



**NASET Management Series
Series I-Step-Step-Guide to Setting up Your Classroom**

**Part II- Important Meetings and Communication
With Parents and Staff Members**

Step I-Communication and Interaction with Parents (Resource Room, Self Contained and Elementary Level Inclusion Classrooms only)

Secondary Inclusion teachers proceed to Step I-A)

Our experience over 30 years and in speaking with thousands of special education teachers have shown that many of the fears of parents may be alleviated by a meeting before the start of school. This would allow you, as a teacher, to get to know the parents on a more personal level, allow them to meet you on a more comfortable basis, give you an opportunity to discuss any fears or concerns, give you an opportunity to find out their child's interests and strengths, and break down barriers that come with fear of starting school.

If you can begin this process a week before school, then consider sending home a letter to parents introducing yourself and inviting them in to the room or to just come in and get to know each other. However, you will want to make sure that your classroom is set up so that each parent gets a good feeling of organization and comfort. Keep this meeting very informal. Examples of these types of letters are:

From a New Teacher

Dear

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself as your child's new (Resource Room, Inclusion, Special Class) teacher for the coming school year. My name is _____ and I am very excited about being at the _____ School. My background includes _____. I was hired this year to teach this class and look forward to working very closely with you so that _____ (child's name) can have a very rewarding and productive year.

To get to know one another, I am inviting the parent(s) of my students in for an informal get together. I have set aside several dates and times so that I can meet with the parent(s) separately. Please give me a call so that I can reserve a time for all of you to come in and see the room, meet with me and talk about the exciting things we will be doing this year.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

From an Experienced Teacher

Dear

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself as your child's new (Resource Room, Inclusion, Special Class) teacher for the coming school year. My name is _____ and I am very excited about having taught at the _____ School for _____ years. I look forward to working very closely with you so that _____ (child's name) can have a very rewarding and productive year.

To get to know one another, I am inviting the parent(s) of my students in for an informal get together. I have set aside several dates and times so that I can meet with the parent(s) separately. Please give me a call so that I can reserve a time for all of you to come in and see the room, meet with me and talk about the exciting things we will be doing this year.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

On the elementary level, you may want to invite parents in to meet with you individually, and then sometime in late September, hold a group meeting for all parents. You should consider meeting individually first, in case there is a parent that is very angry at the system, school etc. You do not want to take the chance that this parent might use the group meeting as a platform for his/her personal issues. Also, you do not want Open School Night to be the first time you meet an angry parent. By meeting with each parent first, you may be able to reassure the parent or defuse any and all concerns. Since these setting will have smaller case loads, this type of plan should be realistic.

When you meet with the parents, you should discuss the following issues so that everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities:

- parent roles and responsibilities
- parental expectations
- parent involvement with homework
- Communication between home and school and between school and home

At this meeting, you will want to speak with each parent and get a sense of his/her concerns, fears, questions, or insight concerning his/her child. You can learn a great deal from parents about the child's likes and dislikes, triggers, unstructured behavior patterns, hobbies, areas of interests, athletic abilities, pets, and anything else that might contribute to forming a future bond between you and the child.

Step I-A Communication and Interaction with Parents (Secondary level Inclusion Class only)

A secondary level inclusion classroom normally does not lend itself to individual meetings. This is because teachers in this setting work with class totals on any given day of over 100 students, both children with and without disabilities. However, communication with the parents of children with disabilities is still necessary. You, as the teacher, may still want to send home an introductory letter but not suggest individual meetings prior to school. In these cases, you may want to learn more about each child from his/her parent through an enclosed questionnaire, checklist or both. Friend (2002) provides the following series of questions which might serve as a structure for such questionnaires or checklists:

- a. What is your child's favorite class activity?
- b. Does your child have any worries about class activities? If so what are they?
- c. What are your priorities for your child's education this year?
- d. What questions do you have about your child's education in my class this year?
- e. How could we at school make this the most successful year ever for your child?
- f. Are there any topics you want to discuss which may require a conference? If so please let me know
- g. If a conference is requested, would you like other individuals to participate? If so please give me a list of their names so that I can invite them.
- h. If a conference is requested would you like me to have particular school information available? If so please let me know.
- i. If you have any questions that I may be able to answer by phone you can reach me between i.e. 7:30 and 8:10a.m. and between 3:00 and 3:30p.m. at the following phone number _____. If you prefer you can reach me by email at _____(optional)

In your initial letter, you should address the same issues as indicated above for the other settings:

- parent roles and responsibilities
- parental expectations
- parent involvement with homework
- Communication between home and school and between school and home

Step II-Meet with your assistant teacher or aide before school begins (Resource Room and Self contained settings only-Inclusion teachers proceed to Step II-A)

Most special education teachers may work with one or more paraprofessionals, aides or assistant teachers to help them, depending on the level of severity of the student population. The best way to get the most from these assistants is by encouraging them to take responsibility for getting results in the classroom. To do this, you need to involve them in almost every phase of the classroom—supervision, planning, grading, record keeping, and teaching, to name a few. Keep in mind that the level of responsibilities will vary for all three positions; aid, paraprofessional and assistant teacher, depending on their training and job description. Try to get a copy of the job description from central administration or the principal. This is usually put together when hiring for a position. This job description will provide an excellent starting place for discussion and expectations. Keep the following general suggestions in mind when working with paraprofessionals, aides or assistant teachers in your classroom:

1. Find out about their abilities and talents so that you can draw on them during the school year.
2. Allow an environment where they can make and try suggestions. Create an environment where suggestions are welcomed but you must also let it be known that you are in charge and will make the final decision. After all, you will be the one to take the responsibility if something goes wrong, so make sure all suggestions go through you before the assistant puts them into action. Also, keep in mind that if you feel your assistant is not using good judgments you may have to play a more authoritarian role by having them pass their ideas to you first. They should understand this since you will be the one called in if something goes wrong.
3. Foster a team approach where everyone is vital to a successful outcome. Let them see that you appreciate initiative. Make sure they realize that they are essential to the success of the students with whom they work.
4. Treat your aides, paraprofessional or assistant teachers as "second teachers" in the classroom. Encourage them to look around, see what needs to be done, and do it. However be very aware that liability issues may arise if the children are left with an aide, paraprofessional or assistant teacher who is not a licensed certified teacher. If a child gets hurt or problems arise while you are not in the room, there could be problems. Meet with your supervisor and discuss this matter to see what your guidelines and responsibilities are in these cases.
5. Make the aide, paraprofessional or assistant teacher aware of the IEP goals for each student. These individuals will acquire personal growth when you trust them and appreciate what they do.
6. Short written notes of thanks are a really good practice. These include such statements as "I want to thank you for being so positive when talking to the students."
7. First-year teachers seem very unsure of how to use their aide. If aides are idle, resources are being underutilized. At first, you may have to organize and instruct the aide on what to do. Do not be afraid to be highly structured and direct. This will alleviate the anxiety of the inexperienced aide and provide needed guidance.
8. Aides and teaching assistants perform numerous duties including assisting with grading and duplicating worksheets. Do not be afraid to allow them to handle many of the tasks that will free up time for more pertinent matters such as working with your students. However, Working with students, whether individually or in small groups is their most important function
9. If problems arise with your aide, paraprofessional or assistant, you may want to meet with the school psychologist, your coordinator of special education or the principal to determine a way to resolve the issues. It is advisable to act promptly in these instances—the longer you wait to talk about a challenging situation, the more difficult it often becomes.

Step II-A- Meet with your team teacher before school begins (Inclusion Class only)

A major component to the success of an inclusion classroom is the nature of the relationship between the special education teacher and the general education teacher. There are many questions and issues that need to be discussed to prevent misconceptions, frustration or dissension from occurring. To avoid potential problems and issues that could arise, the following suggestions should be considered:

- *-talk about roles and clearly define the professional responsibilities so that there is no confusion*

- *-talk about similarities and differences in teaching styles and how that might affect the students and the presentation of information.* Even though teaching styles may be different, they can compliment each other.
- *-talk about the delivery systems to be used in the classroom:* There are several different methods for instruction and assistance to the children in an inclusion setting. Alternative delivery systems are management systems that provide support for students and maximize learning while being presented with the core curriculum in an inclusion setting.

The goal of alternative delivery systems is to develop many creative ways of working together for the benefit of all students. There are many different approaches and it is best to find one on which you and your team teacher agree. Some examples which you may want to suggest if the general education teacher is not aware are:

Team Teaching

Cooperative teaching, sometimes known as co-teaching, is an educational approach in which general and special educators, as well as specialists from other categorical programs, are simultaneously present in the general education classroom, sharing responsibility for some specific classroom instruction. This approach allows the integration of the teaching to be successful, since the classroom teacher is teamed with the specialist.

In team teaching, general and special educators jointly plan to teach academic subject content to all students. The general education teacher remains responsible for the entire class while the special educator is responsible for implementing the IEP goals for special education students.

Complementary Instruction

In this approach, the general education teacher assumes primary responsibility for teaching specific subject matter. The specialist has responsibility for teaching academic survival skills necessary for the student to access and master the core curriculum. The content may be delivered in the classroom and complemented when the special education student is pulled out of the classroom to another setting. The critical differences between complementary instruction and the traditional pullout program is that two professionals prepare instruction together and it is delivered in the general classroom. Specific types of Complementary instruction include:

- **One teach/ one observe:** In this approach, one teacher leads the lesson while the other gathers specific predetermined information on certain students. It is important that both teachers switch off roles so that more than one perception is used in making academic decisions for students.
- **One teach/one support:** In this type of delivery system, the general education teacher is responsible for teaching the curriculum while the role of the special education teacher is to move from each child with a disability to the next and assist in answering questions, monitoring class notes, explaining the material and assignments, and working closely with the students to help level the playing field.
- **Station teaching:** In this type of delivery system, one teacher presents half the content to half the students while the other teaches the other half to the rest of the class. The student groups are then switched and each teacher repeats his/her lesson.

- **Parallel teaching:** In this type of delivery system, both teachers divide the class into heterogeneous groups and each teacher presents a lesson to half the class. Sometimes a third independent study group can be established as well to reduce the number of students in each group being taught.
- **Alternate teaching:** In this type of delivery system, the two teachers divide the group into one large and one small group. This type of system allows the use of remediation with the small group of students that might require more individual attention.

Step III- Communication with Related Service Providers (All settings)

It is imperative that you maintain close communication with every related service provider involved with the students in your classroom. These are the professionals who will provide related services to your students on a regular basis throughout the school year. You will want to maintain the most up-to-date information in case you are questioned by parents, students or administrators. In order to set up these lines of communication initiate the following:

Send out letters to the related service providers for each child introducing yourself and asking for a time to get together. Outline the objectives of such a meeting including coordination of services, avoiding scheduling conflicts, communication and IEP development. An example of this type of letter follows:

Letter to Related Service Provider

Dear

During this school year I will be _____ (child's first and last name) special education teacher. It is noted on _____ (child's name) IEP that he is to receive _____ (related service) (frequency i.e. 1 x a week) from you beginning on (date to begin services. Be aware that related services should begin as close to the start of school as possible if not the first day). In order to coordinate services, I am suggesting that we get together for a meeting to discuss schedules, communication with parents and teachers, modifications and accommodations and any other matters that may assist _____ (child's name) this year.

I will try to contact you to see what times and days are convenient for you or if you prefer I can be reached at _____ (phone and extension) between the hours of _____. My room number is _____ at the _____ (name of school) school.

I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely yours,

- After the letter is sent, seek out the related service provider and set up a meeting. At this meeting with the related service provider, discuss schedules, goals of the service, expectations, communication to parents, and collaboration meetings to discuss the child's progress.
- If you are designated the case manager, the designee responsible for coordinating the child's IEP, discuss the means for communicating information that will be necessary in developing the new IEP at the annual review meeting.

- Also find out as much as you can about the child's specific problem, etiology (cause) and prognosis (outcome) from the service provider.

Step IV- Communication with Classroom Teachers (Resource Room teachers only-Self contained teachers proceed to Step V

As a teacher in a resource room setting, one of your most important responsibilities after assisting children is working with the classroom teachers. Most likely, your major role with the child's classroom teacher will be to assist in adapting curriculum, monitoring modifications, preparing adapted materials for the child to use in the classroom, provide information and suggestions on the child's disability, and provide alternate curriculum materials suited to the child's skill levels.

If you are a new teacher to the school, the first thing to consider is to place a letter in the teacher's mailbox introducing yourself, offering some background information, and listing the name/s of the children you wish to discuss. Indicate in the letter that you will personally contact the teacher for a convenient time to meet to discuss any issues pertaining to the children receiving resource room services. If this is not your first year, then adapt the letter accordingly. An example of this type of letter follows:

Classroom Teacher Letter-First year teacher

Dear

My name is _____ and this school year I will be working with _____ (first and last name of child) a student in your class. _____, (child's first name) has been assigned this service according to his IEP (designate the time period for services). These services are being provided to him/her for the following reasons:

(State reasons-usually weakness areas determined by an evaluation or IEP team)

In order to collaborate on the services I would like to meet with you to discuss _____ (child's first name) program, scheduling time, parent communication and modifications that are required as a result of his IEP. I will be stopping down to your room to discuss a convenient time for this meeting and look forward to speaking with you or if you prefer I can be reached at _____ (phone and extension) between the hours of _____. My room number is _____.

I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely yours,

During this personal meeting with the child's classroom teacher you will want to cover several objectives:

- Define your responsibilities and the resources you can provide to the teacher, e.g., information on the disability, adapting materials, finding more suitable materials for the child's skill levels
- Discuss scheduling the child's time in the resource room to avoid the possibility of fragmentation. Fragmentation occurs when a child leaves the classroom to go to the resource room in the middle of a lesson and returns in the middle of another. This fragmentation can be detrimental to a child who is already confused by the demands of the curriculum. Try to find a convenient time that will ease the transition for the child to and from the room.

- Discuss the child's classroom and test modifications outlined on the IEP. Provide the classroom teacher with a written statement of these modifications. Discuss how these should be implemented in the classroom.
- Go over the child's IEP step by step so that the teacher is fully aware of what has been determined by the IEP Committee (depending on the state in which you work this committee may also be referred to as the Eligibility Committee or the Committee on Special Education).
- Discuss any curriculum concerns that the teacher may have and offer alternatives and options. These can be found in the next chapter.
- Talk about how to coordinate parent communication. Discuss how often to hold parent meetings or send home communication i.e. progress reports and what kind of communication will be reported to parents.

Step V- Communication with the mainstreaming team and classroom teachers with whom your students will be mainstreamed (Self contained class only)

There will be times throughout the school year when you may want to consider mainstreaming a child in your class into the regular education program. Keeping in mind that mainstreaming can be anywhere from 5 minutes to 5 hours or more, depending upon the needs and abilities of the child. When the mainstreaming team decides to move a child for a portion of the school day into the regular education program several steps need to be taken with the teacher with whom the student will be mainstreamed. This communication is crucial, since the general education teacher may have serious concerns or apprehensions about this type of arrangement. If you are considering mainstreaming for a student, the first thing to do is to set up a preliminary meeting with the mainstreaming team in your school. This may be a formal team or a team that is gathered to discuss these issues on an as needed basis. The members of this team may vary but should include an administrator, psychologist, yourself, a guidance counselor at the secondary level and the classroom teacher(s) that may be involved in the mainstreaming process. If the team agrees with mainstreaming, there are several things you will need to do to prepare the regular education teacher. As a result, you may want to consider the following:

Define your responsibilities and the resources you can provide to the teacher when the child is in the general education classroom such as:

1. -Specific information on the child's disability with Internet sites and names of books or articles the teacher may want to research
 2. -adaptive materials that could be used in the classroom to increase the child's chances of completion and success and to avoid frustration.
 3. -finding more suitable materials for the child's skill levels
 4. -monitoring progress
 5. -meeting with the child before and after the mainstream experience to alleviate any concerns that might arise
 6. meeting with the teacher on a regular basis to answer any questions and solve any issues that need to be addressed
- Discuss the child's classroom and test modifications outlined on the IEP and leave teacher with a written statement of these modifications. Discuss how these should be implemented in the classroom.

- Go over the child's IEP step by step so that the teacher is fully aware of what has been determined by the IEP Team (depending on the state in which you work this committee may also be referred to as the Eligibility Committee or the Committee on Special Education).
- Discuss any curriculum concerns that the teacher may have and offer alternatives and options.
- Talk about how to coordinate parent communication. Discuss how often to hold parent meetings or send home communication i.e. progress reports and what kind of communication will be reported to parents.
- Discuss specific goals that you may have for the child and how you will go about determining whether the situation is working for the child and/or the teacher i.e. academic, behavioral, social, and emotional goals

Conclusion

In conclusion, the more interaction and communication you have with parents and staff members, the great chance that misconceptions, anger, miscommunication, and resentment will be avoided. This type of communication will also protect you against issues of liability by the availability of records and meetings if a problem should arise.

The next article will focus on designing and setting up your classroom and the importance of a comfortable environment.

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