

Rethinking Staff Development

Partnerships work to meet student needs

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**Special
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Minnesota school districts, like many districts in other states, are facing serious fiscal limitations. The district I represent not only faces reduced state-level support but also is located in an area that does not have a strong tax base for generating local funds. This fiscal dilemma is occurring in the face of inflation and increased learner needs for those with and without disabilities. Consequently, staff and leadership must address this problem and take steps for its resolution.

This article is an attempt to share with you one possible solution for meeting the needs of students and staff despite fiscal limitations. The solution will be presented in the context of the district I represent.

The Osseo Area School District is located in a west suburban area of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. Osseo Area Schools serve 21,000 students in 20 elementary schools (grades K-6), four junior high schools (grades 7-9), and three senior high schools (grades 10-12). About 11% of the population receives special education services, and 85% to 90% of those students are labeled mildly disabled.

I have been with this district for 32 years and have watched it grow from five elementary schools, one junior high, and one senior high to its current size of fifth largest in Minnesota. It has experienced many of the typical growing pains of rapidly expanding districts.

In the district's years of expansion, special education has expanded right

along with it. I want to focus on the special education area, as embedded in its plan for addressing expansion issues is a possible solution for all learners.

As the Director of Special Education, I believe that meeting the needs of students with mild disabilities must be accomplished in a partnership with general education. Another way to express my personal belief or bias in addressing the needs of students with mild disabilities (about 2,000 in my district) is as follows: "Keep high incidence service plans as close to general education as is appropriate!"

This needs to be emphasized over and over to educators. Special education and general education need to pool their efforts and resources in meeting the needs of students with mild disabilities and without disabilities. My goal as the Special Education Director for Osseo Area Schools is to do just that!

Specifically, the goal is to create partnerships in staff development projects for special and general education staff to plan, implement, and evaluate each project. The staff also share resources that provide the training. We are using Federal B Flow-Through funds from special education, and general education uses a portion of its staff development funds in the form of substitute days.

Staff development partnerships are expensive, but the payoffs are huge for all learners. In addition, mainstreaming and inclusion almost become nonissues!

(continued on page 2)

I believe the most significant contributing factor here is giving staff—general and special—the skills and strategies they need to address all learners.

Making this goal become a reality requires a willingness on the part of leadership to let individual school sites do their own planning with the assurances that when they are ready to move forward, the resources are there for them to access. You are probably wondering, “Do they have a blank check?” Absolutely not! However, you give them the parameters of the resources and let them design their inservice budgets. This means administrators must be transparent about the resources and stay out of the way. The practitioners know what they want and they don’t want several committees to make it happen!

This reminds me of an inservice presenter we had some time back who advised “Don’t shoot skinny rabbits!” I believe we spend too much time in committees trying to “pinpoint” everything we are going to do and its outcome. The practitioner doesn’t have time for this. Sometimes, we need to let motivated staff go after something that appears useful to them as an effective educational practice and discuss outcomes afterwards. It gets the educator “unstuck” or “out of a rut,” if nothing else. This “ready, fire, and aim” planning is fun, exciting, and empowering for the practitioner.

You’re probably thinking this is cavalier or frivolous. Let me tell you how you can control this type of planning.

As a leadership person who is responsible for creating systemic change to meet the constantly changing needs of the

learner, whether the learner has disabilities or not, you better

- be knowledgeable about effective educational practices that will meet the needs of the learners
- have the ability to provide resources
- share your awareness and knowledge of effective educational practices with the teacher or teachers who want to respond to these learners

Consequently, when a teacher wants to try new approaches, you have proven

approaches to offer. Then, you need not be so worried about extensive planning time. Proven practices have already been field-tested and researched, proving their effectiveness up front!

I realized the value and benefits of this scenario some time ago as an educator in a leadership position. In 1984, I decided to become more focused on instructional delivery, strategies for learning, and effective planning practices in designing curricula for lesson delivery. Whatever I was willing to support and offer as a new and innovative educational practice had to meet three criteria:

Options Plus

Options Plus is a junior high staff development pilot project that came through a state grant and local Federal B Flow-Through funds. The target population consists of students with mild learning disabilities who are waived from the Individual Education Plan process and serviced exclusively by classroom teachers.

In lieu of the IEP is a two-page learner plan completed by the classroom teacher, the student, and the student’s parent or guardian. Four classroom teachers and the principal were trained in selected learning strategies and planning procedures of the Strategic Instruction Model and action-research approaches for continuing pilot and program evaluation. They also participated in Learning Styles training to ascertain the different learning styles of each participating student. This model has many positive outcomes. Among them are the following:

- The engagement of the student and general curriculum is not disrupted.
- Both targeted students (20) and nontargeted students (about 125) benefit.
- The staff development plan was designed by the teachers. They designed the activities with minimal facilitation, and they developed their budget.
- Both general and special educators could volunteer to receive the training.
- General educators directly involved in this project and other staff—general and special—want continued staff development in the aforementioned areas.

This pilot project is in its third month of operation. Students, parents, and staff are all pleased with the pilot.

Maple Grove Senior High

Another exciting project undertaken by Osseo Area Schools is the training that has been provided to staff in our new high school, Maple Grove Senior High, which opened in Fall 1996.

The training is identical to the Options Plus project (see page 2), with the exception of the action research component. The staff designed its own staff development plan that revolved around the belief of creating an inclusive school community.

The special education and general education departments of this school have been close partners in designing the staff development plan.

Critical as an outcome here is that this staff—general and special—want to continue as partners in future staff development activities.

1. It must have been field-tested over time and researched with clearly articulated outcomes.
2. It must include an implementation plan for instituting the practice into a system.
3. It should call for inexpensive and user-friendly materials.

It should be no surprise that the work of the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning meets the above three criteria in its Strategic Instruction Model (SIM). Osseo Area Schools hold this model as a main area of focus for staff development. Another area is the Learning Styles training provided by Winnelle Carpenter, a consultant and trainer of several learning styles approaches.

Six salient points need to be reemphasized:

- Students with mild disabilities must be served as close to general education as is reasonable.
- Staff development, because of the belief that schools should be inclusive of

all learners, must be a partnership between general and special educators.

- Staff development must not be demanding on the teacher in the planning stages.
- Leadership must construct budgets with a strong priority on staff development activity.
- Leadership must be current and knowledgeable in **proven** educational practices.
- Training provided must only include educational approaches that are field-tested, thoroughly researched, inexpensive, and user-friendly.

The Osseo Area School District currently offers two important staff development projects—one called Options Plus and a similar program at Maple Grove Senior High—that adhere to the above six points. (See the boxed stories on this page and page 2 for more information about these projects.)

Both of these projects meet my belief of educating students with mild disabilities and

students without disabilities in an inclusive setting where effective mainstreaming will occur if staff development opportunities are made available with adequate resources.

Osseo Area Schools now face a budget adjustment process in which major expenditure areas will be reduced. Most of this adjustment will occur by reducing staff. This, as mentioned earlier, in the face of increased learner needs! For the teacher, whether general or special education, students with more complex needs, whether they have disabilities or not, are on the increase.

We need to take the next step of responding to this reality by providing staff with more effective educational practices through staff development. This means leadership must realign resources to continue to directly support staff in accessing new and proven practices.

On the surface, these budget reductions coupled with increasing needs may appear to be a dilemma. However, getting past the problem to solutions is a fun and exciting experience. Leaders must model a tenacious and aggressive posture of overcoming the problem. Avoid committees that spend too much time on recapping the problems and get to the solutions. The solutions you attempt may give you a feeling of risk-taking because there is less time for staff to plan them. But, if leaders provide **proven options**, schools have little to lose. If we culture staff development around practices that meet the three criteria mentioned earlier, risks of failure are drastically reduced.

Thinking Like a 12-year-old

-by Elizabeth Turner Catarius

Introducing the concept of strategic learning to a large group of 12-year-olds can prove stimulating—if you can think like one of them! For some of us, it's not so difficult. It may be easier for those of us who have reaped the benefits from the long-term exposure to the pre- and adolescent mind, or it may be that some of us have a good long-term memory for a specific period in our lives.

In either case, connecting the idea of strategic learning to the learning base of seventh- and eighth-graders is quite easy. One of the first things I do when introducing the Strategic Instruction Model is to ask the group how many of them are capable of getting what they want from their parents. It may be a sad state of affairs for the American culture, but most of the students I encounter are experts at this. They are quite willing to share their expertise among their peers. They offer such plans as whining, pouting, and temper tantrums. Some of the more learned have developed sophisticated bargaining systems that many corporate managers would envy.

I move on from getting what you want at home to the middle school dating scene. I am not a proponent of dating at this age, but like the swallows and lemmings, dating at this age is a fact of life. I ask how one goes about dating at the middle school. This question is often answered with an array of plans that range from smiling and making eye contact with the intended to a more complex labyrinth of contacting a middle man or woman to see whether your intended would reciprocate your feelings. Now the interesting connections are made. The students are asked what they do when faced with an assignment that they do not know how to start or complete. All of a sudden, the experts on getting what they want are at a loss. It is at this moment that I talk about the excellent planning ability that they have demonstrated so far, and I offer them a plan or strategy to make their academic life as fulfilling as their personal lives. To demonstrate this in a more visual way, I hold up a life preserver with USS Strategy emblazoned on the front. I ask the students to picture themselves in a boat far out in

the ocean. All of a sudden, a terrible, freak storm comes up and they're thrown overboard. "How many of you," I query, "would grab on to the life preserver if thrown out to you?" Except for the occasional dissenter, all of the students claim that they would hold on to the preserver for dear life.

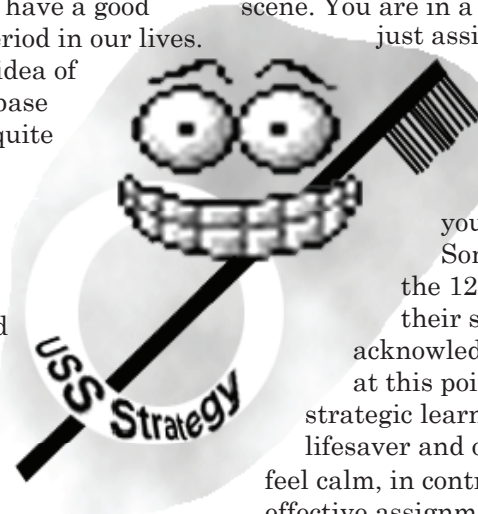
I now ask the students to imagine another scene. You are in a classroom and the teacher has just assigned a lengthy vocabulary list to memorize, an essay to be written, or a chapter to be read. "How many of you now feel the same type of panic that you imagined when you were thrown overboard?"

Some of the more honest among the 12-year-olds are willing to bare their souls to their classmates and acknowledge that feeling of dread. It is at this point that I start to describe what strategic learning is and how SIM can be a lifesaver and offer a plan that can make them feel calm, in control, and independent about effective assignment completion.

Before I conclude my introduction to SIM, I ask the students how many of them have ever spent a night away from home—either at a friend's house, a relative's house, or a hotel. To date, every student has spent at least one night away from home. I then discuss the one item that every parent makes sure they pack. This, of course, is the venerable toothbrush (I even bring one to class and hold it up). "How many of you know what to do with the toothbrush when you go into that unfamiliar bathroom?" Seventh- and eighth-graders spare no mercy in their attitude. I appear to be dumber than they ever imagined. Of course they know what to do with the toothbrush. This is the point where I discuss transfer of knowledge and how they will now be able to transfer their strategic learning to other classes and situations.

Like an experienced salesperson, I have tried to relate their needs and abilities to the academic arena so that they will "buy" the idea of using their strategic learning ability in a different and more productive manner in school. I am hopeful that engaging these 12-year-olds at their interest level will set the stage for a more in-depth exploration and commitment to SIM.

Elizabeth Turner Catarius is a SIM Trainer and resource teacher at Silas Deane Middle School in Wethersfield, CT.



Creating a Classroom Notebook

Kay Younginger, special education teacher/inclusion specialist at Wachusett Regional High School, Holden, Massachusetts, has designed a classroom notebook to reduce paper management tasks for teachers and place the responsibility for make-up work on students. The notebook has the added advantage of serving as a model when grades are given for students' maintaining a notebook or managing a portfolio.

The classroom notebook contains copies of all class notes (taken by an appointed student notetaker) and all class handouts. In addition, another copy of each handout is placed in the notebook for each absent student. Materials are organized by date and a Table of Contents allows students to find the materials they need.

Students who have been absent may use the notebook to obtain class notes and all of the handouts and homework assignments they need to fulfill class requirements. Students also may compare their own notes to those in the notebook to ensure they have complete information, which is especially helpful in preparing for tests.

At least 30 of 100 teachers at Kay's school use this system, and she reports that they love it!

Kay has provided the following list of materials you will need to implement the notebook idea in your own classroom. She also has shared the procedures and rules she developed, but she says the idea is flexible and can be adapted to fit each individual's teaching style and classroom management technique.

Materials

- 3-inch, 3-ring binder
- NCR notebook paper (lined and three-hole punched)
- Notebook dividers
- Lined notebook paper for Table of Contents

Rules

1. The notebook stays in the classroom at all times.
2. Students are responsible to make time to stay after school to get notes. They may either hand copy notes from the notebook or check out the notebook to make a photocopy at school.
3. The student is responsible for removing and completing any worksheet or handout bearing his or her name.
4. Students should check the Table of Contents to ensure no other materials are outstanding as work missed.
5. Students may use the notebook in the classroom after school to check for completeness. (This is most helpful in test preparation.)

Procedures

1. The teacher appoints a note taker (possibly two—one as back-up) in each class.
2. The note taker takes notes during class, keeping the yellow copy and placing the white copy in the class notebook. The note taker enters the date and topic on the Table of Contents page.
3. The teacher places names of absent students on individual handouts or worksheets during distribution to class.
4. One sample of the handouts and worksheets (without student names) and additional copies for absent students (with student names) are placed behind class notes each day.
5. Notebook dividers separate quarters, chapters, units, or any other division the teacher decides is important or useful.
6. On test days, the student notes the date and topic of the test on the Table of Contents page.

Kay notes that she places the most current material on top so students don't have to thumb through a lot of material to find what they need.

A subtle, yet significant, name change

From our beginning in 1977, the overriding mission of the Center for Research on Learning has been to create solutions that enable at-risk individuals to deal effectively with the demands placed on them. We knew then that it would be important for us to have a framework to guide our thinking and research and to make certain that the outcomes of our research could be tied together into a meaningful whole related to problems at-risk students face. Thus, we created an overarching framework and called it SIM—the Strategies Intervention Model.

SIM includes everything that has been researched at the Center. Before beginning any new line of research, we make certain it will logically and meaningfully fit into SIM. We have found, however, that some confusion may exist regarding the place of Content Enhancement Routines in the SIM structure.

Content Enhancement Routines are instructional procedures that enable classroom teachers to make good decisions about what content they consider to be critical to emphasize and how they will transform and deliver it to students. Content Enhancement fits within SIM because when teachers use these procedures, they enable students to better cope with the problems they face in school.

The confusion about whether the routines are a part of SIM probably comes from two sources:

1. Nothing in the name “Content Enhancement” refers to “strategies” per se.

2. The name Strategies Intervention Model seems very specifically tied to learning strategies.

Let’s try to clarify these two misconceptions.

First, the key factor that makes Content Enhancement procedures effective in improving the performance of at-risk students is the application of teaching procedures that would

(e.g., learning strategies) as well as the quality of instruction that is delivered in class (e.g., Content Enhancements). In addition, the name “instruction” gets to the very core of what we, as educators, are all about—teaching and all of the interactive dynamics with students that the teaching process implies. The name

The name “Strategies Intervention Model” is somewhat limiting and misleading.

be considered “strategic” by general education teachers. That is, the instruction of general education teachers is strategic when (1) they carefully select critical content (i.e., they do not try to cover it all but rather they try to select the most crucial information for students to learn) and (2) they deliberately change and transform the critical information they have selected into a form that is easier for all students to understand and remember. For Content Enhancement to make a difference, teachers need to be very strategic in terms of how they think about what they will teach and how they actually go about teaching students.

Second, we feel the name “Strategies Intervention Model” is somewhat limiting and misleading. Therefore, we are changing the name of the model to **Strategic Instruction Model**. (The acronym will still be “SIM.”) The name “strategic” is broader than “strategies”—it captures instruction that is aimed at improving students as learners

“intervention,” in contrast, implies that the process is more of a one-way street in which the teacher is active and the student passively “receives the intervention.” Additionally, we see the term “intervention” as being more of a medical than educational term.

Though it may take awhile for us to change all of our forms, manuals, and other materials to this new name, we are going to begin the transition now. Before you know it, we will all be comfortable with the subtle but very significant change.

Strategram

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