

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

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Introduction

There is an increasing need for Christian schools to address the educational needs of disabled young people who desire the same opportunities that their nondisabled peers are receiving. There are ways in which most traditional schools can adapt their programs to meet the needs of these young people. Granted, providing for the special needs of disabled students is no easy task. Change will not occur overnight, and it will not come without its challenges. When examining the prospects of beginning such a program, one must give careful consideration to the written policies that must be developed for the principles, people, programs, and properties involved in Christian special education.

Principles

Developing a written philosophy of Christian special education is the most important aspect of beginning a special education program. Realizing why it is necessary to meet the needs of disabled students will help us to maintain our focus when faced with the challenges that come our way. In the book *Special Education: A Biblical Approach* (1993) Vaughn states, "Special education is not merely a branch of Christian education; rather Christian education is a type of special education" (p. 44). Christian education deals with the individual and the individual's responsibility to God. Vaughn continues, "Individual responsibility requires individual accountability. Individual accountability grows out of individual ability; and individual ability is fostered through individual education" (p.44). *Special* means specific or individual; thus individual education is special education, and special education, in a very real sense, is Christian education (Vaughn, 1993). The reason there is a distinction between Christian education and Christian special education is the fact that those in Christian education, for the most part, have chosen not to include Christian young people with disabilities. For true Christian education to exist, disabled young people must be included in the process.

Secular education seeks to elevate mankind at the expense of the individual. Christian education, however, seeks to elevate Christ through the individual. Individual members of the body, understanding their function within the body and working together for the good of the body, illustrate the true picture of Christ and His church. Is the public school better qualified to recognize and prepare the disabled Christian young person for his responsibilities

within the body of Christ? The answer is obvious. If those in Christian education do not seek to meet the needs of all its members, then what is being provided is not Christian education in its truest form.

The purpose of providing for the needs of disabled young people must flow out from the philosophy of Christian education. If Christian education deals with the individual and his responsibility to God as a member of the body of Christ, then by definition Christian education is special education.

People

The second most important decision made when providing a Christian education to disabled young people is the selection of a teacher. In any area of education, the teacher is the key. Those desiring to work with struggling learners must have a strong sense of compassion for them. Teachers must be willing to lay aside all preconceived ideas that disabled children are lazy, rebellious, and in need of greater discipline. Ideally, these teachers should be trained in the area of special education. If not, they must have some understanding of characteristics of the various special education categories and the methods appropriate for them. At the very least they should know the category of children with whom they will be working. They must also exhibit a willingness to pursue additional preparation in this area.

As mentioned earlier, implementing a program for students with disabilities will not occur overnight. Finding qualified teachers will be difficult. There are many secular colleges that offer degrees in special education but few Christian colleges that do the same. Making the need known and encouraging your own high school graduates to pursue such a ministry may cause additional Christian colleges and universities to seriously consider developing a program that would prepare teachers in this area.

In addition to selecting the right teachers, one must have someone on staff that is qualified to administer tests and correctly interpret the results. The special education teacher may perform this function initially, but as the program grows a person trained in the area of assessment would be a vital asset to any program. This individual would meet with teachers to provide information concerning a child's strengths and weaknesses, his ability levels, reasonable expectations for progress, and what teaching methods work best for him. This person can also function as a guidance counselor assisting the child with future planning

based on the student's abilities and interests. If it is not possible to employ a full time person in this position, a school can contract these services on an "as needed" basis.

Which students you enroll in your school is the next decision to be made. The range of disabilities is very wide. Specific learning disabilities have the highest prevalence rate; speech/language disorders, second; mental retardation, third; serious emotional disorders, fourth; and other disabilities, fifth. The area of greatest need would be the most logical place to start. Then additional programs can be added as the need arises.

Developing a multidisciplinary team would be very helpful in determining the child's needs and the appropriate approaches to having those needs meet. The responsibilities of this team would include (a) collecting relevant data on the child; (b) observing the child in a regular classroom; (c) reviewing all the data and findings from the observations; (d) making a collective group decision on whether the child should be included in a special program; (e) writing up a report on the findings and conclusions; (f) recommending an appropriate program; (g) making recommendations as to what should be included in the Individual Education Program (IEP); and reviewing the child's program on a yearly basis.

The members of this team may include (a) the school administrator; (b) the individual responsible for performing the testing; (c) the child's teacher(s); (d) the child's parents; (e) the child himself, where appropriate; and (f) any other person the school or parents might consider qualified to assist in the decisions needing to be made.

Programs

Once the philosophical issues and the people issues have been decided, the appropriate programs must then be determined. Testing is a vital part of determining the direction of the child's educational program. Two appropriate tests to administer for initial program planning purposes are the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery – Revised and the Brigance Basic Skills Inventory. The Woodcock-Johnson provides information relating to cognitive ability levels as well as achievement levels. It then compares the two and indicates whether or not the child is performing up to his ability level. The information gleaned from the cognitive scores provides insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the student in the areas of memory, processing speed, visual and auditory processing, general comprehension, and fluid reasoning abilities.

The Brigance Diagnostic Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills provides an accurate picture of the specific skills the child has mastered. It also supplies goals that can be incorporated in the IEP based on any skill deficit areas.

Additional assessment instruments such as the KeyMath Revised: A Diagnostic Inventory of Essential Mathematics and the Test of Nonverbal Intelligence—Third Edition (TONI—3) also prove helpful in preparing IEPs for students.

There are three primary reasons for testing a child: (1) to determine whether the child has a disability; (2) to determine the child's functioning level; and (3) to document the child's academic progress. Having a child classified for the purpose of receiving special education and related services would be the least appropriate reason.

Once testing is performed and the results indicate the existence of a disability, then the decision needs to be made as to the setting in which the instruction will take place. There are several options to consider as the needs of special education students are being addressed in different ways. These options include an itinerant program, a self-contained classroom, a resource classroom, and inclusion. The setting would be chosen depending on the child's needs.

An **itinerant program** is a program in which a special education teacher serves different schools on specific days of the week. A student may not require individualized instruction every day but may receive it a few days a week, several hours a week. Depending upon the number of Christian schools in the area and the number of students requiring such services, the itinerant teacher could be contracted to work with several schools and several students on a weekly basis.

Students with mental disabilities or severe learning disabilities have been served in **self-contained classrooms** over the past several decades. It is here that the student receives the major part of his academic instruction. Generally, the special education teacher assigned to the self-contained classroom teaches core courses such as reading, math, and language. Outlining skills, study skills, organizational skills, test-taking skills, and prevocational skills should be a part of the program for the severely learning disabled student.

For students with mental disabilities, the educational goals would include the teaching of functional reading, math, and language skills. Self-help or adaptive living skills and community-based instruction are also a part of the program designed for students with below average intelligence. A general guideline

when teaching functional academics is to teach those skills that will allow the student to function independently. When teaching a young person with mental disabilities, one must ask, "What can a student learn today that will allow him to be more independent tomorrow?" Both the mentally disabled student and the severely learning disabled student can join their nondisabled peers in regular classrooms for subjects such as art, physical education, and music.

In many self-contained classrooms in public schools, there are approximately 15-18 students. To assure good student learning, however, one should place no more than six to eight students in a self-contained environment. Ideally, students in the self-contained classroom should be of the same approximate age and ability levels. One student with differing needs may hinder the progress of the others or may necessitate the hiring of an additional staff member. Additional students may be enrolled if a qualified (paid or volunteer) assistant is supplied to the charge teacher.

The **resource** classroom is set up for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. The teacher in this program provides opportunities for students to acquire the basic skills necessary to experience success in the regular classroom (Fichter, 1993). Students leave their regular classroom and go to the resource classroom for remediation in one or two academic subjects, usually reading and/or math.

It is important that the resource teacher and the regular classroom teacher work together to provide assistance to the student. The regular classroom teacher must be able to explain the problems that the student is experiencing. Likewise, the resource teacher must be prepared to recommend and implement certain strategies that will assist the regular classroom teacher. The teachers then work together to produce an Individual Education Program (IEP) for the student. The IEP lists the goals for the student along with the accommodations and remedial activities that will be used to meet the student's needs. Generally, a special education teacher can serve 20 to 30 children in a resource program throughout the school day. Each class may include six to eight students.

The location of the special education classroom is very important, as it communicates an attitude toward the students in the classroom. The classroom should be centrally located and well within the main flow of traffic. Locating it in this manner will communicate an attitude of acceptance and unity.

Inclusion is the philosophy that all students, regardless of ability or disability, should be educated

in regular education classes. Initially the disabled student(s) may need specialized assistance to learn how to adapt to a regular classroom situation. Over a period of time the goal is to withdraw the assistance and provide it only when the student needs it. When additional support is needed, it is preferred that peers, older students, and classroom volunteers be used to assist the general education teacher. (Villa & Thousand, 1995).

According to Markel and Greenbaum (1996) this philosophy "often conflicts with the need of some students with learning disabilities or ADD for intensive one-on-one teaching by a professional trained in special education methodology. Too often, budgetary or political concerns preclude making these judgments on a case-by-case basis" (p. 132). Reif and Heimburge (1996), who support inclusion, also bring a balance to this philosophy by stating:

Not every student is able to function in a regular classroom, even with a maximum amount of support from special education. The regular classroom setting is not the best or most appropriate placement for every student.

Children with various handicapping conditions are entitled to appropriate placements and supports that will provide them with the most effective educational program to meet their needs (p. vi).

The setting in which the needs of disabled students are met must be carefully considered. If the child's needs can be met in the classroom by making minimal adaptations to his program, then the regular classroom is appropriate. If, however, a major portion of time is being spent with one or two students to the point where the other students are being neglected, an alternative setting must be chosen.

Other written policies to be established prior to beginning a special education program include:

the criteria for special education classification.

- the criteria for grade placement.
- the type of discipline used with disabled students.
- the criteria for awarding high school diplomas.
- the criteria for awarding certificates of completion if the student is unable to meet high school graduation requirements.

Having these policies in written form will assist in maintaining consistency in the special education program.

Properties

Properties include textbooks and other teaching materials, equipment, and the actual physical location and arrangement of the special education classroom.

The location of the classroom has already been mentioned. Choosing the appropriate materials will provide an interesting challenge for those just starting a special education program. There is a wealth of material on the market from which to select. Both *Special Education: A Biblical Approach* and *Strategies for Struggling Learners* (see reference list), have appendices listing suppliers of special education materials.

Until the teacher gets to know the specific needs of the student well, purchasing materials for a student on a semester or quarterly basis is recommended. Because of the changing needs of the disabled student, teaching materials are rarely ordered for the entire year.

Effective classroom setup can be accomplished in several ways. Two resources that provide information regarding alternatives for floor plans and equipment arrangements are *Classroom Organization and Management* by Eaton and Hansen and *The Resource Teacher: A Guide to Effective Practice* by Wiederholt, Hammill, and Brown.

Conclusion

Generally, the cost of educating a student with disabilities is twice that for a nondisabled student. The cost, however, should not be the determining factor when deciding whether or not to meet the needs of disabled young people. If our educational philosophy is consistent with Scripture and if we are consistent in carrying out that philosophy, the Lord will provide what is needed.

At Hidden Treasure Christian School we have purposed to follow the stated philosophy. Over the past seventeen years, in spite of the financial challenges, we have seen God supply the funds needed to sustain this ministry. He has provided the people to carry out the ministry. He has given wisdom in developing the programs for the ministry and He has supplied the properties necessary to perform the ministry. The blessings we receive from working with disabled young people far outweigh the challenges we have experienced in doing so. The most difficult decision to make concerning implementing a program for disabled children is whether or not you are going to do it.

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