

Identifying the Concerns with Special Education

For the past several years staff members of the Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education, have been involved in discussions with parents, as well as with special education administrative and direct service personnel, in an effort to assess the effectiveness of special education programs and services in Iowa. During the 1987-88 school year there were a number of discussions involving a cross-section of general and special education personnel and parents, enlisting suggestions for improvements in the delivery system serving students in need of special education.

As a result of these discussions, a structure and process was developed, known as the "Renewed Delivery System for Special Education Programs in Iowa." This process has many facets and is comprehensive in its effort to involve participation from all groups having an interest in the delivery of special education. The utilization of this process validated various issues that had been previously suggested pertaining to needed improvements in the delivery of programs and services to students with learning and adjustment difficulties.

The major issues delineated through this process include the following:

1. Special education has become separated from general education in the process of delivering services to students requiring special education.
2. There has been a heavy reliance on pull-out programs as the primary delivery method.
3. Concerns have been expressed regarding the movement toward excellence in education relative to its implications for students at the lower end of the academic achievement continuum.
4. Major concern was expressed with regard to the issues of over-referral of students and the over-identification of students to be placed in special education programs.
5. The types of programs and services available through special education have been strictly limited to students determined to be eligible to receive such services.
6. The requirements of special education laws and regulations have not only severely limited the number of students that can benefit from such services, but have maintained a level of rigidity in the options that are available to those who are eligible.
7. There has been an overemphasis on standardized assessment techniques utilized primarily to determine whether a given student is eligible for special education programs and services.
8. The curriculum typically provided students requiring special education is a reflection of the general education curriculum; parallel in nature, but perhaps delivered at a slower pace with more concrete applications. Insufficient attention has been given to the special education student's ability to generalize what has been learned and in applying the skills acquired in daily living.
9. Evaluation of special education activities has too frequently been based upon process rather than student outcomes.

Many of these issues have several subcomponents, but in general are descriptive of the kinds of concerns expressed by parents, educators, professional associations, advocacy groups and educational agencies, as the current delivery system has evolved.

Principles for Renewal of Iowa's Special Education Service Delivery System

I. Foundations of the Renewed System

- It will be necessary to *integrate the resources* of general education, compensatory education and special education in addressing the needs of students with learning and behavior problems.
- The renewed delivery system program innovation will *recognize the expertise of special education support and instructional personnel in addressing the challenges of education* in meeting the needs of all students with learning and behavior problems.
- The utilization of *special education support services personnel will not be strictly limited* to students requiring special education.
- The renewed delivery system will create the opportunity to *broaden the range of intervention alternatives* available to students.
- The preferred environment for delivery of quality instructional and support services for students with learning and adjustment difficulties shall be the *local attendance center* which is closest to the home of the student and is age appropriate.
- It is a fundamental principle in the planning for educational innovation for students with learning and adjustment that the outcomes of *services for students requiring special education will not be compromised* and will be improved.
- The renewed delivery system will actively promote *meaningful involvement of parents* in the decision-making process and subsequent delivery of programs and services.
- In the renewed delivery system, every effort will be made to *keep paperwork to the minimal level* required to keep those involved informed, to record program and service plans, to ensure procedural safeguards, and to document student progress and outcomes.

II. Organization of Resources

Staff Development. Students will benefit when personnel working in education receive needed staff development. This staff development will enable regular and special education personnel to acquire skills needed to implement “best practices” for students with learning and adjustment difficulties.

District/Building Plan. Students will benefit from better coordination and utilization of current instructional and support service personnel. This can be done in a prescriptive manner through the establishment of local building plans.

Transition. Students will benefit from transition efforts which coordinate communication and services provided by personnel at various levels throughout students' educational and post-educational careers.

III. Utilization of Resources

Functional Assessment. Students will benefit by requiring assessments which are functionally oriented and built upon a question oriented assessment plan that tests hypotheses leading to an understanding of factors directly effecting the individual's learning or behavioral difficulty.

Developing Appropriate Instructional and Support Interventions. Students will benefit from a variety of innovative instructional and support interventions which will focus on bringing services to students and not students to the services.

Direct and Frequent Progress Monitoring. Students will benefit by procedures which directly and frequently monitor behaviors that are the focus of interventions. Monitoring procedures permit on going decision making and adjustment of interventions when needed and thereby heightening the probability of helping students acquire new skills, knowledge, or ways of functioning.

Outcome Oriented Criterion. Students will benefit by an outcome criterion, focusing on gains in students' skills, when adopted and applied to decisions about programming, placement, and re-reviews/evaluations.