

Why Not Community-Based Instruction? High School Students with Disabilities Belong with their Peers

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Sean is a 9th grade student who experiences significant disabilities. For the past two years, he attended his neighborhood middle school and was fully included in all regular education classes and school events with his peers. This year, as Sean begins high school, his team has recommended a different type of daily schedule. Although all of his typical classmates maintain eight periods of classes per day, Sean's team has recommended that he enroll in only five regular classes and spend the remaining three periods of the day in the local community participating in community-based and vocational instruction. This instruction would include learning how to buy food in the grocery store, developing leisure skills at the local health club, eating lunch in a fast food restaurant, and working three days a week in a local business. The team indicated that these opportunities would help to



All students at Souhegan—not just those with disabilities—get experience meeting personal challenges on the ropes course.

prepare Sean for life when his school career ends.

What is wrong with this scenario? Does it or does it not make sense for Sean to leave the school building to develop functional life skills in his local community? Is it necessary to compromise Sean's participation in classes and school with his friends and classmates to teach him these and other skills?

Schools are undergoing a major transformation in how and where all students are educated throughout their school careers. Many of these changes are positive, as the accompanying articles in this newsletter attest. However, today, most high school students without disabilities continue to receive the majority—if not all—of their formal education within the school building. Given that premise, and the hope that someday all schools will build stronger relationships with their communities, why then is Sean, and a great number of high school students with disabilities, continuing to leave the school building—leave their same age friends and classmates—to participate in community-based instruction during the school day?

Why Not Community-Based Instruction During the School Day?

Access to all school and community opportunities should be independent of a student's abilities and/or disabilities. Whether a school requires all students to spend their entire school day within its walls or embraces a free-flowing partnership with community businesses and organizations, expectations and access should be the same for all students. Disability or label should not increase nor decrease access or opportunity. As schools throughout the country develop philosophy and policies that merge the dual systems of education for students with and without disabilities, they often continue to perpetuate the separate system that exists for secondary students with significant disabilities. Secondary students with disabilities, even those who have been fully included in elementary and middle school grades, are expected to gradually move away from their peers during their secondary school years. By leaving the school building—when all others remain—students with disabilities become physically segregated and potentially socially isolated from their peers. Typical relationships are impeded, peer contacts are minimized, and the notions of separate and different are reinforced. Surely these are not the desired outcomes for instruction designed to prepare students for life after school.



"Leslie is a nice girl. She knows just what to do and I really miss her when she's absent." Madelyn Mauro, Leslie Frey's supervisor in Souhegan's Information Center.

The segregating outcomes of community-based instruction during the school day for students with disabilities is but one—albeit a very significant—reason to discontinue this standard practice. However, this social inequality is coupled with academic inequality as well. Many schools are moving toward a belief in the ability of all students as learners as the disability field is challenged by reports of literacy and competency in individuals with labels of mental retardation. It is clear that students with disabilities can and should have access to the learning that occurs in typical high school classes. Limiting a student's time in the school building, necessitates a limit in the number of classes that comprise a student's school career. A society that values a well rounded, liberal arts education for its students cannot exclude students with disabilities from this tenet. Long held beliefs that students with disabilities could not learn nor benefit from the knowledge and skill imparted in high school classes sets up an endless of cycle of low expectations and minimized outcomes. High school classes offer all students opportunities to gain knowledge that assists them in making present and future life choices as well as developing interests and community connections. These same classes provide students with life skills such as communication, cooperation, problem solving, self-initiative, and self-esteem, valued by teachers and employers alike. It is this knowledge and skill, coupled with strong social networks, that helps to prepare a student for a well-rounded life after school.

If Not Community Based Instruction During School, Then When?

This essay is not an attempt to dismiss the value of instruction and experiences in a student's local community nor the opportunity to gain job experience. Instead it hopes to raise the question of the appropriateness of this occurring for students with disabilities when all other



What could be more "functional" than learning how to use technology, working with others to solve problems, and getting your assignments in on time?

when and where do students with disabilities gain experience and skill in areas not traditionally covered in high school classes or curriculum?

The answer to this question lies in the basic principles of inclusion. Students with disabilities must have access to the same opportunities as their peers to develop skills and experiences in relationships, the community, and on the job. Traditionally students without disabilities venture into the community, not during the school day, but after school, on weekends, and in the summer. Students explore the full gamut of community resources (e.g., shopping malls, movie theaters, recreation centers), as well as work a variety of jobs when school is not in session. Students combine their school day with a rich array of out of school experiences.

This knowledge allows us to determine where and when students with disabilities should have access to this rich array of experiences. Community instruction and experiences can occur at the same times—and places—where other students are. A student who desires to gain job experience can be supported in an after school, weekend, and/or summer job. A student who needs experience in ordering and purchasing in a restaurant can be supported to join peers at the local "hamburger joint". Support for this instruction and experience occurs in the typical places that students use for recreation, social connections, and work experience. For schools that embrace the value of community connections for all students, this support can also occur during student-apprenticeships, community service projects, and school-supported cooperative work experiences.

In addition to times when high school students are not in the school building, young adults with disabilities can be supported to develop increased competency and experience in the community upon completion of their

Hampshire it is age 21 years or upon the receipt of a standard high school diploma). Unfortunately, for many young adults with disabilities, the years following their senior year are spent in the high school building, perhaps continuing to take classes with students who are no longer age-appropriate peers. Many young adults become second and third year seniors as they await their graduation from the education system. Graduation with students with whom they spent their school career either does not occur or occurs simply as a ritual and results in continued enrollment in the high school building. Instead, this time can be spent providing young adults with support to develop connections and skills in their local community—in the same places and at the same times as their peers. Instruction and support in the community can now occur to assist a young adult with disabilities to set up an apartment, attend college or adult education classes, join a local health club, and/or work a full or part-time job.

Sean's Story Revisited

What about Sean? His team had recommended that he gradually decrease his time in typical high school classes and increase his time spent in community-based instruction. Instead, Sean is attending all typical high school classes, including a marketing class that requires all students to work one period a day in the school store. Sean is enjoying this experience and hopes to work in a local grocery store during summer vacation. Sean takes a weight training class and he and some of the other students work out in the gym two days a week after school. The team still feels strongly that Sean needs to increase his competency in "purchasing skills" so Sean is supported every day during lunch to buy a meal and handle his own money. Sean isn't exactly sure what he wants to do after high school, but he likes his biology class and may look into the Technical College's "lab tech" program. The team has indicated that all of these opportunities will help to prepare Sean for life after high school.

Postscript to "Why Not Community-Based Instruction"

Beginning in the early 1980's, "best practices" for students with moderate and severe disabilities included instruction in a wide variety of community environments—workplaces, homes, stores, restaurants—to give students practice in functional skills that they would need when they graduated from high school. As students become more fully included in regular education classes, many parents and teachers wonder if being included means that students no longer need to learn those functional skills or if there might be more appropriate ways for students to learn them without being removed from the regular school environment and the company of their peers. Carol Tashie and Mary Schuh, project coordinators

with UNH's Institute on Disability, are among the first inclusion proponents to suggest that best practices need to be redefined so that students are no longer removed in order to learn functional skills.

At Souhegan High School, teachers are striving to make all students' education "functional" and for students with significant disabilities, this means that they take a full schedule of regular academic classes, they have the opportunity to gain job skills through apprenticeships within the school environment (office, Information Center, school store), they have the choice of working at a summer job, and that more focused decision-making about what they'll do after high school (including post-secondary education and work) will be done at the same time as other students, as they approach their junior year.

- Cheryl M. Jorgensen
Project Coordinator



Workshop Announcements

"Equity and Excellence: Restructuring Schools to Include All Students"

1993-1994 Seminar Series for School Leaders

Co-Sponsored by the UNH Institute on Disability
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The New Hampshire Alliance for Effective Schools

Monthly day-long seminars from September 1993
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Registration information will be sent to all schools in
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From Special to Regular: From "Transition" to "Graduation" for Students with Disabilities

Carol Tashie is the coordinator of New Hampshire's *Turning Points* project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The purpose of the project is to support schools and communities to increase their capacity to fully include students and youth with disabilities in typical school and adult life. In this interview conducted by Cheryl Jorgensen, Carol describes two major shifts in thinking and practice that the project is promoting — eliminating traditional "community-based instruction" during the school day and enhancing the typical graduation planning process so that students with disabilities can take full advantage of opportunities to move on to higher education, technical training or employment.

Cheryl: How has "transition" usually been defined for students with disabilities?

Carol: When IDEA — the re authorization of P.L. 94-142 — was enacted in 1990, it contained a requirement that all students' IEP's must include an indication of how transition planning — the process of helping students leave school and move into adulthood — was going to be conducted. Most professionals addressed this requirement from a traditional special education perspective. They saw "transition" as something that happens to students with disabilities that helps them move from special education to the world of adult services. Depending on the community in which you lived, this meant transitioning from "school to work" or "school to sheltered work" or "school to day habilitation" or even "school to the waiting list for services."

At about the same time that the new transition regulations were enacted, those of us who had been working to include students with disabilities within the mainstream of regular education were trying to look at all educational practices and issues for high school students more from a regular education perspective. The "transition question" for us was "how does this process fit into our notion about quality inclusive education for all students?" We began to think about how to make "transition" more typical.

We started by asking ourselves and folks in schools about how typical students move through the grades. How do students learn to make good decisions and good choices? How do they select the courses that they'll need to prepare them for life after graduation? What are the opportunities and connections they take advantage of outside of school that will help them be successful after they graduate and move into adulthood?

This new approach to transition planning meant that there was no checklist and no cookbook that would work for every student.

We consider transition to be the natural process through which all students progress as they move from school to post-school life, including the supports and resources they'll need in order to make that journey successfully.

Cheryl: So you wanted to develop the transition process from a more typical perspective because that's how you have approached supporting students to be included in regular classes. But beyond just a philosophical concern, you must have also acted from the belief that "something is broken" with the transition system — that transition as it had traditionally been viewed was not being effective for students with disabilities. What's wrong with the current transition process and how can it be fixed?

Carol: There are several major problems with the traditional way that students with disabilities have been prepared for leaving school. First, high school students with disabilities have not been included in the typical school experience — regular classes, extracurricular activities and graduation planning. Another issue is the over-reliance on paid, professional staff to support students both in and out of school.

As many students with disabilities progress through school, they spend less time in the school building with their peers and more time in the community. Traditionally, middle and high school students with significant disabilities have spent part of the day in the school building and part of the day out in the community working at a job, learning to shop, making community connections, using recreational facilities, going to restaurants, and so forth.

In order to evaluate the logic and effectiveness of this process, shift gears for a moment, and think about some of the common complaints that young people with disabilities and their families have about their lives. A typical comment is that "school's OK, but all I do is sit around after school and watch TV." Parents bemoan the fact that their other teenage children have full and active lives while their child with disabilities still relies on her parents for entertainment on the weekends. But why are kids so lonely and bored? Where are their peers? What are typical kids doing after school, on the weekends, or during the summer? Ironically, they are working, spending the money they earn, learning to move safely and independently in their community, using recreation facilities, eating in fast food restaurants, hanging out in the mall, and so forth. Exactly the same things that students with disabilities are doing *during* the school day!

Is it any wonder that some students with disabilities have no friends or shared activities with other kids their age? We need to work on strategies for helping students with disabilities benefit from full involvement in a typical schedule of academic classes and extracurricular activities while also providing them with opportunities to learn job skills and independent living skills in the same places and at the same time as their classmates. Our new book *From Special to Regular: From Ordinary to Extraordinary* presents a comprehensive model for taking advantage of learning opportunities provided by general education classes and for expanding and modifying the curriculum for students with disabilities.

Another problem with the traditional transition process is that it perpetuates the notion that special, paid people are the only ones who can support students in school, at home, in the community or on the job.

To get a glimpse of how institutionalized this notion is, picture the following scenario.

Imagine that you walk into a high school, pull a typical student to one side and ask her "how are your transition plans going?" It's likely that she'll give you a puzzled look and have no idea what you are talking about. But if you ask her "how are your graduation plans coming along — what do you plan to do after high school?" it's the beginning of a conversation about college applications, SAT's, or employment interviews.

Next, walk down the hall to the guidance office and ask a counselor "how are you involved in transition planning for students with disabilities?" Again, you will get a puzzled look along with the comment "we don't do transition planning for students with disabilities; why don't you try the special education office." If you then ask a different question "how do you help students make plans for after graduation" the counselor will tell you about helping students develop their portfolios, arranging for SAT tutoring, sponsoring a visit from college admissions counselors, or offering a small tutorial session on making a good impression in a job interview. These views and practices perpetuate the problem of people with disabilities relying too much on special education, special employment, special housing, special recreation, special friends, and so forth.

Because of the shortfalls of the current system and its conflict with our belief that "typical is better", we returned to the task of figuring out how students with disabilities can fully participate in school and after school activities with their peers without disabilities.

Our efforts should not be targeted toward developing a different, special system of high school education and transition for students with disabilities, but rather on making the typical educational experience and graduation planning process open to all students, who are provided with the supports that they need to take advantage of those processes.

Cheryl: One of the first concerns that people have about this new way of thinking and conducting business is the implications for teachers' job roles and responsibilities if students are now going to be supported after school hours so that they can work, learn to live in the community and make those community connections alongside their classmates.

Carol: I do agree that schools are concerned that this shift in thinking will mean that they will have to become 24-hour a day service providers and that that will be more expensive. Parents are also worried that if the job training and learning to be part of the community doesn't take place during the typical school day, then it won't happen at all. There are a number of strategies for managing this change.

People's job roles will need to change — both in what they do and when they do it. There needs to be a shift from the model where the professional or paraprofessional provides support directly to the student to a model of encouraging and nurturing people in the school and community who can provide supports to students with disabilities much in the same way that support is provided to other new workers, new community residents through churches and service organizations, and so forth. In addition, the hours that school folks work may need to shift. A job developer might work afternoon and weekend hours instead of the usual 7:30-2:30 school day. And we're not talking about a student getting a job — let's say at a local video store — and always having a paid school staff member by their side. We are talking about the school district helping that student get the job and then looking at the co-workers in that store as being able to provide support to the student with outside support provided as necessary. It also makes sense to tap into other community agencies such as vocational rehabilitation and adult services to provide support as well. In New Hampshire, Vocational Rehabilitation has been involved in providing support to students to help them get and keep after school jobs. Respite funds have supported students' participation in extracurricular activities.

Cheryl: Can you talk about the new "timeline" for how students will progress through their years in school? The traditional way of thinking is that students with disabilities will be in the school building until they are about 14. From 14-18 they are job shadowing and learning how to

use the stores, buses, libraries and so forth. From 18 to 20 1/2 students are settling into the job that they will have at graduation, and finally, most of the transition activity is compressed into the last, hectic six months of school. Sound familiar? What is the alternative, Carol?

Carol: The new timeline is the OLD timeline! Typical kids go through their high school experience — one year in 9th grade, one year in 10th grade, one year in 11th grade, and then after 12th grade, something magical happens...they graduate! For students with disabilities, people have always tried to figure out a way to keep kids "in school" until they were 21 and their eligibility for special education services expired. We want to make sure that students with disabilities are progressing through high school in the same way that typical students are. Moving through the grades, taking those required courses, choosing some elective courses, participating in extra-curricular activities — with the supports necessary to be successful, of course.

What about graduation? Our state regulations are interpreted to mean that a student's eligibility for special education services and supports ends with receipt of the standard high school diploma. We need to make some compromises until the system catches up with what we are doing...continuing to provide support after the formal graduation ceremony (after 12th grade) to students in work settings, in 2 or 4-year colleges or technical schools, in adult education classes, and so forth. One compromise is for students to participate in all of the ceremonies and activities of senior year, including graduation, but receive the formal diploma at age 21.

And after graduation? Typical students make a variety of choices. They go to college part-time or full-time, they work part-time or full-time, they live at home or find an apartment with a roommate. Students with disabilities need to have the same choices. And the school district needs to work in close collaboration with that student, her family, and with employers or college officials to discuss what supports the student will need and what goals the student will strive for in the next couple of years before she turns 21.

Some people want a checklist of exactly how to go through this process. While we don't have such a checklist, we do have some written guidelines for helping students with disabilities be full participants in high school and during those transition years (contact the Turning Points Project at 603-228-2084 or 1-800-238-2048).

Cheryl: As I listen to this new way of thinking, I believe that the school restructuring movement offers some opportunities and raise some cautions regarding the transition process. In schools like Souhegan High School, the diploma will not be awarded on the basis of Carnegie units, credits, or accumulated "seat time", but rather will be conferred when students can demonstrate that they have mastered a body of knowledge and a set of performance-based skills. For some students the diploma might be granted at age 14, 16, 18, or 23. Here's where an increasingly flexible system for all students might benefit students with disabilities. The cautionary note is for us to

be vigilant that students with disabilities are not over represented in the group of students who "hang on" until age 23.

I'm also noticing that schools that are trying to restructure their diplomas based on performance-based standards are having a difficult time fitting students with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities, into their definitions of "quality work." If the demonstration that is required for graduation is to "orally present three arguments for and against establishing congressional district boundaries based on racial balance" then many students with disabilities will be automatically out of the running for a diploma for that high school. If instead the outcome is for all student to be able to "share important information and express opinions to others", we can envision how students with significant learning challenges might demonstrate that outcome. Any parting thoughts?

Carol: I am also optimistic about the direction that many schools are moving relative to improving educational outcomes for their students. It's up to all of us to make sure that students with disabilities are fully included in those reform and restructuring efforts, and that they share in the struggles and rewards of the educational experience.

Announcements

We are pleased to announce the selection of our second research and demonstration site, Amherst Middle School. An RFP was sent to every superintendent, principal and special education administrator in New Hampshire (representing 64 school administrative units) and eleven applications were received. Four finalists were called in for personal interviews (Amherst, Timberlane Middle School, Londonderry Junior High School and Salem Middle School). Each of the finalists were currently involved in inclusion activities and had committed teachers and administrators. Amherst was chosen because of the existing support for school reform throughout the district, the superintendent's belief in inclusion, and the fact that many of the school's current practices represent more traditional ways of doing business and offer a real challenge for the project in terms of introducing and sustaining change in an existing school — a very different challenge than that presented by the project's first site, Souhegan High School.

This summer an eight-person team from the middle school will attend the McGill Institute on School and Community Integration in Montreal. Prior to the beginning of the school year, a goal-setting session will be conducted with the Middle School students, staff and community to identify the school's strengths and needs relative to support for restructuring to include all students. The project's research agenda will be designed to capture both the process of that restructuring and the impact on teachers and students.