The Roles of Special Educators in the 21st Century School

As we all plan for the school year ahead, we are anticipating the work needed to build administrator and teacher capacity in the areas of 21st century knowledge and skills. As these professional development opportunities increasingly include all teachers, regardless of specializations, questions related to the role of special educators have become more frequent and more specific. At this point, it is worth confirming these roles and new responsibilities as West Virginia continues to focus on 21st century instruction and its foundational literacy requirements while implementing the revised Policy 2419 with its strong focus on instruction for improved results.

Teachers who see special education as their life’s work are attracted to it because of the opportunity to work closely with individual students, to collaborate more regularly with families, and to have an impact on a child whose learning needs are unique and a continuing challenge. In the early days of special education, teachers and administrators in the field of special education often believed deeply that only they could make a difference in the life of a child with an exceptionality. That belief frequently led to the segregated program designs from which the field has been retreating for the past decade. While that design might have met the needs of teachers seeking traditional roles within that model, by the 1990s we knew that this approach was not meeting the needs of the students. The students with disabilities in particular were not progressing academically or socially, and their transition options were severely limited.

In a recent issue of Educational Leadership (Volume 64, No. 5), Dr. Thomas Hehir, who was the director of the federal Office of Special Education Programs for much of the 1990s, reminded readers that

“The purpose of special education is to minimize the impact of disability and maximize the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in schooling and the community.”

What roles do special education teachers assume in this 21st century world that ensure this purpose is realized for their students?

1. First, the special education teacher is the professional who is responsible for implementing the Individualized Education Programs (IEP) of every student on her or his caseload and assumes responsibility for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Policy 2419. While this means being certain that the agreed upon services in an IEP are provided as specified, the role is more than just being the overseer of implementation. This leads us to the second role.

2. The special education teacher must work proactively to ensure that a student’s IEP goals as well as broader educational goals are increasingly within reach at all times. The debate around how a special education teacher can be responsible for a student’s progress when the student is in a general education class much of the time with another teacher of record is an important one to be addressed here. Both federal and state funds are provided to ensure that each student with an exceptionality has a teacher who is uniquely qualified to work on behalf of the student so that agreed upon instruction and services are provided and progress in the appropriate curriculum can be achieved. The special education teacher, when he or she is hired and assigned within caseload standards, assumes this responsibility.

This is not an easy role to assume and perform successfully. It involves

- constant vigilance regarding the special education student’s progress;
- ongoing conversations around what the student needs, who will meet those needs and how they will be met;
- monitoring progress through data collection that may be accomplished by the special education teacher or another education professional but is done systematically; and
- taking steps to alter the student’s program if the progress data do not demonstrate that the student is on track to achieve goals.

The special education teacher does not relinquish responsibility for progress of the students on his or her caseload regardless of the setting in which services are provided.
Policy, Practice and Procedures:

**Question:**
I am in receipt of a document entitled School Based Practice Frequently Asked Questions. This document was released by the West Virginia Board of Occupational Therapy. The last question reads, “Can the IEP committee change a related service such as OT, type of service/treatment or service delivery (amount of time) without an OT consent?” The response given in this document is NO.

Please clarify the IEP team’s authority to initiate and terminate related services. Does this mean that an OT or other related service provider has the authority to dictate the student’s IEP?

**Response:**

The West Virginia Department of Education’s Office of Legal Services and the Office of Special Programs, Extended and Early Learning (OSP) concur that the West Virginia Board of Occupational Therapy’s (WVBOT) answer is inconsistent with IDEA and West Virginia Board of Education Policy 2419. The WVBOT’s answer is confusing the medical model and is confusing practicing OT without a license with an IEP team carrying out its responsibilities under IDEA.

IDEA charges the state and local education agencies with providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to a student with disabilities (SWD). As part of that charge, IDEA and Policy 2419 require schools to create IEP teams. These teams may include medical or related service providers who participate in person, but the IEP team may also rely upon reports and recommendations of medical or related service providers.

The local education agency is charged with the responsibility of determining eligibility and the continued need for various services in order for the SWD to benefit from special education. IEPs must be reviewed annually; and IEP teams may change a related service, including OT. This is not considered practicing medicine or occupational therapy. The IEP team makes educational decisions. Nowhere does the IDEA or Policy 2419 give a provider of the related services the power to determine the type of treatment and service delivery (amount of time).

**Question:**
During the past several years our county has maintained a full day, five day per week alternative learning center with a certified special education teacher. At times due to drugs and/ or weapons, students with disabilities were placed in this program for up to 45 days. Consideration is now being given to eliminating the day program and offering this service for disruptive students at night. My question: if, due to drugs/ weapons, we place a SWD in the evening program in an interim education placement for 45 days (three hrs per day) will this violate anything in 2419 or Section 504 in regards to length of education placement for 45 days (three hrs per day)?

**Response:**

A district has the authority to remove a student with a disability to an interim alternative education setting for up to 45 school days for violations of weapons, drugs or serious bodily injury. It is the IEP team’s responsibility to determine the appropriate educational services. If the IEP team determines three hours per day is appropriate so as to enable the student to continue to participate in the general curriculum and to progress toward meeting the goals in the student’s IEP, then your evening interim alternative education setting (IAES) would be appropriate, assuming this would be the services afforded a general education student with similar behavior. Should the parent and district disagree on the services, the district makes the determination and provides the parent with prior written notice (PWN). In this situation, the district is required to provide transportation for the student.

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**Employment for People with Disabilities in West Virginia**

West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Service, working with the Center for Excellence in Disabilities at West Virginia University, has completed its systems analysis of employment for people with disabilities in West Virginia. Currently, the project is utilizing these findings to complete a strategic comprehensive employment plan by July 2007.

With support and funding from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, stakeholders worked throughout 2006 to determine needs and barriers and identify overarching goals for ensuring employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The project is now seeking further input and suggestions from major stakeholders statewide. Of particular interest to educators are the goals related to transition supports and assistive technology (Goals three and five.)

The proposed goals for the strategic plan are:

- **Goal 1:** Engage state policymakers, members of the business community and advocates to provide leadership, build a responsive culture and ensure sustainability of strategic plan goals and objectives.

- **Goal 2:** Enhance the availability and quality of employment supports for people with disabilities through coordination, increased awareness and person-centered practice.

- **Goal 3:** Strengthen and improve transition services and the transition process for youth and young adults moving from school to post-secondary education or employment.

- **Goal 4:** Increase access to transportation and create effective transportation services and supports for people with disabilities.

- **Goal 5:** Integrate assistive technology in the workforce delivery system, in schools and in the workplace.

- **Goal 6:** Educate and engage employers to market and develop opportunities for the employment of people with disabilities.

- **Goal 7:** Build and sustain objective benchmarks and data collection processes that provide information for appropriate systems outcomes.

If you or your staff have ideas or suggestions for activities to address any of these goals, please e-mail them to kruddle@access.k12.wv.us, abraham@hsc.wvu.edu or call Jack Stewart at 866-720-3606 for more information.
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3. As the WVDE establishes the response to intervention process through tiered instruction models at all grade levels, special education teachers may assume the role of interventionist.

IDEA allows school districts to set aside funds for early intervening services, i.e., a county may use a portion of its federal special education funds for services that address academic and behavioral needs of students who are not already identified for special education services. This option was developed in response to research related to the likelihood that children and youth are frequently inappropriately identified for special education services because they enter school with inadequate preparation to acquire the building blocks of literacy, in particular, and math. The process for identifying a student as learning disabled now includes agreement by the eligibility committee that the learning profile of the child is not the result of lack of research based reading instruction. Reading interventions that are monitored to document progress toward expected benchmarks, or lack of progress toward them, will be the responsibility of staff who are knowledgeable about those research based reading programs and can deliver them as designed. A special education teacher is one of those staff who can provide interventions for students not already identified for services. Policy 2419 provides guidelines for the local school district regarding the number of unidentified students for which a special education teacher can provide interventions.

4. The accountability and highly qualified teacher requirements of No Child Left Behind provide extraordinary impetus for those students with disabilities who are assessed with WESTEST to be included in general education classes so that instruction in the core content areas may be provided by a content endorsed teacher. We know that, typically, teachers did not go into the field of special education to teach core academic classes. While preparation in reading and math strategies is part of the preparation of special education teachers in West Virginia, special education teacher preparation programs have never focused on core academic content.

Special education students in core academic classes must, nevertheless, receive the support necessary for them to achieve their IEP goals and improve their academic results. The special education teacher must fill this role when sharing instructional responsibilities in an integrated classroom. The revisions to Policy 2419 provide that a special educator sharing instructional responsibilities in an integrated classroom should not be assigned to more than two of those classrooms in any instructional period. This was done for three reasons: (1) to ensure that students with exceptionalities in those integrated classes receive the support to which they have a right (2) to provide support to the general education teacher who frequently does not feel prepared to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities and (3) to allow the special educator to establish herself or himself as an instructional presence in the classroom.

5. Threaded within the roles above, of course, is the ever present primary role and responsibility of the special educator to bring to the student with special needs the knowledge and support necessary for that student to transition to an adult world that is moving quickly, extinguishing geographical boundaries, expecting a facility with technology for communication, and requiring from each of us a sense of place in the global community.

Teachers entering special education, and seeing it as a calling, will no doubt continue to be attracted to it for the reasons already noted. The roles of a special educator have changed, however, during the last 30 years — and most notably during the last 10 years. They may continue to change. Clarity about those roles is crucial so that special educators are not surprised, disenchanted or discouraged as they work within schools of the 21st century. Although roles may continue to change, special educators have never been more important to the success of students who must manage their unique learning needs within a complex and rapidly changing world.

Realignment of Support for Preparation of and Technical Assistance to Teachers of Students with Sensory Impairments

The WVDE and Marshall University have collaborated for 10 years to provide for the professional preparation, technical assistance and sustained professional development necessary to provide a free appropriate public education to students with sensory impairments. That collaboration included Marshall’s responsibility for coursework, practicum supervision and technical assistance. The WVDE assumed responsibility for the sustained professional development for teachers working with students who are deaf and hard of hearing and blind or visually impaired.

Beginning July 1, 2007, the two preparation programs at Marshall will be under the direction of one faculty member who will coordinate provision of coursework and practicum supervision. The WVDE will assume responsibility for technical assistance and professional development. At the local level, this change will mean that questions, issues and/or requests for technical assistance regarding FAPE for students who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/low vision will be directed to the Office of Special Programs, Extended and Early Learning.

If you have questions about this realignment of functions, please contact Dr. Michael Sullivan at Marshall University Msullivan@marshall.edu or Dr. Lynn Boyer at the WVDE lboyer@access.k12.wv.us.
Upcoming Events

July 9 – Aug. 21
K – 3 Reading Model Academies
Linda Palenchar for information
lpalench@access.k12.wv.us

July 16 – 20
Technology Integration Specialists’ Training
Bridgeport Conference Center

July 17
Title I Directors
Embassy Suites, Charleston

July 30 – Aug. 3
Teacher Leadership Institute
Waterfront Place Hotel, Morgantown

Aug. 6 – 7
County Test Coordinators

Aug. 13 – 17
State Technology Conference
Charleston Civic Center

Aug. 14 – 15
Phonemic Awareness training
RESAs I, II, III, IV
Kathy Knighton for information
knighto@access.k12.wv.us

Sept. 17-18
Fall Conference for State Special Programs Leadership
Embassy Suites, Charleston

Oct. 18 - 19
West Virginia Council for Exceptional Children
Waterfront Place Hotel, Morgantown

Oct. 23 – 25
Title I Directors
Waterfront Place Hotel, Morgantown

Exceptional News will be published bi-monthly beginning January 2006. The Office of Special Programs, Extended and Early Learning anticipates that it will include updates on state initiatives, a calendar of events, timelines for submission of reports and other materials, and answers to questions related to the implementation of IDEA 2004 and Policy 2419. Exceptional News will be available online at http://wvde.state.wv.us/ose/ and distributed to agencies and interested persons throughout the state and nation. Suggestions for topics to be included are always welcome at lboyer@access.k12.wv.us