

Are You My Teacher? A Performance Analysis

Introduction:

The recently-hired fourth psychologist in a span of three years at Montgomery High School has found herself thrust into the middle of a virtual hornets' nest. She seems to have inherited a program high in conflicts, controversy and confusion, and low in collaboration, communication and conviviality. To make matters worse, she has a follow-up Coordinated Compliance Review breathing down her neck!

Focus: Collaboration between the Special Education Case Managers of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and the Regular Educators in charge of the classes where these students are mainstreamed as full-time students will be the main focus of this analysis. Secondary issues include use of Instructional Aides' time and their skills.

Attitude Snapshot: A review of the extant literature about best practices in special education and an in-depth interview of an outside special educator (my SME) experienced in initiating, implementing and maintaining an inclusion program reveals that mainstreaming these students for up to a full day in heterogeneously-grouped classes is increasingly common in today's educational institutions. The interviews and questionnaires used for this analysis revealed several problems within the organization, as well as with the personnel involved. Some fuzzy goals and general complaints mentioned were:

- *“Regular Ed. Teachers oughta wanna take care of the students themselves; after all, they are their students, at least for that class period. I don't even know some of these kids personally yet, since I have never had them in a class of my own!”* –**Special Educator/Case Manager**
- *“It's hard to support students in a class I know nothing about while I am in my own classroom with my own students teaching my own curriculum. They [regular ed. teachers] oughta feel glad they get to steal my aide away a couple of days a week!”* –**Special Educator/Case Manager**
- *“To be honest, sometimes too much contact with the Regular Ed. teacher opens up the floodgates for requests for help with discipline problems, missing work, ... seems like they expect me to run their classroom sometimes, just because there is a kid with learning disabilities in it.”* –**Special Educator/Case Manager**
- *“Special Ed. Teachers oughta wanna collaborate with us and get more involved in their students' progress. The ‘Dump and Run’ approach is not working for me or for their student.”* –**Regular Educator**
- *“I should be informed the very first day of school about which students in my class have special needs. What good does it do me to find out after a month has passed and the kid is already failing? Then if I do get anything from the Case Manager, I never know what format it will be in or if it will even have any information I can use. I teach reading and got a copy of a kid's math goal as my only resource. What am I supposed to do with that?”* –**Regular Educator**
- *“Those aides show up when their teacher feels like sending them. Aren't they supposed to be my aide those periods? One teacher said he kept his aide back for two days because *she* was behind with *his* grading!”* –**Regular Educator**
- *“...and I'm not the only aide who feels that way. I don't like going to the regular ed. classes and not having anything to do and feeling useless; sometimes the teacher seems to think it's extra work to find something for me to do. Quite a few of my coworkers take advantage of this fact and spend more time drinking coffee in the lounge than working in the classes they are assigned to.”* – **Instructional Aide for Special Education Students**
- *“There are so many students and different classes. I like doing it and am proud when it's done, but the aides' schedule is really hard to do and I do it by myself, so it takes me at least three weeks.”* –**Instructional Aide for Special Education Students**
- *“While regular educators are responsible for the student's achievement in that classroom environment, they should always feel supported in their efforts by adequate adaptations, tutoring options, adult aide time, or whatever it is going to take to assure the students' chances for success in that class. If the collaboration necessary for that to take place is not happening, then we need to help those teachers to make it happen. These requirements are not going to go away or decrease, and there will be no additional release time; if anything, IEP days may get cut if things get any worse with funding.”* –**School Psychologist**

Sources of Analysis Information:

I chose to speak directly to those who I felt would be honest and not threatened by my questions: namely, the students, the parent, the aides and the psychologist. I developed an anonymous questionnaire, however, for the two groups of teachers, sensing that they would be more forthright with their responses that way. 72% of the questionnaires (23 of 32) were answered and returned, several with lengthy anecdotal comments about their particular situation. I also consulted an outside Subject Matter Expert (SME).

Target Audience Analysis:

There are several key players who all have a specific role in this situation:

- **The School Psychologist** - While ultimately reporting to the school principal, the psychologist is the administrator primarily responsible for overseeing the various special education programs and

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students on campus. It is significant to note that the current psychologist is the fourth one in three years, which led me to wonder if a lack of continuity in leadership may have played some part in the performance discrepancy; however, the problem was reported to have had a long history which predates the more recent high turnover at this position.

- **The Special Education Case Managers** - Special education teachers are currently expected to prepare for and teach their own classes, and also manage their caseloads of students' Individual Education Plans (IEP's) within the school day. They have one preparation period per day of ninety minutes, just like the regular education teacher. The district does provide nine release days per year for these teachers (called IEP days), plus the services of at least one instructional aide. The special education classes are also smaller than the regular classes, with a ratio of about 18:1, as opposed to the 35:1 in the regular classes. Special educators say they rarely hear from the regular educators, and that they would help if there were a problem.
- **The Instructional Aides** – There is currently a practice in place where instructional aides follow a schedule which takes them out of the special education classroom and puts them to work in the regular education classrooms that are the most impacted by sheer numbers of mainstreamed students for once or twice a week, usually an hour at a time. Some aides reported that their services were not well used, as they spent some of their time just waiting to be told what to do. One of them does too much, since she single-handedly develops the aides' collaboration schedule.
- **The Regular Educators** - Some classes on campus have as many as ten students with learning disabilities in them at a time. Regular educators complain that some classes have high loads of these students while others have none, as well as being upset with the slow release of information and schedules. This is especially significant at Montgomery, which works on a quarter system. Rather than a class running for a whole semester, the credit is earned in just one quarter of nine weeks, which is significant in that students can fall severely behind in a very short time. They blame the Case Managers for not adequately supporting their students and the Psychologist for not “making them” comply.
- **Special Education Students and Parents** – Most students characterized their educational experiences as “fair” or “ok”. They expressed frustration with the difficulty of the classes, but did not seem to blame any one particular person, group, or factor over any other for their lack of success. Successful students tended to be less likely to indicate dissatisfaction with the school's programs. I was only able to speak to one parent of a special education student mainstreamed in regular classes who expressed gratitude that her daughter was able to be in regular classes and was successful. Due to the fact I only spoke to one parent of a very successful student, that sample will not have any direct bearing on the conclusions of this study. It is recommended that parents be included in the solution system created for this problem.

Conflicts and Drivers:

- Frequency and quality of instances of collaboration and communication between Regular Educators and Case Managers. (Environmental Driver due to lack of common time, as well as a Motivation driver, to a lesser extent, primarily due to low confidence. There is also an incentive problem, as currently more collaboration can cause a perceived higher workload for the Case Manager.)
- “Ownership” of (or responsibility for) the mainstreamed students, including accountability issues (Drivers are low confidence, resulting in a Motivation problem, as well as Environmental and Skills/Knowledge problems with developing schedules for support, as well as vehicles for collaboration.)
- “Ownership” of (or entitlement to benefit of) Instructional Aides' time and efforts, including accountability issues, as well as skills/knowledge problems on the aides' parts. (Drivers are a skills/knowledge problem on the part of the aides, as well as for the Regular Educators where the aides and adapted curricula are concerned. Special Educators have both a slight Motivation problem, with value being the main issue, as well as a more serious incentive problem, since some seem to perceive collaboration as punishing, since it causes more work.)

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Gap Analysis:

Interviews and questionnaires, coupled with a review of the literature, clarified that the desired behaviors (optimals) to attain and maintain a successful program, along with what is actually happening (actuals) and the areas of need that are currently preventing success (gaps) are as follows:

Optimals	Actuals	Gaps
Timely identification of mainstreamed students	Late and incomplete identification of mainstreamed students	One to four weeks of time during which the Regular Educator is unaware of students' status
Weekly, systematic collaboration between the teacher of record and the Case Manager	Little or no contact, haphazard at best	Months with no collaboration or contact, during which the students are often falling behind and without the extra help they need
Shared information and "ownership" of responsibility for students	Finger-pointing, Regular Educator is primary owner as teacher of record for that class, even though the Case Manager is responsible for the IEP.	Shared information and responsibility on a consistent, systematic basis.
Clear expectations for Instructional Aides with a system of accountability accessible to all.	Aides used at whim of teachers, unsure of role, sometimes able to waste time elsewhere	Clear expectations, better scheduling, increased accountability, possible training regarding interventions with struggling students

Performance Discrepancy: The Special Educators and Regular Educators are experiencing little or no collaboration, very little shared information regarding students and their progress, limited agreement about the aides' role and how their time should be used, or systematic feedback and remediation where the students' best interests are concerned.

Front End Analysis with Solution Set:

- It is recommended that there be **systematic and standardized weekly collaboration** between Regular Educators and Case Managers, using the following job aids:
 - A student profile worksheet which the Case Manager would use to describe:
 - The student's special needs/Strengths and weaknesses/Any medical problems relevant to performance in school/Input from parents or care providers/A synopsis of the IEP goals and how they might be pursued in that class/The date of the student's next IEP meeting/Time(s) and/or day(s) of weekly collaboration contact (Minimal weekly contact will consist of the second job aid (see b below).)/Preferred times and methods for additional necessary contact.
 - Copies of this profile would be given to the Regular Educator, instructional aide and School Psychologist no later than one week into the new quarter.
 - It is recommended that a weekly collaboration checklist be sent to the Case Manager by the Regular Educator. Case Managers will respond as appropriate, with a minimal response being a simple acknowledgement of receipt.
- It is recommended that a "Collaboration Folder" be developed for each student, maintained by the Case Manager, randomly spot-checked by the School Psychologist on a biweekly basis for accountability purposes, as well as presented to parents as part of the student's annual IEP meeting.
- It is recommended that the Psychologist, in collaboration with the Registrar, generate and disseminate a list of mainstreamed students with their mainstreamed classes organized by Regular Educator, including the names of the corresponding Case Managers.
- It is recommended that there possibly be some training for instructional aides regarding expectations of the job and common methods of support that can be utilized in a classroom for the benefit of all of the students.

Conclusion:

The problems described in this analysis, the corresponding causes and suggested courses of action will provide the first collaborative, concerted effort to solve a longstanding problem in this school. The success of the effort will depend on buy-in from the stakeholders involved. Job aids to be developed will play a major part in consistency and accountability, which will be the two most important ingredients of the formula for long-term and lasting success.