

Special Education – A Vision of Achievement

June 25, 2007

A vision must be rooted in a set of beliefs. What follows is a summary gleaned from hours of conversations with many in the district over the last 12 months and from a series of structured conversations throughout the district. Eight visioning forums have been held with elementary staff (special ed & general ed), middle school staff (special ed & general ed), high school special ed staff, special ed parents, principals, department heads, team chairs, central office staff, advocates, and the School Committee. These forums included over 100 participants and 15 hours of frank dialogue.

10 Beliefs for the Special Education Children of Arlington

- 1. Nearly all special education students can be at grade level in math, English, science, and social studies. When this is not likely, we should state so explicitly, and forge common expectations with parents. In all cases, standards should be as high as possible for all students.**

As educators and parents, we hope that 100% of our students can master core subjects. Best practice in the state indicates that over ¾'s of students on IEP's with mild or moderate special needs can be at grade level, and perhaps someday 90% will be. Our expectations, our rigor, and our practices should evolve until nearly all children can attain solid achievement in math, English (reading & writing), science, and social studies.

Some students, however, have disabilities that are profound. We should set honest and useful goals that will help these children live, learn, and function with their disability and ensure a high quality, appropriate education. Both parents and the schools should be clear and honest when content mastery is not the primary goal. This requires working together. Such a decision should not be made lightly or too early in a child's education. In all cases, standards and expectations should be set as high as possible.

All of our students can and should achieve at high levels, but only if we believe they can.

- 2. Mastery of fundamental skills, such as reading, writing, math, study/organizational skills (a.k.a. executive function skills), and the ability to socialize with peers should be a priority, starting in the early grades and continuing until students demonstrate grade level mastery.**

To focus on everything means not to focus at all. Learning has a logical progression – mastering reading and number sense lead to mastering writing, science, and social studies. The curriculum of regular education students follows this path. As children move through the grades, more subjects in greater rigor are added.

For struggling students (with or without an IEP), we should follow a similar path. Often, however, we add higher-order science before math is mastered. We add foreign language before English grammar and conventions are mastered. All students by grade 12 should master four core subjects, but the timing should not be dictated by date of birth.

For many students, study skills and time management come naturally or are learned by osmosis. Other students require explicit instruction in these areas. These too are important foundation skills.

If a student is lonely, unhappy, or not enjoying school, it is hard to create the motivation for the hard work needed to overcome a disability. Having a relationship with a significant adult in school is essential. This is often the role of the special education teacher and it requires time, sensitivity and training. Explicit instruction in socialization skills for some students and whole-class and school-wide efforts in tolerance and acceptance will also support academic achievement and the well being of all our children.

3. Intensive targeted support, not breadth of services, will help students achieve.

Time does matter. Some students can learn a topic in 48 minutes/day – others cannot. Many special education students will need extra class time to master a subject. This goes well beyond help with homework, but rather direct classroom instruction, class participation, assessment, and feedback. This additional instruction is best if done in smaller groups. Other districts have found that 50% to 100% additional time may be required in math, reading, or writing. The higher the grade, the more time per day it may take to reach grade level. This is a huge commitment of a student's day and teacher resources, however, it does not alter the reality that many students will require extensive, concentrated time daily to learn at high levels.

This creates a new challenge – how to make the school day interesting and enjoyable. Careful balancing of academics, electives, and fun will be needed. Perhaps social studies must be reduced, science delayed, or foreign language eliminated. The school day is short, before/after school is not viable, and art, music, PE, and electives are an important part of a comprehensive education.

A corollary to this best practice is “focus is critical.” Currently, a tendency exists to provide as many services as possible. It is not uncommon to have a student receive reading, speech, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, counseling, adaptive phys ed, social pragmatics, and other supports each week. Most of these services are short in duration, (sometimes as short as 15 minutes), 1 or 2 times/week. This is a little of a lot, rather than a lot of a few key targeted interventions. Children cannot handle a significant increase in one support area without reductions elsewhere. Many children do benefit from OT, PT, speech, counseling, etc. Services should be prioritized. The day is a fixed length. Every minute in one support is a minute taken away from another support or from the regular classroom. Student needs must be identified in fine detail.

Additionally, fewer modifications and accommodations in an IEP targeted to the most critical needs will be more faithfully supported in the general education setting. When we ask a teacher to make dozens of modifications and accommodations in many subjects, we dilute the general education teacher's focus and, at times, overwhelm them.

4. Not all interventions work equally well for all students. We must measure progress and try multiple strategies targeted to individual student’s learning styles, until effective strategies are confirmed. All children deserve access to a range of “best practices,” which requires developing a range of proven approaches and strategies.

One size does not fit all. Some students might respond well to intervention “X,” while others with a similar diagnosis might not. This does not make intervention “X” a bad intervention, just not right for a particular student. To ensure success and growth for all students, we must constantly assess progress and try new interventions if the current efforts are not successful. This is not a sign of ineffective teaching or a bad choice of intervention, but recognition that some trial and error is natural, given the variation of student needs and styles. Providing staff with the kind of professional development and training that will give them a “tool box” to provide options for students is the district’s responsibility. This “tool box” must include assistive technology and other necessary equipment.

Once we identify effective practices, we must have procedures that help match students’ needs to our repertoire of best practices. This requires a detailed, explicit diagnosis of why an individual student is not learning. Who administers a test, which school a student attends, or who sits around the table should not dramatically alter services provided or a child’s progress.

5. Scheduling is of strategic importance.

Obviously, good scheduling is desirable, but, to efficiently and effectively manage special education, good scheduling is of strategic importance.

Without clear and inclusive lists of who needs service, services will be denied and parent trust lost. Scheduling is a skill, and not every administrator or teacher should be expected to be a master scheduler.

Good scheduling also has a significant impact on cost. A very oversimplified example: to serve 50 students with an average group size of 2, plus 5 students served individually due only to scheduling conflicts, might take 1.0 FTE. With detailed scheduling and an average group of 3 and no unneeded “singletons” would take only 0.6 FTE, a 40% reduction in staffing.

6. Teamwork, communication, and integration between general education and special education will improve student learning.

Having two or three people teach one subject with differing styles, expectations, and emphasis can be confusing. Some general education students (not all) can easily navigate the different styles of multiple teachers. Many special education students get confused or frustrated if expectations vary from teacher to teacher or grade to grade. In writing, for example, should a conclusion rephrase the introduction, include the student’s own thoughts, or be a pithy one liner? Struggling students will learn quicker if expectations and supports are the same in one grade as the next, in regular class and in support class, and in English as well as in social studies.

This level of teamwork will require district-wide standards for what every student should know and be able to do, district-wide common assessments (evidence that the standards have been mastered), and very close integration between the “regular” classroom and special ed instruction. The less “pull out” instruction, the easier this integration becomes. In many ways, special education teachers must be active members of the content area departments as well. Opportunities for teacher-to-teacher communication and collaboration must also increase.

7. Students with great needs require highly skilled staff to achieve at high levels.

Students who struggle need and deserve great teachers. Great teachers come in many shapes and forms. Special education staff brings expertise in providing accommodations, crafting modifications, and providing emotional support. Content area teachers (math, English, reading, chemistry, etc.) have expertise in the curriculum and can pinpoint very specific content gaps. Both special education and general education staff can teach organizational study skills (executive functioning skills).

Effective remediation and intervention will require a balance of special education and general education staff. All teachers supporting an individual student must be given the time to plan together to provide cohesive, integrated support.

Paraprofessionals (teaching assistants) can play a supporting role but, in most cases, cannot provide academic remediation, intervention, or direct instruction, since they are not trained or certified in academic subjects.

8. When possible, it is better to educate students in district.

Many parents believe that children benefit socially and emotionally when they can attend school in Arlington. Kids feel part of the community and neighborhood. Additionally, out-of-district placements often require a long bus ride, which is undesirable.

Servicing students with significant needs is a challenge and requires top quality programs. Given the high cost of out-of-district programs and transportation, however, the district should be able to offer high quality programs in a cost-neutral manner.

9. Special education is successful when a student is able to perform on grade level working independently and when services are no longer needed.

There are few supports in college, and even fewer in the work place. That is not to say this is right, but this is the reality. We are most successful when students have learned how to succeed on their own, with minimal supports, or through self-advocacy.

Ideally, students will need less support, fewer services, and reduced remediation/intervention as they progress through the grades. Mastery of grade level standards and study/organizational skills will allow for greater independence.

Classroom teaching assistants, rather than 1:1 aides, and part-time aides, rather than full-time aides, will also help foster greater independence.

10. For most struggling students, general education, not special education, should be the first level of intervention.

General education and a wide array of general education interventions should be tried before considering special education services.

This suggests that a pyramid of general education interventions need to be developed and implemented within the regular classroom by the classroom teacher and general education support teachers (reading teachers and other in-class certified staff).

Effective learning teams, active Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT) and a sense of responsibility by classroom teachers will be essential.

What would the Arlington Public Schools look like if this vision became reality?

A vision is a set of beliefs that shape our actions and decisions. Over time, these actions, decisions, and spending choices create a new reality for our students. If the draft vision did guide our actions, what would we see a few years from now?

We would still see much of what we have today. The vision builds upon our current capabilities, talented staff, and passion for helping kids succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Parents will be partners in this process on a productive, and ongoing manner. Very little would disappear from the current situation, but emphasis and proportions would change. In the future, we would have...

1. A significant general education remediation and intervention system. Teams of teachers and administrators would identify struggling students and recommend best practice interventions. These interventions would be implemented in the classroom by general education teachers and by remediation and intervention staff with content expertise. Large-scale efforts and services would be implemented before a referral to special education.
2. Fewer 1:1 teaching assistants and more certified, content-strong support teachers, who would help struggling students with and without IEP's (similar to the K-5 reading program and the literacy lab).
3. Study skills and socialization would be explicitly taught at clearly identified times for both general education and special education students.
4. All support in academic areas would be tightly integrated with each day's whole-class lesson and provided by highly qualified staff. Time to collaborate, plan, and evaluate student needs would be built into the schedule.
5. Most struggling students would receive intensive support in targeted areas, rather than limited support in many areas. Services, goals, accommodations, and modifications would be focused on key areas, more consistent across the district, and based on best practice.
6. Standards, expectations, and curriculum would be the same for all students. Regular assessment would monitor progress, and methods altered quickly when progress is not being achieved.
7. Student schedules would balance the needs for non-academic classes, create an enjoyable day, and recognize that we cannot keep adding without taking away. Schedules will also be fair to staff and cost efficient.
8. More students would be educated in the district.
9. A district-wide, K-12 continuum of support would be in place, proving smooth transitions from grade to grade and school to school.
10. Most importantly, services will diminish over time because students have gained grade-level mastery of core subjects, solid study and social skills, and independence – our measure of success.