

The Principal's Role in Implementing Mainstreaming

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Principals should provide the leadership to make mainstreaming a success in their schools.



Photo: Michael Sexton, Texas A&M University.

Rapid change always places demands on school administrators responsible for program development and implementation. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, is no exception. Closer examination of this law and companion state education statutes reveals that building administrators are subjected to extraordinary pressure and in many cases are ill-prepared to respond effectively. The requirement for mainstreaming contained in nearly all recent regulations has caught many principals unprepared, confused, and angered. Why is mainstreaming such a sensitive issue? What is the role of the building administrator in resolving the conflict?

A Crucial Difference

It is important to remember that in passing 94-142 Congress was not responding to the recommendations of the usually influential general education lobby and its assorted professional allies and associations, but rather to the insistent demands of a well-orchestrated parent and special educator coalition (Martin, 1976; Gilhool, 1976). The concerned citizens who helped bring about passage of the law remain active throughout the country to ensure appropriate implementation at local and state levels. In some cases principals are stunned to encounter parents who are more knowledgeable than they are about specifics of

the legislation. One principal was heard to remark in amazement, "She knows more about her child's legal rights than our school board's attorney!" Articulate, demanding parents are often assisted by child advocates, and together they may leave principals bewildered, ready to withdraw behind the battlements.

Resulting voids of leadership are filled by special education personnel from within the public schools, intermediate districts, colleges and universities, and state and federal agencies. Few question that they are competent, concerned

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professionals motivated by an honest desire to improve educational opportunities for the handicapped, but too few have recent experience in general education. Urged on by the advocates and largely unassisted by shellshocked general educators, they prepare the multitude of recommendations, rules, procedures, and reporting systems needed to implement 94-142.

Most building principals lack extensive special education training or experience (Bullock, 1970). Special education programs and services are implemented with little direct input from building administrators. The lack of a clear definition of special educator roles makes it difficult for administrators to evaluate their performance (Reynolds, n.d.). Nevertheless, mainstreaming is an expectation. Principals must make it succeed.

Just Good Education

In some ways making mainstreaming work is no different from making other programs work. Some of the following are already practiced by active, alert principals:

1. *Know what staff members are doing.* Discuss with special educators their objectives and

expectations. Special educators should be able to say exactly what their program is hoping to achieve without resorting to jargon. There may be differences of opinion, but at least they should be clearly understood.

2. *Encourage respect for children.* Good schools demonstrate a respect for children's differences as much as their similarities. This implies that each child is to be treated as an individual. When the school views each child as having his/her own growth patterns, attitudes, abilities, and interests, the handicapped child is not an outsider.

3. *Emphasize positive self-concepts.* Children become what adults expect of them. Welcoming and encouraging the special child provides good reinforcement for appropriate mainstream performance. Conversely, overt comments about a student being disabled and unable to participate are self-defeating.

4. *Exhibit positive attitudes toward the school and all its programs.* When a principal speaks well of teachers, teachers praise students, students comment at home, and parents say good things about the school. The resulting morale helps overcome many of the rough spots in initiating special programs.

5. *Provide alternative learning opportunities for all students.* All children do not learn in the same way, and good schools plan for that. If children are already familiar with multisensory materials, a variety of supplemental activities, and movement within the school, the addition of special education materials, methods, and procedures becomes another bonus.

6. *Reinforce effective home-school relationships.* Wise principals do not insult the ability or concern of parents by making it difficult to share information. If parents already assist in the decision-making process with responsible access to school data and records, then the parent participation required in special education programming is a logical extension. Similarly, an effective school already provides assistance for parents who request or require it.

Some Differences

But to suggest that there are no major differences between implementing special and general

education programs is misleading (Hopkins and Conrad, 1976). The practices suggested earlier will do much to facilitate mainstreaming, but others are also needed.

1. *Familiarize yourself and your staff with the identification process for securing special education assistance.* Good schools seek to provide services to needy students. A priority of 94-142 is securing additional assistance for students with special needs. Recognize that the legislation is a way to provide your current students with a wider range of educational options, not a scheme to dump problems on your school.

2. *Encourage expansion of activities within the affective domain.* Good schools never ignore children's feelings and emotional development. However, the increased contact of regular and special students often raises some strong reactions on the part of both. These feelings can be dealt with effectively and positively when the school has a prior commitment to affective education.

3. *Become attuned to teacher anxiety regarding special education students.* In some schools a mystique has grown to falsely justify special educators' roles, which might be called the "you-must-have-the-patience-of-Job syndrome." When described in these terms, some special educators tacitly agree, smile modestly, and thus reinforce the image that it takes something special to be a special educator. With the advent of 94-142, children perceived as "Job's trials" are in all classes. Without detracting from special educators, principals need to assure other teachers that the task before them is attainable.

4. *Develop a sense of team planning between general and special educators.* If the focus of this joint planning is meeting a youngster's needs, rather than which teacher's role is most appropriate for a stated task, good cooperation develops. Avoid separation and isolation of personnel. Special educators who are welcomed find ways to contribute their skills beyond the boundaries of their own program.

5. *Avoid instant expertise.* Good leadership does not require superior knowledge on all specialized issues. Recognize that within the relatively narrow field of their training special educators may well be better informed than you are. Concentrate your energies not on debating the latest

research, but on finding ways to use knowledge to enrich the total school program.

Summary

The ultimate success of mainstreaming is particularly dependent on the leadership of building principals. While there are obstacles present, and in the minds of some the goal may be questionable, the fact remains: there are new requirements and opportunities for educating the handicapped. Mainstreaming is expected. School administrators already have many of the skills needed to make it work. If they use them and add those suggested earlier, everyone will benefit. Special educators, general educators, parents, and children need principals who will assume that leadership role.

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