

# **SPECIAL EDUCATION**

## **OPENING A SPECIAL ED CLASS**

### **GRADES 1-8**

The following are some important tips for a special ed teacher who is starting a new school year. These are primarily geared towards multi-grade Learning Handicapped, or Severely Emotionally Disturbed classrooms:

#### **1. PHYSICAL CLASSROOM ARRANGEMENT**

- Desks should be arranged in a manner where each student has his/her own personal desk...no sharing or grouping, as this leads to major distractions for the special ed child.
- Centers should be arranged in various parts of the room where students can go when they are done with their individual work, so they do not disturb others. These centers can be filled with fun and educational things such as puzzles, easy reading with pictures, GeoSafari©, and other hands-on material.
- The teacher's and aide's desks should be placed at opposite ends of the classroom, front and back, for supervision purposes.

#### **2. BULLETIN BOARDS**

As in regular ed classrooms, some bulletin boards should be reserved for the students' work, while others should cover topics that are also being covered in the curricula at that time. For example: when I work on my Ocean Unit, I put up a

bulletin board with a blue backing, different sea life taped onto it, and I drape an old fishing net over it, complete with small sea shells caught inside the net. Next to this board, I have a center with many shells, complete with two books all about shells and the ocean floor.

### **3. CLASSROOM INTRODUCTIONS**

On the first day, plan on reviewing your CLASSROOM **RESPONSIBILITIES**, (not **RULES**—the kids become immediately resistant), SCHOOL STANDARDS, and your PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS.

*This last part is extremely important. Most of these students have gotten used to low expectations from their previous teachers...and as a result, have tried little, academically and behaviorally. If your personal expectations are high (but realistic) they will raise themselves to your expectations!*

Depending on the age of the students, you may want to include your expectations for the overall year. However, for special ed students, you must be clear about choices they make, and positive and negative consequences of those choices.

### **4. THE FIRST COUPLE OF DAYS**

- Placement tests: Begin the first day giving at least one placement test and try to have all tests completed by the third day. The sooner you have the students in a routine, the better.
- Fun activities: Plan some fun activities for the first day. Let them have a period of time to interact together. They may play games, work on a fun assignment together, or whatever you decide.
- In an elementary school, start organized P.E. from the very beginning. Tremendous social skills, along with physical skills, classroom cohesion and organizational

skills are developed on the playground—especially with the special ed student.

## 5. THE TOP FOUR SURVIVAL TIPS

- ALWAYS PLAN MUCH MORE THAN YOU'LL GET THROUGH IN A DAY. Sometimes, some of your ideas won't work out with these particular kids on that particular day, and you'll have to switch. Also, with high expectations...your students may do better than you expected, and finish sooner than expected!
- Be prepared to THINK ON YOUR FEET. These students are often extremely intelligent and expect you to take them to areas you may not have anticipated. On the reverse side, a discipline, or learning problem, that unexpectedly shows up and is not dealt with immediately and appropriately, can destroy a lesson for the entire class.
- Be FLEXIBLE. Some days, even the first week, you end up having to forget about your plans and do something unplanned. That's okay and part of being a special ed teacher!
- Finally, and probably most important, ENJOY YOU R KIDS. These are usually sweet, fun kids, and a good special ed teacher can have a greater effect on their future than anyone else.

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# **MODIFYING THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM FOR STUDENTS OF SPECIAL NEEDS: A LIST OF IDEAS**

## **GRADES: K-12**

There are many simple modifications which can be made to assist students with disabilities in the regular classroom. Many of them are not that time consuming and can make a world of difference. The list below includes a few of the ideas that have helped the students I work with.

1. When independent work is presented, try to give it to the student in small "segments". For example, a test or worksheet could be folded in half. The student could be asked to do the first half and then come up for further directions. This prevents the student from feeling rushed or overwhelmed with the amount of work given.
2. Allow extra time (within reasonable limits) for students who have difficulty. Also, reducing the length of an assignment is sometimes a good idea.
3. In your lesson plans, note in italics (or mark with a highlighter) the objective you want the student to master. His or her objectives do not need to always be the same as the rest of the class. Look at the students IEP (Individualized Education Plan) so that you know what objectives need to be covered. For example: The whole class might be expected to write a paragraph about something they learned. A student with mild mental retardation in your class might be expected to write 3 facts she/he learned. A student with fine motor problems could write some; you or a peer helper could take dictation on the rest.

4. Present information visually (overhead projector, posters, pocket charts, chalkboard) and auditorally. Whenever possible, tie in a hands on component as well. I had a teacher who threw a koosh ball to a student if he wanted them to answer a question. It helps to keep everyone focused! Doing this will help all the students in your class; they each have their own unique learning style after all.

5. Have students do simple exercises before writing (pushing palms of hands together, pushing down hard on a desktop, squeezing and relaxing fists).

6. If a student cannot do what everyone else in the class is doing, modify worksheets. For example, imagine most students are doing subtraction with regrouping in class. Cut the problems out of the worksheet and use the rest of the original as a "frame". Create some problems appropriate to the students level (double digit subtraction with NO regrouping, subtraction facts to 18) and paste them onto the modified original. After you copy it, the student has a worksheet that looks like everyone else's; but he or she can do work at their own level.

7. Have a large variety of multi-level reading books in your classroom. A listening center is also a "must have". Have parent, high school and other volunteers put some of your textbooks (relevant chapters) on tape so that students with disabilities may have these cassettes as a tool.

8. Use story maps and other graphic organizers to assist students with writing tasks. Advance organizers (outlines) can help students search for meaning when they read. Make up a chapter outline and give it to all the students. It teaches them to attend to the important points in a chapter.

9. Use color coded index cards in a file box to keep track of your students' objectives and modifications. The students names should not be on these cards!!! By color coding, you

have the information handy without violating confidentiality. If you need to, ask the special education teacher to help you find this information in the students' IEP's and PPT minutes.

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## **BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION SYSTEMS**

### **GRADES: K-6**

As we all know, a special education class needs a variety of behavioral systems. Here are some quick strategies/systems which work for me:

#### **POINT SYSTEM:**

Each student has a chart given to him/her at the end of the day with points earned throughout the day: reading, math, behavior, homework, etc. The student must have the chart signed by his/her parent and returned daily. I write notes to the parents on the charts, so as to be in constant contact with them.

Once a month, the students take their points and go "shopping" in my classroom "store", which is full of school supplies, and little knick-knacks that the students enjoy.

#### **RECESS/LUNCH TICKETS:**

Sometimes our students think that our assistants have less

authority than we do as teachers. An easy remedy is for the students to earn “tickets” for good behavior at recess and lunch. My assistant hands out the tickets which reinforces the fact that they must listen to her. At the end of each week, we hold a drawing for a prize.

### **INTERMITTENT REINFORCEMENT:**

I tell my students that they never know when I’m going to catch them being “good” (on task, good citizen, etc.). If I do, they may get a compliment, a sticker, “free time”, or something else special.

Although these strategies may seem like a lot of work, I’ve seen my classes go from having the “store” once a month to only having it once in a semester. As long as you taper off the frequency, it works great! They begin to do their work, not only for the reward, but because it’s important to them.

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## **MAINSTREAMING SPECIAL ED STUDENTS INTO EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

### **GRADES K-12**

Our students with special needs often excel, or just feel good about participating, in all of the “extras” at their school. Music, drama, art, student council, sports, drill team, etc.,

are only a few examples of activities which may be valuable for our special education students. In addition, everyone benefits through greater understanding of each other as a result of this extra-curricular contact.

However, a couple of steps need to be taken in order to ensure that the special ed. student has a valuable, rewarding and successful time while under the direction of a regular education teacher in an extra-curricular setting:

- In order for these students to participate, everyone, including the students themselves, must be comfortable with the situation and behavior expectations. It is up to the special education teacher to prepare the student properly—especially with behavior expectations!
- It is also up to the special education teacher to assure the regular ed. teachers the appropriateness of placing the student into the activity.
- The students need to know that they are responsible for the requirements of the activity: practice, memorizing, asking questions, taking notes, etc. If they have trouble with any portion of this, they need to find a solution: practice with a friend, ask for help from their special ed. teacher, etc.

*An example: A friend of mine directs the Musical Theatre production group at a magnet school for the performing arts. Although the members of the group are almost always exclusively taken by audition from the magnet population, he also allowed two home school, special education day class students to audition. They both passed, and were let in as full performing members of the group. The only adaptation that the teacher had to make (and was fully willing), was to allow the two students extra time to memorize words of songs, (since their disability involved language processing). However, this adaptation was not a hindrance to the group, nor a burden to the teacher. An end result was one of these*



*special ed. students had a singing solo at the major show of the year!*

If all parties accept the expectations of the students, the teachers, and the program itself, success is almost always assured. These students in the special ed. program are there for specific needs...much, if not most, of their talents and personalities are the same as students in the regular education program. Therefore, why shouldn't they participate fully whenever appropriate?

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## **FULL INCLUSION MAINSTREAMING**

### **GRADES 1-12**

Today's popular catch phrase for special education students is "full inclusion." What no one seems to address is that some students are ready to attend regular education classes and some students need more individual attention to prepare them for entry, or reentry to the regular program.

"Full inclusion" assumes that with minimal assistance, a special education student will be successful in a regular classroom. This is true for SOME students, but certainly not all!

When thinking about moving a student back to the regular

program, many issues must be considered when determining the most appropriate placement:

- **Is the student on grade level, or near grade level, for everything?** If so, and the student's behavior is appropriate, full inclusion could be the best answer.
- **Is the student on grade level for one or two subjects?** If so, mainstreaming for only those subjects would be most appropriate, if the student's behavior is not an issue.
- **Is the student below grade level but able to help much younger children?** If so, allowing the student to be a peer tutor will not only raise his/her self-esteem, it will also reinforce the basics for the student.
- **Is the child so far below grade level that he/she can not tutor, however, the student's behavior is good?** If this is the case, this student can be mainstreamed for recess/nutrition, lunch, art, music and PE.
- **Is the student's behavior such a problem that it is extremely disruptive to others?** If so, then this student may not be ready to mainstream, or may need to "earn" mainstream situations in his/her favorite area.

Whatever you choose to do with your students, be sure that you choose whatever is appropriate for each individual—DO NOT simply choose a system because it is the current "thing" to do! The 1970's law, PL-91-142 has a statement about "least restrictive environment as appropriate to the student." We must remember this when making decisions to help our students.

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# WORKING WITH PARAEDUCATORS

## GRADES: K-12

I use many of these strategies to help my paraeducators in the classroom. Frequently, it is difficult to keep them up to speed, since they are usually only there from start to finish of school (if we are lucky). Here are some things that I do to keep them up!

**1. Weekly Meetings.** We meet every week for 20-30 minutes to discuss new information, things teachers need, changes in schedules, etc. I also use this time to brainstorm on any problems that we or any students are having, to disseminate information to them in the way of articles or handouts, and plan modifications for certain activities.

**2. Sit down with each para at least once a week, usually at lunch or right after school.** This is very informal, and gives the para a chance to express any concerns or issues.

**3. Model for paras.** At least once, and for new paras, it is important to not only tell them, or explain things to them, but to be able to show them. This may mean asking your principal for release time, or using your own. I go into the classrooms and have the para watch and critique how I work with the students. It would also be a good idea to video them so that they may watch and critique themselves.

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# RECORD KEEPING TIPS

## GRADES: K-12

In addition to teaching, Special Education teachers have to keep records on everything. This can be very time consuming. Below, are ways I have tried to make this overload of paperwork more manageable.

**1. IEP's** – I keep copies of all my student's IEP's in a binder. I keep the binder at my desk so whenever I work with a student one-on-one, I can quickly find the IEP and focus on the skills that are specified. Then, I can record the information directly on the IEP.

**2. Student Papers** – I give each student a folder that is to stay in the classroom. Visually impaired students have yellow folders and my Autistic student has the only purple folder. Therefore, they can easily find it and retrieve papers.

**3. Turning in Work** – We have all heard “But I turned it in. I put it on your desk.” To stop this problem, I made a Turn In Box. It is labeled by grade. Students put all completed work in that box. They know not to put it on my desk. It has worked great!

**4. Returning Papers** – I use the Turn In Box described above. One side of the box is labeled “Return” and is labeled by grade. Volunteers hand out any papers they find in the box. I never have to hand back papers or clutter up my desk with them.

**5. Behavior Logs** – I have several students who are labeled as Behavior Disordered. I created forms to record their behavior. Then once I quickly write down the behavior, I can easily file it in their student folder (that I keep in a desk drawer w/ work examples, notes from home, etc.) Then, when the principal needs documentation of behaviors, I have neat, organized forms that I can quickly retrieve and copy.

**6. Inclusion Support** – My students have Related Arts classes (music, art, computers, physical education, etc.) in a regular

education setting. Therefore, to help them succeed, I must track their progress and help them with any assignments they are having trouble completing. To do this, I made a form. On the form, I have a column for: Student Name, Passing?, Make Up Work. The teacher can easily complete the form, put it in my mailbox. I have the information on how to help them and written proof that the student is receiving help.

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# **SETTING UP A LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM FOR SPECIAL ED STUDENTS**

## **GRADES 1-8**

When putting together an academic program for Special Education students, the first thing one must keep in mind is to follow the IEP (individualized education program) for each student. Although teachers often feel pressure to follow the Course of Study for their particular school district, following the IEP is extremely important. Most learning disabled students need strong Language Arts and Math programs. On the IEPs, goals will usually be listed in these areas. Therefore, the major concern of a teacher setting up a program of this type the first time should be in establishing a strong Language Arts program.

Here are some basic ideas to keep in mind when establishing a Language Arts program for Special Ed students:

## **READING**

The best thing one can do with special ed students in Language Arts is to establish a phonics program. As old as the idea may seem, teaching phonics to our students is valuable to the majority (but take care...it is NOT appropriate for all). I use Hooked on Phonics, but the Renee Herman is also good, especially for younger children.

If you use Hooked on Phonics, be sure that an adult works one on one with students. It's **much** more effective in the classroom than having the students work independently with the tapes!

## **SIGHT WORD VOCABULARY**

A sight word approach is especially important for those students who do not appear to respond well to the phonics approach. This method may easily be worked into spelling, history, math, science, and of course, literature.

## **READ GRADE LEVEL BOOKS**

One should read grade level books to the students—even if they do not have the decoding skills necessary to read them independently. By reading to them, the students can still enjoy, comprehend, compare and contrast these books! Special Education students have a right to be exposed to literature that those without special needs are reading!

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# **MANAGING INSTRUCTIONAL TIME IN THE RESOURCE ROOM**

## **GRADES: K-6**

Because the needs of students who come to the Resource Room are so diverse, it can be challenging to structure the learning environment. I have begun managing my Resource Room in the following manner:

### **Setting Up/Getting Prepared**

1. I created a chart with three columns. Each column has an arrow pointing downward (one orange, one blue and one green). I laminated the chart so that I could write on it with wipe-off crayons.
2. Each day, I decide how I want to group students. Generally, grouping by ability level or IEP objectives works best. I end up with an orange group, a blue group and a green group. Then, assigning one column on the chart per group, I write student names in the columns.
3. I then assign certain tables as work spaces by placing an orange marker on one table, and so on. My markers are simply folded pieces of manila that stand up. Using this system allows me to set up everything the night before. Students can come in, look for their names on the chart, and group themselves according to color. They usually look over the materials I have already set out. So far, this seems to increase their enthusiasm.
4. I have 1 or 2 paraprofessionals in my room most of the morning. I write brief instructions on sticky notes (the larger ruled brand) and stick the notes on the

materials. This usually is sufficient explanation.

## **Rotation/Instructional Time**

1. I provide direct instruction (mini-lessons on a skill or strategy; reading from a Linguistic Reader, etc.) to the first group of students while the other 2 groups work with paras. The paras do a lot of skills games, review and reinforcement/practice activities. When I finish my mini-lesson, the groups rotate.
2. Then, we rotate again! Simple! Sometimes I teach the same mini-lesson to 3 groups. Sometimes my instruction is more individualized. Likewise, paras may do different activities with different groups. It all depends on what the students need on a particular day.

## **Variation:**

One group could do independent work or simple games (SIGHT Word Bingo, for example) if sufficient paraprofessional help is not available.

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