessible to all. Forward Together (2019), a study of teacher efficacy in instruction of students with disabilities, describes "what general education teachers currently know and believe about teaching students with identified disabilities and/or learning and attention issues. While many feel unprepared to teach the 1 in 5, many are committed to learning more and improving their abilities." In our experience, students are confused by the roles of each member of the collaborative teams that support their education (Scruggs, 2007). All stakeholders agree that students who struggle in school should have extra supports (special education, related services, AIS, RTI, ENL, nutrition, counseling, transportation, and mental wellness instruction among others). But in the classroom, teachers are overwhelmed by the needs of their students, short on time to identify needed skills, let alone find the resources they need to adjust their teaching to truly activate an inclusive classroom experience.

This series approaches the challenges of inclusion in an innovative series of conversations and professional learning experiences.

1. **Administrators roundtable:** Addressing the mandates, the reality, the vision of their districts.
2. **Presentation for districts, PTAs:** Why inclusive classrooms?
3. **Classroom teacher series:**
   a. Assessment in the inclusive classroom
   b. Instructional practices in inclusive classrooms
4. **Instructional resources for inclusive classrooms:** Identifying online resources from NYSED, IRIS, IDEAs That Work, high leverage practices, as well as local, in-person resources including RSE-TASC, BOCES, and Center for Disability Services.
5. **Collaborative teams:** Introduction to building collaborative teams and developing systems to hold teams accountable to the families and students they serve.
6. **Co-teaching:** Moving beyond "a good rapport"—gathering data for co-planning, grouping, accountability.
7. **Mental health wellness** strategies for every classroom environment.
8. **Using technology** to ensure multiple pathways to achievement in secondary classrooms, and to support collaborative practices.
9. **Teaching assistants:** Offering meaningful PD for TAs that supports student growth and independence.

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Executive Functioning and Learning Disabilities

By Sheldon H. Horowitz, EdD

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I have often written about learning strategies, and how important it is to help students become "strategic" in their approach to learning, and I discussed some ways that teachers can promote student learning by both teaching and reinforcing the use of effective strategies to their students and by embedding effective teaching strategies into their classroom instruction. What was missing from that discussion was any real focus on the kinds of "thinking" students need to do when they are confronted with different types of learning challenges and opportunities. These "thinking ingredients" fall under the umbrella term "executive functioning."

A WORKING DEFINITION OF "EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING"

"Executive functioning" is a term used to describe the many different cognitive processes that individuals use to control their behavior and to get ready to respond to different situations. Whether the task at hand is to read a newspaper article, write an email to a friend, have a telephone conversation with a relative, or join in a soccer game at the park, executive functioning is at work behind the scenes, helping to accomplish the desired goal. In other words, executive functioning:

- Is conscious, purposeful, and thoughtful
- Involves activating, orchestrating, monitoring, evaluating, and adapting different strategies to accomplish different tasks
- Includes an understanding of how people tap their knowledge and skills and how they stay motivated to accomplish their goals
- Requires the ability to analyze situations, plan and take action, focus and maintain attention, and adjust actions as needed to get the job done.

WE ALL HAVE IT AND WE ALL DO IT

Sometimes these processes seem to happen in a seamless and automatic way, and at other times they seem to not happen quickly enough (or not at all), resulting in what some people refer to as "getting stuck," not knowing what went wrong and having a hard time discerning what to do next. At its best, executive functioning allows us to be mentally and behaviorally flexible for all sorts of task demands, to adjust our thinking to accomplish our goal (even when there are changing conditions along the way), and to adapt our reflexes and responses in ways that result in coherence and smoothness of responses.

How does someone know if their executive functioning abilities are well tuned and ready for action? A few indicators might be if you:

- Make good use of past knowledge and experience (both before you start an activity and while it is ongoing)
- Take notice of the current situation for cues about what is expected of you and how you might best proceed doing the task at hand
- Think about what you are doing (or are about to start doing), imagine what if any implications it has for you in the future, and allow yourself to feel whether this activity has any personal values or relevance to you (taking your emotional temperature really does matter because it often has a very real impact on how you think!)
- Feel you are ready and can be flexible in changing your thinking along the way if need be
- Can delay gratification (not jump to conclusions too quickly) and inhibit any impulsive responses that might take you off track or distract you from your goal
- Are able to adjust the way you think and respond when the rules change unexpectedly.

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

Our article, "What is Executive Functioning?" describes how in school, at home, or in the workplace we're called on all day, every day, to self-regulate behavior. Normally, features of executive functioning are seen in our ability to:

- Make plans
- Keep track of time
- Keep track of more than one thing at once
- Meaningfully include past knowledge in discussions
- Engage in group dynamics
- Evaluate ideas
- Reflect on our work
- Change our minds and make mid-course corrections while thinking, reading, and writing
- Finish work on time
- Ask for help
- Wait to speak until we're called on
- Seek more information when we need it.

Problems with executive functioning may be manifested when a person:

- Has difficulty planning a project
- Has trouble comprehending how much time a project will take to complete
- Struggles to tell a story (verbally or in writing); has trouble communicating details in an organized, sequential manner
- Has difficulty with the mental strategies involved in memorization and retrieving information from memory
- Has trouble initiating activities or tasks, or generating ideas independently
- Has difficulty retaining information while doing something with it (e.g., remembering a phone number while dialing).

These problem behaviors are often the descriptors we hear about students with learning disabilities (LD) as well as those with ADHD and language processing disorders. Parents and teachers complain that they:

- "Forget to look ahead," and have trouble planning and setting goals
- Have difficulty sorting, organizing, and prioritizing information
- Focus either on details or the big picture at the expense of the other
- Have difficulty shifting from one activity to another (especially when rules/tasks demand change)
- Have a hard time juggling multiple details in working memory

- Struggle shifting between information that is literal versus figurative, past versus current, etc.
- Are often overwhelmed by the increased and varied workload in the middle and upper grades
- "Get it" (e.g., the information being taught, the work tasks assigned) but often "don't know what to do with it" (e.g., how to complete the task in a way that demonstrates their knowledge).

For individuals with LD, problems with executive functioning are often complicated by performance anxiety. Feeling anxious about what to do and how well you're doing (especially when, as is the case with LD, you are "winging it" without a strategy or plan of attack) can easily lead to feeling overloaded and overwhelmed. This in turn leads to exhaustion, inattentiveness, and a cycle of insecurity and feeling out of control. Not a great scenario for learning!

AN EXCELLENT RESOURCE

A fine summary of executive function difficulties and learning disabilities can be found in the fifth chapter of a new book titled *Executive Function in Education: From Theory to Practice*, edited by Dr. Lynn Meltzer (2007, Guilford Press). The chapter discusses some of the core executive function processes that affect academic performance:

- Selecting appropriate goals
- Initiating work
- Organizing
- Prioritizing
- Memorizing
- Shifting strategies and being flexible in thinking
- Self-monitoring/checking

The chapter also includes an explanation of the interrelationships between strategy use, effort, self-concept, and academic performance.

Useful sections can also be found on reading comprehension, written language, independent study, homework and long-term projects, and test taking. This chapter also addresses the challenge of identifying difficulties in executive function because of "diagnostic fuzziness," a term that means exactly what it sounds like. There is much overlap between the shared behaviors we typically attribute to executive function LD, and ADHD. There is also considerable controversy around how motivation, effort, and persistence affect the types of behaviors that fall under the executive function umbrella.

And the part of this chapter that I like the best talks about "intervention approaches" on two different levels: the environment and the person. It offers (as simplified and paraphrased below) a set of principles that are important for teaching all students, and are especially critical for students who

show weakness in executive function processes:

- Executive function strategies should be taught explicitly and systematically.
- Teach students how, when, and why specific strategies should be used.
- Embed strategy instruction into the curriculum.
- Students should be encouraged to modify and personalize strategies to match their own learning preferences.
- Practice using strategies with different tasks across content areas.
- Keep motivation high (being a strategic learner can be very hard work!).
- Help students set realistic goals and use self-monitoring and self-management strategies to identify areas of weakness and self-correct behaviors and performance.
- Make sure that students experience success in using strategies and encourage their consistent use over time.
- Count "strategy use" as part of a student's grade (focus on the "how" of learning, not just the "what")
- Help students understand the limitations of hard work without a strategic plan for learning; effective executive function tools and strategies can greatly improve learning efficiency.

ADDITIONAL **RESOURCES**

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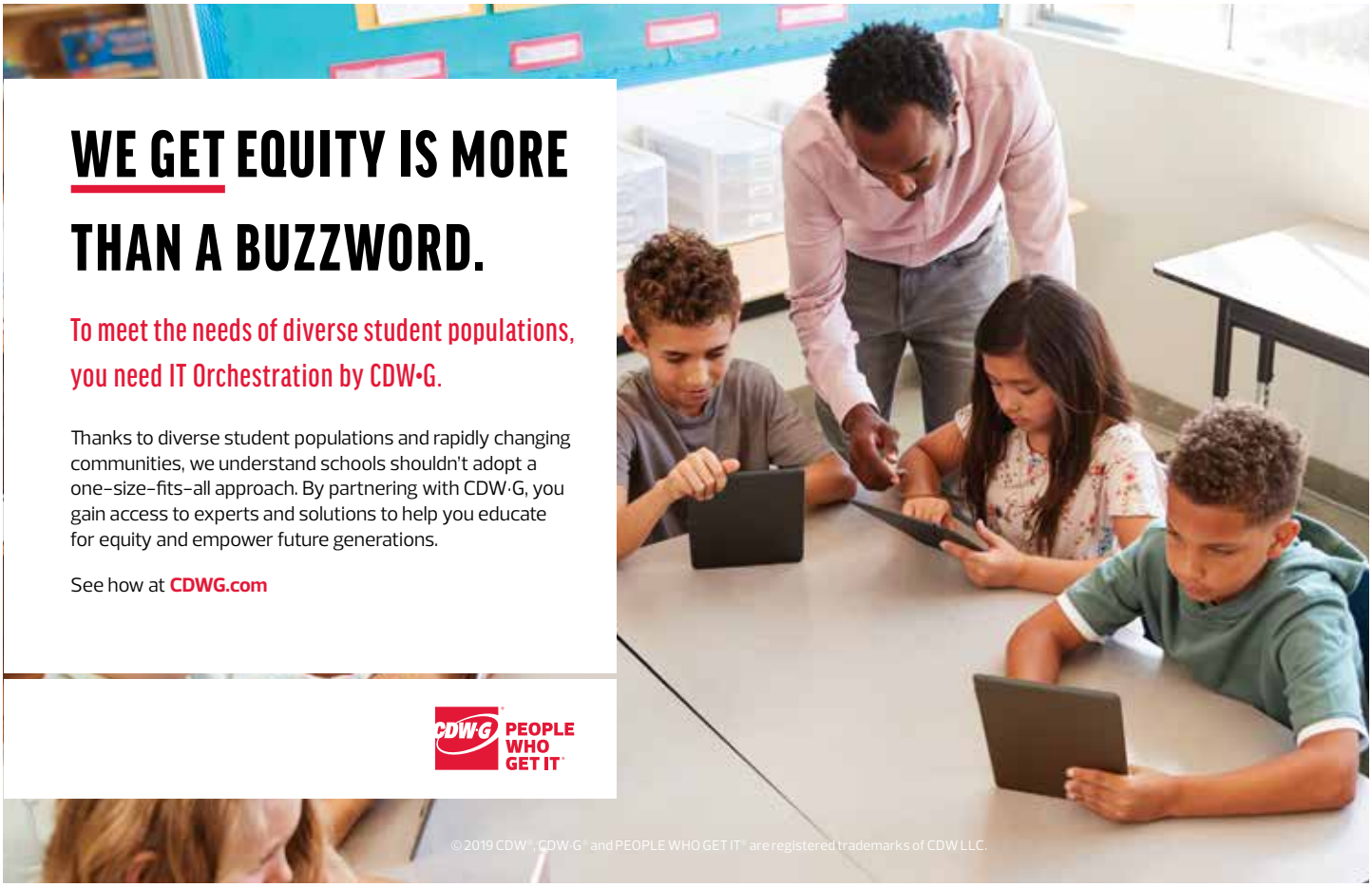
Watch the author discuss executive function and learning disabilities in this video or visit: http://bit.ly/361C2vk.

SHELDON H. HOROWITZ, EdD, is the director of LD Resources & Essential Information at the National Center for Learning Disabilities.



Special Education Teacher Attrition: Administrative Support Matters!

By Jill M. Bennedum

Every school year, half a million public school teachers across the nation leave their current school. Sixteen percent of these teachers retire, while 84 percent transfer between schools or leave the profession (Goldring, Taie, and Riddles, 2014). These transitions have proven to be a disadvantage to the learning needs of students, as well as to the culture of a school. The number of public school teachers who left a position to work for a different district, or left the profession entirely, doubled in the time between 1991 and 2013. Attrition rates are at the point that more teachers leave the profession rather than remain in the classroom until eligible for retirement.

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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION

Special education teachers leave the teaching profession more than teachers of any other subject area (Goldring, Taie, and Riddles, 2014). Recruiting and retaining appropriately certified teachers to work with students with disabilities have long been two of the most challenging responsibilities for school leaders. The demand for special education teachers grows higher every year due to the rising number of students being identified as having disabilities coupled with higher than average numbers of teachers who leave the profession (Billingsley, 2004b). Forty-nine states across the U.S. report shortages of special education teachers. Enrollment in teaching degree programs is lower than at any point since the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) began collecting these data. Because of these factors, over 40 percent of special education positions are filled each year by someone without any type of teacher certification.

Even though research shows it takes three to seven years for new teachers to become highly effective (Catrett, Houchins, and O'Rourke, 2008), nearly thirty percent of all new teachers are so dissatisfied with their career choice or are offered better jobs that they leave the profession after just three years. Adverse working conditions were stated as the reason for much of this turnover and have become the focus of emerging research in teacher attrition.

WORKING CONDITIONS

There are many different versions of working conditions for teachers. Burkhauser (2017) purports working conditions for educators typically include administrative support, teacher empowerment, opportunities for professional development, collaboration, time, community support, and school culture, along with facilities and safety. According to a similar study of working conditions conducted by Geiger and Pivovarova (2018), administrative support and opportunities for professional development are considered to be the most important working conditions for teachers. Additionally, those teachers who reported having support from school administration were more likely to remain in their current teaching roles.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS

One study conducted to define administrative support from the special education teacher's perspective resulted in three themes:

A principal who…

1. Handled student discipline appropriately
2. Included teachers in decision making
3. Showed appreciation for the work the teachers did (Prather-Jones, 2011).

While principals and special education teachers must work in tandem to provide supports that promote special education teachers' self-efficacy, research indicates that the majority of school administrators are not well prepared to support special educators (Monteith, 2000). This research showed that principals admitted special education was the area they lacked the most training in. Although it has been over 40 years since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed, the majority of states are still issuing administrative certifications without requiring even one course in the area of students with disabilities. In addition, most higher education programs offer principal preparation programs that neglect training on the numerous laws pertaining to the education of children with disabilities (Bateman and Bateman, 2015). The responsibility of training building principals on how to provide appropriate working conditions for special education teachers often falls upon the administrator in charge of the district's special education program (Benedict et al., 2017).

There are multiple research studies that have shown administrative support relates directly to teacher retention. Both general education and special education teachers have indicated that administrative leadership was critical in creating sustainable positive school environments (Conley and You, 2017). Teachers' perceptions of school leadership predict their intentions to stay or leave their current position more than any other working condition. "Rather than leave bad schools, teachers leave bad principals" (Property of Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004).

Administrative support can be very tricky to define. Bettini and Billingsley (2019) found that some special educators define administrative support as appreciation and encouragement, which carry vague descriptions and would likely vary from teacher to teacher. Although the research has not officially found conclusive evidence as to which improved working conditions will retain the highest number of special educators, studies of administrative support have been garnering attention. This would seem appropriate given administration's ability to contribute to, if not control, many of the working conditions of a school. Of all of the workplace conditions, administrative support does consistently stand out as being of utmost importance to special education teachers. Recognition from a supervisor for doing a good job has a higher impact on employee performance in both business and schools than any other factor (Blasé and Kirby, 1992).

FROM ENFORCER TO SUPPORTER

The group of special education teachers most at risk for attrition are those who have less than five years of teaching experience. Because they are lacking seniority, beginning teachers are often given the most challenging caseloads, even though they have not yet acquired the multiple skills necessary to be successful with this population. When special education teachers perceive they have support from administration, it is an incentive for them to stay on the job. However, when there is no perceived administrative support, it is most often a cause for leaving the profession. Additionally, when administrators did not give time and attention to the needs of special education students, their teachers, in turn, had little attention given to their own workplace conditions. This lack of attention and respect did not support mutual problem solving, and also failed to promote collegiality, both high on the list of important workplace

conditions (Arnold and Otto, 2005).

Studies have shown that building principals could take on the role of servant leader (Newton and Shaw, 2014) in order to provide the working conditions that teachers need to stay on the job. Rather than taking on the role of the enforcer in order to make certain teachers do as they should, the servant leader offers encouragement, support, and professional development. Researchers have been able to prove that administrators who show supportive behaviors, including suggestions, feedback, acknowledgment and collaborative problem solving, are more likely to have special education teachers who report favorable working conditions and choose to remain in their teaching positions (Billingsley and Fall, 2011).

No matter how school districts choose to address special education teacher attrition, one thing is certain: administrative support matters!

JILL M. BENNEDUM is the executive director of human resources and student services for Owego-Apalachin CSD.

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Early Interventions:
The Pyramid of Interventions

Undoing the Tiers

By Mary S. Esposito

TIERS—ARE THEY SIMPLY A PATHWAY TO SPECIAL EDUCATION?

For a general education student, failure within the traditional system of tiered support becomes a pathway into special education. A student who is struggling in the core, typically known as tier 1 interventions, then is referred to the next level, tier 2. In tier 2, the frequency and intensity of the support increase. Then comes tier 3—the most intense intervention that can be offered to general education students.

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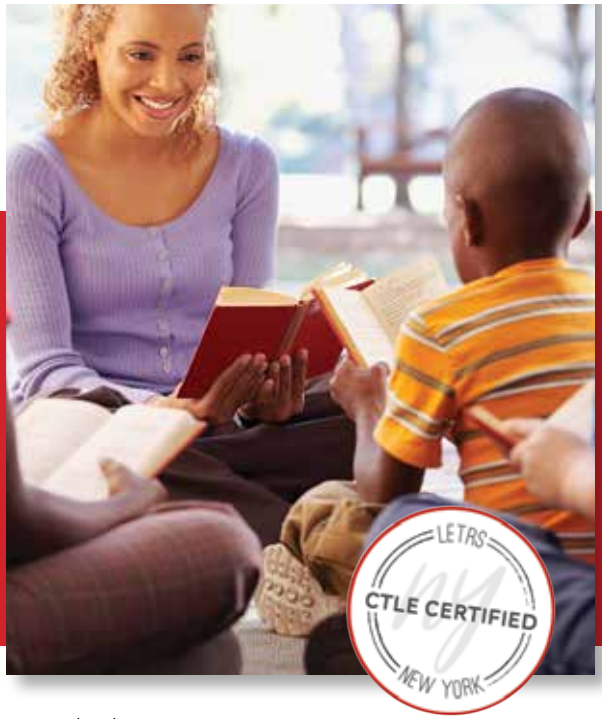

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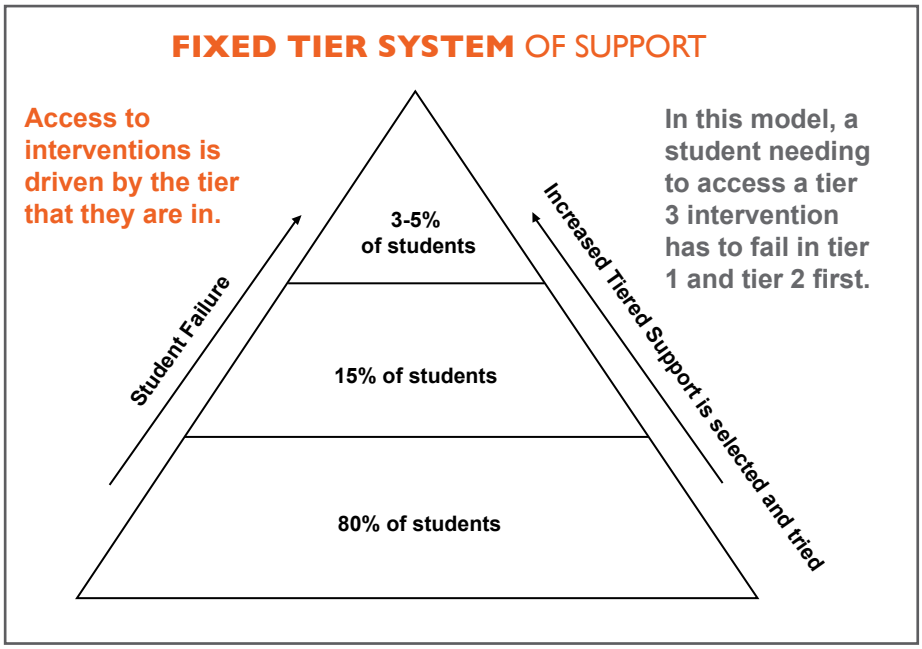
If tier 3 does not prove to yield the desired outcome of growth after a few cycles, then the student gets referred to special education, therefore creating a multistep pathway to a service that the multitiered system was created to avoid in the first place. This dilemma of the "wait to fail" method may be viewed through a different lens if we look at the pyramid with a different lens and allow the tiers to be more fluid.

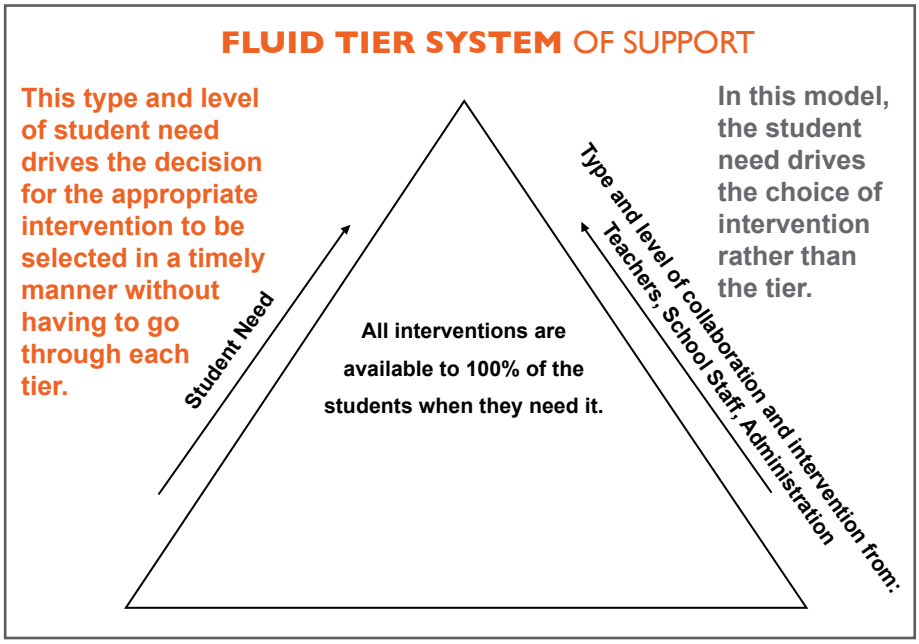
FLUIDITY WITHIN THE TIERS

What if the pyramid of interventions lost its tiers? Take away the lines dividing it into thirds and reconnect the pyramid into one whole again. What is left in the pyramid are all of the interventions, which can now be viewed holistically. When educators are no longer trapped in a tier, they can think outside of the box, outside of the tier in this case, to pinpoint an intervention that can work while closely monitoring the progress.

Picture one of your teachers who has a struggling decoder who is now limited only to the interventions allowed in a tier 1 core program. What may actually be needed to help the student is typically only provided in a tier 3 program approach. In the current tiered model, the teacher would provide the intervention within tier 1 until its effectiveness is proven or disproven, then move on to the more intensive tier 2 and so on.

If the teacher could be given access to what the student really needs within the pyramid, regardless of tier, time and resources would be saved and student achievement would be monitored in the intervention that most closely aligns with the need. Removing the tiers gains a wider range of resources to help students achieve goals and avoid the "wait to fail" model as shown in the graphics.





SUPPORT TEAM MODEL AT WEST HAVERSTRAW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

School administrators have an ever changing role in special education. We are now so much more hands on from the early intervention phase to the referral phase. Those of us who work in general education settings must be very adept at the identification and intervention process in order to avoid overreferring students to special education. One of the duties of the school administrator is to facilitate a process in which students are identified in a timely manner early on when an academic, social-emotional, or behavioral issue is detected.

In large schools with an increasingly growing population of students who are transient, suffering trauma, or living in poverty, it is important for systems of support to be ready in place when the need presents itself. First comes the identification process through an organized and systematic procedure that will keep the teachers, support staff, and administrators on track and communicating while the students can access resources to get their needs met.

At West Haverstraw Elementary School, we started a support referral process to help us with the identification of students. This new support referral is a step or two before our instructional support team procedure (IST) where a team of support staff and specialists meets with the teacher to brainstorm solutions. This is our new attempt at catching students very early on and not waiting for them to fail.

Teachers have access to an online, electronic "support team referral."

The support team consists of the administration, school psychologists, and social worker. The team meets once every six days to discuss cases brought to the team by teachers via the online referral. This referral process has been designated for noncrisis issues. Crisis cases are obviously dealt with in the moment.

The teacher fills out a simple electronic referral. Name, grade, checks off type of problem, presenting issue(s), desired outcome(s), and checks off the names of any other teacher who may be working with the student. The information is submitted via a Google form and into a sheet that the support team now uses to discuss cases.

At our support team meeting, the student is assigned a point person from the team who "manages" the case, and an email is generated to the teacher. The email informs the teacher that he/she is in charge of the case and explains what the next steps will be. In addition to the referring teacher, all of the student's teachers are copied on the email so that they are all in the loop of a presenting problem. This communication helps us all help the student in unison.

Having many students in need and only a few interventionists to provide support, the support team process allows us to be more efficient with our time and in our process. Teachers now have a channel to voice concerns, be heard, and create the interventions with the point person on the support team. Practitioners on the support team and interventionists spend less time in what I coin the "hallway" and "restroom" two-minute intervention conferences, emailing, and interrupting the staff's work. They spend more time helping the teacher work on interventions for the student.

The mindset of the fluid tier intervention model and the support team process have been two ways that our support team is able to better facilitate the resources for the needs of general ed students in an attempt to stop the cycle of the "wait to fail" model.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:
WHES support team: Angelica Terry, assistant principal; Dr. Karen Miller, school psychologist; Rosemary Cepeda, school psychologist; Carmen Diaz, bilingual school social worker; all work together with me as an integral part of the support team for students and teachers. Craig Mantin, instructional technology specialist, helped us with the technology to make this happen.

MARY S. ESPOSITO is the principal at West Haverstraw Elementary School in the North Rockland Central School District.

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#GenerationUnified:

The Student Leaders All Schools Need

By Dr. Robert J. Zayas and Stacey Hengsterman

More than 8,200 students in 172 high schools across New York are leaders in the fastest growing sports movement in the world.

Special Olympics Unified Sports includes students with and without intellectual disabilities playing on the same team. The games are not charity. They are authentic competitions governed by the same rules as all interscholastic sports, overseen by certified officials and coaches. Beyond the game, students in Unified Champion Schools participate in youth leadership activities, engaging the entire school community in the movement to inclusion.

These students are part of what is now known as Generation Unified. They represent their school on and off the court in a way that no generation before them has been able to do. They are the future.

A unique partnership built on education and student leadership paved the way for Unified Sports in New York.

Seven years ago, Special Olympics New York (SONY) and the New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA) embarked upon a partnership that made this possible.

NYSPHSAA is an educational service organization dedicated to providing equitable and safe competition for its membership of 800 high schools. It's the third largest high school interscholastic association in the country, with more than 600,000 student athletes playing sports. SONY is the largest Special Olympics chapter in the U.S., with more than 67,000 athletes. It is driven by the mission to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in 22 sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

While it is not what either of our organizations is best known for, we share a commitment to educational programming that spurs athlete leadership, sportsmanship, and community service. In 2013, we came together to bring these mutual core values to a broader population.

As the partnership talks began, it became clear that not just sports, but interscholastic Unified Sports should be at the core of our program partnership. It was important for our Special Olympics athletes not merely to put on a high school uniform (a rite of passage for any youth playing sports), but to have the same high school athletic experience as their general education peers, alongside them. If the program was going to fulfill its potential, it didn't need "volunteers" from general education, but true teammates, ready to practice, learn, win, and lose together. Teammates who bring out the best in each other, and find a way for everyone to contribute.

It was a great start. Playing Unified Sports was integral, but it wasn't going to be enough. We needed to change everyone's attitudes and actions toward students with disabilities. We needed the whole school engaged. And we needed the students of all abilities to lead the change.

Through support from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education, Special Olympics had developed the Unified Champion Schools program, which offers a unique combination of proven activities that successfully equip young people with the knowledge, skills, tools, and training to create classrooms and school climates of acceptance, respect, and meaningful inclusion. These are school climates where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in—and feel a part of—all activities, opportunities, and functions.

We piloted the program in the Capital Region (NYSPHSAA Section II) with 12 schools in 2014. Shenendehowa High School hosted an inaugural summit for what would be known as the Youth Activation Committee (YAC) on the Friday of a Regents Exam week in January. We were overwhelmed with the student participation and enthusiasm. They came ready, prepared with ideas, creativity, and a palpable sense of urgency. They left with a mission.

Schools developed a six-game league schedule for unified basketball in the spring season, and we concluded with every team having a final game at the Glens Falls Civic Center. Administrators, coaches, students, parents, siblings, and friends shared stories of change, transformation, fulfillment, and inclusion.

Six years later, we have schools participating in every NYSPHSAA section. We've grown from 12 schools to 172, from 144 Unified Sports teammates to more than 8,200, and from 80 inclusive youth leaders to 3,500. This rapid growth is to be celebrated, but it still isn't enough.

To realize the full potential of Generation Unified, we need more schools, more sports, more students.

Research shows that there is a strong relationship between school connectedness and important outcomes such as regular school attendance and staying in school. Eighty-one percent of students say that the Unified Champion Schools program is changing their school for the better. Sixty-three percent of school administrators feel that it has made a big impact in creating a more inclusive school environment.

Research also shows children with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities; 58 percent of administrators feel Unified Champion Schools has made a big impact in reducing bullying and teasing in their schools.

As Special Olympics New York celebrates its 50-year anniversary, we are taking our historic partnership a step further with an ambitious goal: bringing this critical program to 50 (or more!) new schools and raising the funds necessary to support the ongoing growth of Generation Unified. The future of our schools and our communities depends on it.

To introduce Unified Sports in your school, or to begin work toward becoming a Unified Champion School, please contact Nate Johnson, director of Unified Sports, at npjohnson@nyso.org.

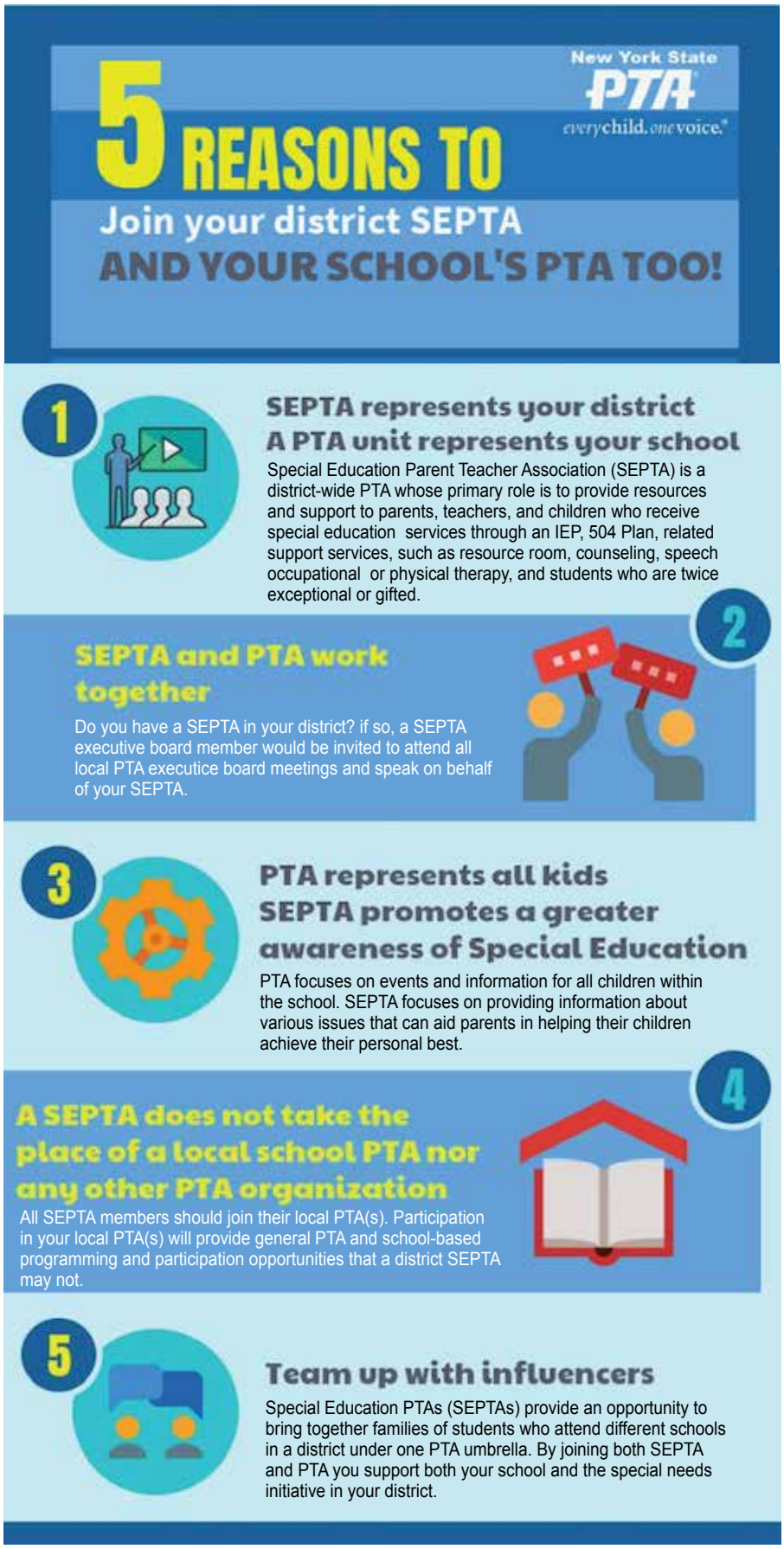
DR. ROBERT J. ZAYAS is the executive director for the New York State Public High School Athletic Association and STACEY HENGSTERMAN is the president and CEO of Special Olympics.

Special Education and PTAs– Why SEPTA?

By Lissa Zukoff

As the school year kicks off, and the flurry of flyers arrive, parents may notice one from their local SEPTA or SEPTSA (Special Education PTA/PTSA) in addition to the school PTA. A Special Education PTA or SEPTA/SEPTSA is a unit organized for those interested in the issues of educating special needs and/or gifted and talented children. While it may seem redundant to have two PTAs, SEPTA serves an important purpose.

When my oldest son, who is on the autism spectrum, was transitioning from a center-based preschool to a general education kindergarten in our district, I was terrified. I had no idea what we were walking into, or if he would be able to function and socialize with the other children. He had been bussed from our home to a preschool in a different town, so I never had the same opportunity to make connections with other parents, as my neighbors with children who attended local preschools had. I didn't know the teachers, the school, the routines. I was flying blind and sending my baby into the unknown.



Every meeting brought a different speaker to our community, we had experts on topics such as mental health, twice exceptional children, nutrition, executive functioning, sibling support, ADHD—and of course, advocacy. I learned how best to advocate for my son, and as he's gotten older, how to teach him to advocate for himself.

The information presented was invaluable, but what has been the most irreplaceable are the connections I've made with faculty, experts, laypeople, and of course, others who are walking this path. We can bounce ideas off each other, commiserate during the difficult times, and celebrate accomplishments together. Joining that SEPTA changed my life, and that of my son, for the better.

If your school/district does not have a SEPTA, I encourage you to reach out to the NYS PTA to find out how to start one. I am an active member of my PTA and SEPTA, both are there to ensure that all avenues are explored as we use one voice to advocate for every child.

LISSA ZUKOFF is the special education specialist for the NYS PTA. For additional information, Lissa can be reached at specialeducation@nyspta.org or visit https://nyspta.org/home/advocacy/special-education_ptas/.

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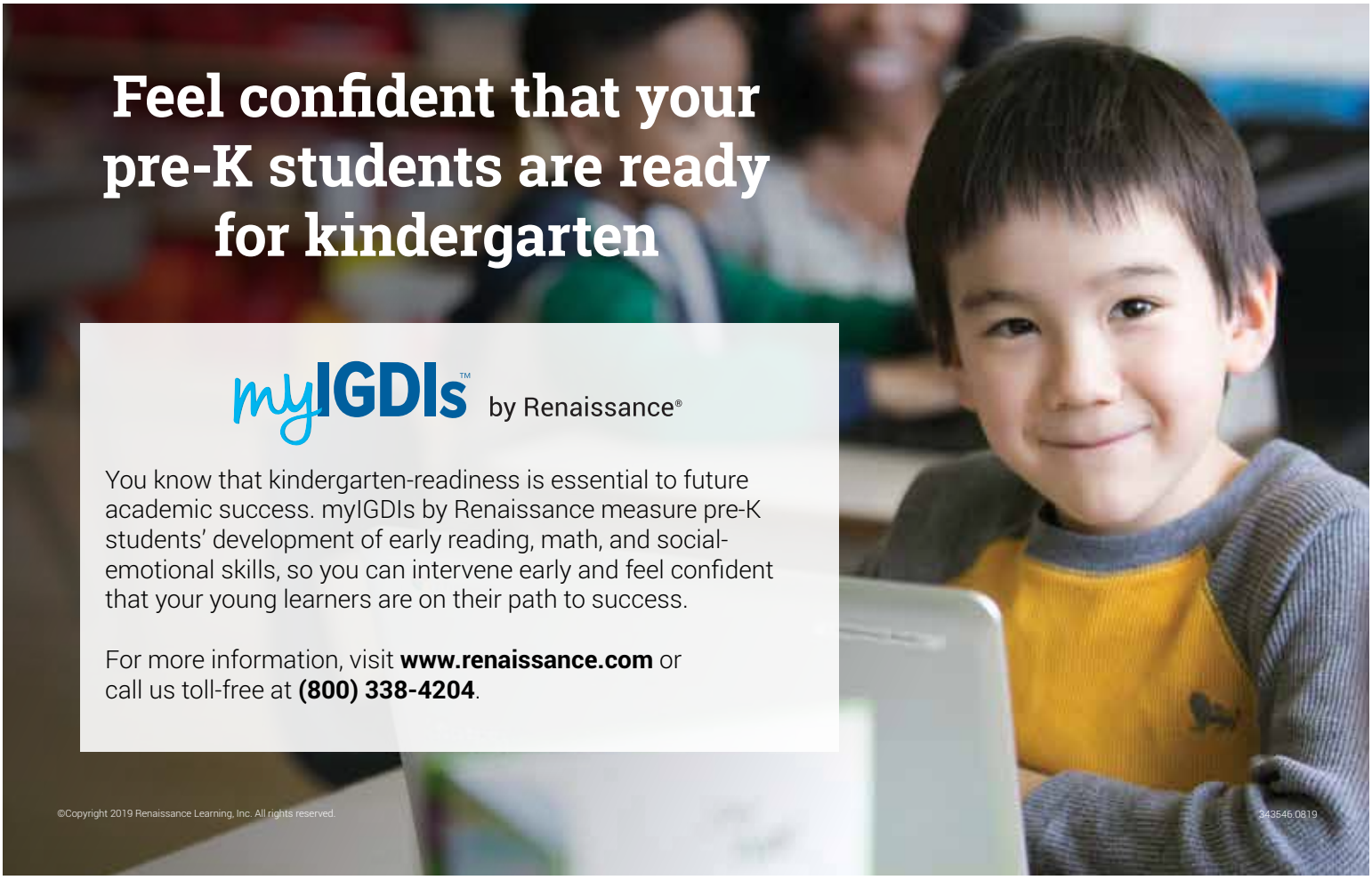
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