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Building Partnerships: Preparing Special Education Teachers for the 21st Century

This resource paper was developed by the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, in cooperation with the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. It is intended for college and university faculty members in teacher education; state and local school boards; state and local school administrators; special and general education teachers; and parents of students with disabilities.

The foreword from Eunice Kennedy Shriver, head of the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, states that ". . . now is the time to rethink some of our more traditional practices in teacher education." This paper begins such a process with a discussion on why and how we must chart a new course for the future. Our purpose is to address some of the key issues and strategies for setting a new agenda in the preparation of special education teachers, including:

- a. A call for a core of knowledge and skills that will be taught and applied by both special and general educators;
- b. A description of the roles for special educators in tomorrow' schools and the skills needed to fulfill their responsibilities;
- c. The importance of a higher education and school partnership in preparing new teachers; and
- d. Issues in the recruitment and support of special education teachers.

The full text of the remainder of this paper is shown on the following pages.

TODAY'S SCHOOLS

- There is a growing diversity in our nation's schools that includes increasing numbers of students with disabilities, those from ethnically diverse backgrounds, and students at-risk of educational failure. Students with many different needs are coming together in a common environment. To respond to this diversity, our schools need teachers who are prepared to meet the challenges of educating all students for the 21st century.
- An increasing number of students with disabilities are now being educated with their "typical" peers in general education schools across the country. While the majority of students with disabilities spend at least a portion of their school day in a general education classroom, significant numbers are still being educated in resource rooms and special classes. Regardless of where students with disabilities are placed, they are entitled to well-trained, highly qualified special education teachers who can work in partnership with other professionals and parents to deliver specially designed instruction that meets the instructional needs of the students they serve.
- Historically, higher education has prepared general and special education teachers in isolation from one another. Because of this, many newly prepared teachers do not have the necessary skills to work collaboratively to meet the needs of all students across a multiplicity of instructional settings.

SCHOOLS IN THE FUTURE

- Special and general education teachers, parents, administrators, and other school personnel will be working more closely together to provide an appropriate education that meets the needs of all students. Special education teachers must be perceived as valued members of this family school partnership.
- While special education teachers must continue to acquire the specialized knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of students with disabilities, they will also have to apply this expertise to assist other high-risk students in a more collaborative educational environment.
- The preparation of special educators must be based upon empirically validated and effective practices. Professional development will be a lifetime career process that continually builds on the entry level skills that are acquired during the initial university / college program.
- Special educators and their school colleagues will be held more responsible for raising expectations regarding the learning capabilities of students with disabilities. This will include ensuring that these students have access to the general education curriculum when appropriate. However, regardless of whether the curriculum is academic, compensatory, and /or functional in its orientation, special educators will be held accountable for ensuring positive student growth.
- Student learning will extend beyond the walls of school and into the community. Special educators will have to be skilled in working with other agencies (such as social services, vocational rehabilitation, job service) and the business community, particularly during the transition years from school to adult life.

CHARTING A NEW COURSE IN TEACHER PREPARATION

Teacher preparation programs of the future should focus on:

- A common core of knowledge and skills that are taught to and applied by both special and general education teachers.
- The entry level skills needed for special educators to serve as school-based support specialists working as members of a parent-professional team to develop, implement, and evaluate individualized education programs for students with disabilities.
- Advanced training specialties for special educators in areas such as assistive technology, challenging behaviors, transition from school to adult life, alternative approaches to teaching academic content (e.g., reading, language, math), or functional life skills.

A COMMON CORE FOR THE PREPARATION OF SPECIAL AND GENERAL EDUCATORS

More than 90% of all students with disabilities spend at least a portion of their school day in a general education classroom. As schools become more diverse, seeking to promote the collaboration between general and special educators, teacher candidates need to be prepared to provide instructional support to all students. This will necessitate providing prospective teachers in both special and general education with a common core of knowledge and skills prior to their moving on to specialty areas in elementary, secondary, and/or special education.

Recommended Core Domains

Foundations in Education:

- History of education
- Philosophical, sociological, and legal foundations of education (including the statutory bases creating the right to education for students with disabilities)
- Organizational development, leadership and systems change theory

Cultural and Learning Diversity:

- Understanding and valuing human exceptionality
- Multicultural issues in home, school, and community environments
- Issues of over representation of ethnic minority students in at-risk and special education programs

The Home-School Partnership:

- Understanding and respecting family dynamics
- Importance of parental involvement in the education of all students
- Elements of effective home-school collaboration
- Positive home-school communication strategies
- Promoting student and family self-determination

Foundations for Learning:

- How children learn
- Motivating students to learn
- Accommodating and adapting to individual differences

Assessment:

- Theoretical foundations of assessment
- Multiple assessment techniques (i.e., norm-referenced, curriculum-based, authentic, portfolio, criterion-referenced, behavioral observation and measurement)

Curriculum and Instruction:

- Instructional design models
- Basic constructs of literacy
- Functional/compensatory skills development
- Standards-based assessment and curricula
- Pedagogical factors that predict student success

Collaboration and Teaming:

- Developing a collaborative ethic: Understanding and clarifying the roles of school professionals
- Models for teaming and collaboration
- Approaches to effective communication with colleagues and parents
- Conflict resolution

Student and Classroom Management:

- Teaching social skills and managing student behavior
- Dealing with challenging behaviors: Ethics, principles and effective procedures
- Managing curriculum and instruction for diverse groups of students (i.e., multi-age, multi-ability classes)
- Managing the physical environment of the classroom and school

Technology:

- Technology literacy (i.e., computer operation, software development, use and evaluation)
- Applying technology in the classroom (assessment, curriculum, and instruction)
- Using technology (including assistive technology) to enhance learning for diverse groups of students

BEYOND THE CORE: PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATORS AS SCHOOL SUPPORT SPECIALISTS

In the classrooms and schools of the future, special educators will be called upon to fill many professional roles, including instructor, collaborator, consultant, and coordinator.

In the role of Instructor, the special education teacher must be able to:

- Understand and apply specialized instructional techniques, including accommodation and adaptation of classroom environments, teaching methods, and curriculum to meet individual student needs.
- Teach students with diverse needs in academic and/or adaptive skill content areas. Academic content areas include basic, remedial, or adaptive skill instruction in reading, mathematics, language, etc. Adaptive skill domains include areas such as learning strategies, social skills, self care, health and safety, employment training, recreation/leisure, and socialization.
- Foster student self-determination, self-management, and choice-making.
- Apply methods to motivate learning, and promote individual student participation.

In the role of Collaborator (in partnership with parents and other school professionals), the special education teacher must be able to:

- Apply multiple assessment techniques in identifying the educational needs of students with diverse learning and behavioral needs; link assessment techniques to appropriate curriculum and instruction.
- Apply effective problem-solving strategies to facilitate the academic and/or adaptive skill development of students with diverse learning and behavioral needs across a variety of educational environments.
- Co-teach (with general educators) students who have diverse learning and behavioral needs across a variety of subject areas using large and small group teaching methods which include direct instruction, cooperative group techniques, activity-based approaches, and other appropriate techniques to motivate students and encourage responding.
- Work with guidance personnel and other educators to develop teaching strategies that will foster the valuing and acceptance of diversity.
- Apply effective accountability procedures for evaluating individual student progress and long-term results.

In the role of Consultant, the special education teacher must be able to:

- Serve as an expert resource and trainer for school personnel and parents on effective instructional practices for students with disabilities. Expertise may be provided in content areas (such as effective approaches to teaching reading to students with disabilities) and/or problem-solving skills (such as strategies to motivate students to participate in class activities).

In the role of **Coordinator**, the special education teacher must be able to:

- * Take the lead responsibility for organizing the activities of the school team relative to the:
 - Development, implementation and evaluation of student IEPs.
 - Effective and efficient utilization of school resources relative to the needs of students with disabilities.
 - Professional development activities for school team members.
 - The supervision of paraprofessionals, peer support, volunteers, etc.
 - Facilitation of positive communication with parents, including information and training programs.

The specific activities associated with each of the previously identified roles for special education teachers must be student and family-centered.

* Student-centered activities involve being able to:

- Conduct multiple kinds of assessments consistent with the student's educational needs (such as performance-based, curriculum-based, ecological).
- Teach in small group or individual settings; co-teach with general education colleagues across content domains.
- Develop and implement an accountability system that measures student progress on identified goals and objectives.

* Family-centered activities involve being able to:

- Understand and respect parent values, needs and constraints.
- Foster ongoing communication between school and home in an atmosphere of openness and mutual trust.
- Assist parents in becoming active members of the student's educational team.
- serve as a referral source for parents to other community organizations and supports.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP IN THE PREPARATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS

The most effective way to prepare future special educators for the demanding challenges of the next century is to establish a higher education-school partnership that begins early in the training program and extends throughout the teacher's career. The partnership involves several key elements: (1) field experiences that link course work to actual practice; (2) joint mentoring and evaluation of prospective teachers; and (3) collaborative research endeavors to improve practice.

Connecting University/College Course Work and School Field Experiences

- Preservice preparation should include both university / college course work and extensive field experiences in the schools. School field experiences should be directly tied to course content.

- Field experiences for teacher candidates should be under the mentorship of an experienced and highly qualified teacher, and include the opportunity to interact with administrators and other school personnel (such as counselors, school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, adapted physical education teachers, etc.).
- Field experiences need to be as diverse as the students these teachers are expected to serve. They should include opportunities with students who exhibit a wide range of learning and behavior challenges, and those who come from culturally different backgrounds.
- Teacher candidates should be exposed to curricular approaches that encompass both academic, compensatory, and functional learning. A variety of field settings should be made available, including: (1) early childhood, elementary and/or high school, (2) inner city, suburban and rural, and (3) lower, middle and upper socioeconomic levels.
- Field experiences should include working with parents during IEP development, parent-student-teacher conferences, telephone conversations, information and training seminars, and classroom volunteering.

Collaborative Mentorship and Evaluation

An effective partnership between higher education and the schools requires that the mentoring and evaluation of students be the joint responsibility of both organizations. The mentoring and evaluation process should be initiated at the time the teacher candidate enters the university/college preparation program. It should remain in place following certification until the completion of an induction period of not less than one year.

Collaborative Research

The advancement of effective educational practices for all students, including those with disabilities, is dependent upon higher education and the schools establishing a research partnership that is mutually beneficial. University/college faculty must move away from research agendas that are developed and investigated in isolation from the real challenges facing today's schools. Concurrently, schools must create and take advantage of university/college expertise to establish a collaborative effort to identify and investigate research questions that will facilitate an understanding of "best practices" in the education of all students.

RECRUITING AND SUPPORTING A QUALITY SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKFORCE

As we approach the new century, the availability of qualified special education teachers to meet the challenges of diversity in our nation's classrooms is at a critically low level. The U.S. Department of Education reports that, while more than 300,000 special education teachers are employed in this country, an additional 26,000 are needed to serve students with disabilities between the ages of six and 21; an additional 2,200 are needed to serve preschool-age children. Approximately, 30% of all special education teachers are presently on emergency certification and increasing numbers of special educators are leaving the profession every year.

While there is a critical need for qualified special education teachers in the 1990s, the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the number of special education teaching jobs will increase even more in the 21st century. By the year 2005, the U.S. will need an additional 267,000 special educators. As an occupation, "special education teacher" has the 11th highest growth rate among hundreds of other careers in this country.

Recruiting New Special Education Teachers

The decision to enter the teaching profession is often very personal. One in five new teachers has a mother who is or has been an educator at one time; one in ten has a father in the field of education. Other deciding factors include seeing teaching as an inner source of satisfaction and strength, and a strong sense of fulfillment associated with contributing to the learning of others.

Recruiting new special education teachers is a complex task with few simple solutions. There are, however, several factors that may contribute to a more successful recruitment in the future:

- Given the critical shortages of special education teachers, and the fact that the profession has the 11th highest growth rate in the country, it is important to get the message out that special education is a very marketable career choice. In fact, U.S. News and World Reports lists special education teacher as the "hot track" job in the field of education.
- Local school districts, state agencies, and the federal government need to promote teaching as a high status profession. The perception must be that special education teachers are an important and valued workforce and that a career in teaching is a rewarding and positive experience.
- Incentives must be made available at the federal and state level to provide financial support to future teacher candidates. Both federal and state governments play an important role in providing scholarships and grants-in-aid to provide financial assistance to individuals seeking a career in special education. Given the number of ethnically diverse students in special education programs, incentives should be specifically targeted at attracting individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds.
- Universities/colleges will need to develop strategies focused on collaborative efforts with schools to recruit people in their local communities who are interested in mid-career change. Presently, about one of every three new teachers is a person who transfers into the field from another career.

Supporting Special Education Teachers

In general, special educators are less satisfied with teaching than general educators and are more likely to leave the profession, particularly during their first year. Often identified areas of dissatisfaction include: excessive paperwork and meetings, unclear expectations relative to their role in a school, and isolation from general education colleagues.

There is a need to pay special education teachers a salary commensurate with their training and responsibilities. Contrary to popular opinion, salary is a factor in a teacher's decision to stay in the profession. Teachers who are paid better remain in teaching longer.

To promote positive attitudes among the special education workforce and reduce attrition, school administrators may choose to employ several strategies:

- Communicate genuine respect for special educators as valued and competent professionals.
- Recognize the difficulty of the task facing special educators, and acknowledge the specialized skills they possess.
- Seek ways to facilitate and support the time and effort required by special education teachers to complete federal, state, and locally-mandated paperwork requirements.
- Develop role descriptions for special educators and other school professionals that seek to clarify their authority and responsibility as members of a professional-parent team.
- Allocate time and provide for special education teachers to engage in collaborative activities with school colleagues (such as co-teaching) and interact with parents on a regular basis.
- Reinforce opportunities for special educators to participate in professional development activities both within and outside of the school. Openly support teachers who seek to experiment with new strategies, conduct research, and develop innovative models for instruction.

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