

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Intensifying Intervention

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What can be done when students with moderate/severe disabilities are not progressing? This is the question that should concern teachers and parents when working with students that have challenges of all levels. Literature exists in regards to working with students that have mild/moderate disabilities, but finding research on improving moderate/severe progress can be difficult to find. As a result, it can be unclear when to challenge a student or when to back off due to complications. Some severe students are medically fragile and some have severe behaviors that require creative strategies for them to learn in a manner that does not frustrate them. Frustration can lead to inappropriate behaviors, such as hitting, screaming, etc. Both teacher and parents alike are caught between a desire to help the student to develop and to keep them happy and safe. The purposes of this article are to: 1. Provide specific strategies in working with moderate/severe students; 2. To provide understanding of the challenges teachers face when working with students in a public school setting; 3. Present current resources and perspectives on best practices in working with students that have moderate/severe; 4. To empower parents in their abilities to advocate for their students in the school, at home and post academic settings.

Current strategies used in the public school system include: 1. tiered placements for varying degrees of needs; 2. Development of individual educational goals; 3. Assessing students needs with a Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA); 4. Additionally, parents can request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at the cost of the district. All of these resources are designed to help provide support and insight into helping students progress, however both parents and teachers are faced with the challenges of implementing programs resources on a consistent and timely basis, if progress is to be achieved.

Tracking and data collection are imperative to both teachers and parents to assess if students with moderate/severe disabilities are meeting goals. The “one size fits all” approach to providing educational services may be financially beneficial for public school systems, but it can be educationally and behaviorally damaging to the students with challenges. The recent subscription of “Teaching Exceptional Children” (TEC) (2014) addresses the issues of interventions with students that have disabilities. The subscription is published by the Council for Exceptional Children, which is a professional organization that advocates for students with disabilities. In the editorial section of this month’s issue Barbara Ludlow makes pragmatic differentiation between veteran teachers and newer ones. Parents should not be surprised by the fact that teachers are not magicians and to effectively help students to progress requires: time, resources, patience and data. It is common for the parents of students with disabilities to feel overwhelmed and to seek out the security of school professionals that hold degrees in specialization, however, each student is unique and requires a differentiated approach.

Ludlow states:

Although special education teachers in training often wish for a cookbook of effective practices describing what strategies work with which students, experienced teachers know there are no recipes for their work. Even when interventions have been thoroughly researched and validated as evidenced based practices for students with a given disability, there is no guarantee that they will be successful when implemented with a specific learner, who represents a unique set of challenges related to developing basic and tool skills, learning academic content, and acquiring appropriate social behaviors. To meet each child's needs, veteran special educators understand they must cook up a special mix of methods and materials, assessing how well they work together, and changing ingredients until they get results (p. 4).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires monitoring of student progress. Public schools have responded by setting up tiered settings for students. However evidence suggests that students still fail to reach benchmarks even with school tiered systems. More intensive strategies are required to meet the mandate of IDEA, when students with disabilities are struggling. Parents can benefit from understanding and being aware of what strategies work and why, so they can better advocate for their children and in working with them at home and eventually post-academically.

Parents should read and keep up on best practices to help encourage progress. One resource parents may find helpful is the website created by the National Center on Intensive Intervention (<http://www.intensiveintervention.org>). The site provides examples and scenarios that can help to explain alternative strategies. Parents should consider themselves their child's first teacher. So, when the articles refer to "teachers", parents should consider themselves as such, especially if their child has a moderate/severe disability. Parents can have the illusion that teachers and school staff will advocate for their children at school, however, as Pete Wright points out in his book "From Emotions to Advocacy" (2011) "Teachers, administrators, and school staff may provide support to children and their families. Because they are employed by school districts, it is unlikely that school personnel can advocate for children with disabilities without endangering their jobs" (p. 5). Certainly pressures and conflicts of interests exist in the public school system for teachers and administrators alike, who are charged with the responsibilities of carrying out federal and state mandates with scarce resources. Whitby, Marx, McIntire and Wienke (2013) disagree with Wright on the point of his claim that teachers are not advocates and point out that teachers have an ethical obligation to advocate for the needs of students, however, they agree and acknowledge how "Researchers have found administrative pressures placed on special educators to act unethically in some situations" (p. 33).

Parents should be aware that most teachers do want to help their students to progress. Some teachers do advocate behind the scenes for improved conditions for their students that the parents may never be aware of, but they may have pressure from above that can prevent them from succeeding in the short term. Lack of training, resources and experience can all impact the progress of students in school. By knowing exactly what the challenges are for the students, time, effort and resources can be used more effectively and efficiently.

Parents are their children's best, first and ultimate advocates. Parents need to be the experts in their child's challenges, because it is the parent that will advocate for them post-academically and can help set up how the students will live out their lives. As such, it should come as no surprise to parents that organization is vital to helping children in having opportunities and making progress. The overall suggestions of the articles in this month's publication of TEC make the point that when students are not meeting benchmarks, intensive interventions are needed. Parents can keep a record of assessments (Data-based Individualization or DBI), which will help you to know how your child is doing in reading, mathematics, and behavior; compare what you see at home with what school professionals are observing. Parents are mortal and the ultimate goal of most families will be to see their children with moderate/severe disabilities transitioned to an appropriate post academic residential program that can provide them with a qualitative life style. If parents understand what needs to be done and how to do it, then it becomes easier to delegate responsibilities to others. Parents do not need, nor should they carry the burden of caring for their adult children.

There is a famous quote by Einstein which summarizes the need for the need to change one's strategies when working with individuals that have disabilities: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results." By quantifying and measuring progress of students, changes can be made to differentiate instruction. One example of this is of a student in my own special day class that has difficulty in walking. Staff and teachers alike became afraid to walk the student out of fear that he would fall, however, the student demonstrated he could hold his own body weight. I decided to take a more intensive approach and found that by walking the student each day, he improved.

I found the student became more independent by letting go of his hands and merely giving him a physical prompt from the small of his back. I addressed the risk of fall by walking the student on the padded field turf of the school football field. The result has been that the student went from being able to take 6 steps to over 352 steps independently in less than a month! By tracking the student's improvements I was able to show what worked for the student and how he could improve with intensive instruction in walking. Instead of doing the same routines, I changed my strategies and the student was able to demonstrate different results. The student has become stronger over time and developed new self-advocating skills.

As parents and teachers, it is easy to become distressed when we pay too much attention to what our children and students can not do. By focusing on finding out what they can do will bring light to an otherwise isolated human being trapped in a body challenged by disabilities. It is important for non-disabled individuals to remember that people with disabilities are human and require the same opportunities for social contact as those of us who are presently without a disability. Intensifying interventions are what is required when students are not making progress.

Resources

- Danielson, L. & Rosenquist, C. (2014). Introduction to the TEC special issue on data-based individualization. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. Vol. 46, No. 4. pp. 6-12.
- Ludlow, B. (2014). Intensifying intervention: Kicking it up a notch. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. Vol. 46, No. 4. pp. 4.
- Whitby, P.J.S., Marx, T. McIntire, J., & Wienke, W. (2013). Advocating for students with disabilities at the school level: Tips for special educators. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. Vol. 45, No. 5. pp. 23-39
- Wright, P. & Wright, P. (2011). *From emotions to advocacy: The special education survival guide*. Harbor House Law Press, Hartfield, Virginia. ISBN: 1-892320-09-6