

Bridging Special and Regular Education: The Pennsylvania Initiative

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In Pennsylvania, increasing numbers of special needs students are experiencing success in regular classrooms. The credit goes to an innovative program known as the Instructional Support Team.

In November, when Dana transferred into a 4th grade class at Parkview Elementary, she was reading two years below grade level and had difficulty getting along with other students. Parkview's Instructional Support Team designed a plan that allowed Dana to set a weekly socialization goal and to chart her reading performance using curriculum-based assessment techniques. Eventually, Dana also made a videotape of herself explaining the graphs of her reading performance progress to share with her teacher and parents. By May, Dana was reading on grade level and had made many friends at school.

At Jefferson Elementary, Mark was sent to the office for throwing sand into another student's eyes. Because the principal had already seen Mark four times that fall for discipline problems, she recommended that the Instructional Support Team address the problem. Team members designed an intervention plan to help Mark at school. They modeled clear, direct communication techniques for Mark's teachers. And they helped Mark learn to stop and reflect on his course of action and its consequences, to generate alternative actions, and to make reasoned choices. Mark had no discipline referrals during the month-long intervention period and maintained appropriate behavior afterward.

Providing Better Instruction

The Instructional Support Educators in Pennsylvania have been working since 1990 to shift the focus of special education from categorizing the services delivered to providing better instruction. Regulations adopted that year called for schools to develop Instructional Support Teams (ISTs). These teams function as pre-referral intervention groups that link all school resources to better meet the needs of students with persistent academic, social-emotional, or behavioral problems. The IST program is designed to

- Assure that regular education services are used effectively for all

Board of Education, "The most significant change in the regulations was to focus on instructional needs of students, rather than on [their] perceived internal deficiencies" (1992, p. 7). The idea was that regular education and special education should be interdependent, overlapping, and cohesive. During the five-year phase-in period, more than 1,400 elementary and middle schools in all 501 Pennsylvania school districts initiated the IST approach.

Pre-Referral Intervention

The Instructional Support Team approach is based on the premise that many teachers need help in meeting students' increasingly complex academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs. Team members work with students who have not yet been identified as eligible for special education and—with other education profes-

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students prior to referral for multidisciplinary evaluation;

- Provide peer support and problem solving assistance for teachers through a team-based structure and in-class support;

- Provide initial screening for students who may require multidisciplinary evaluation; and

- Assist teachers who have special needs students in their classrooms.

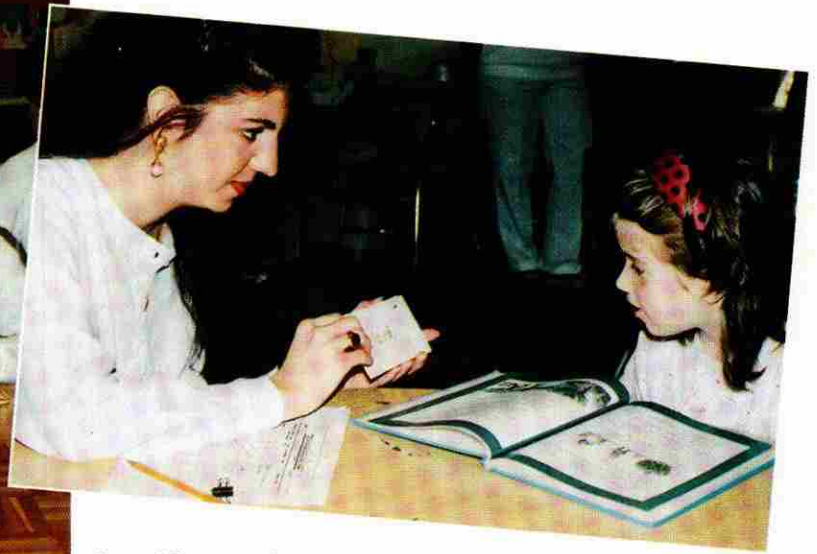
According to Robert Feir, executive director of the Pennsylvania State

sionals—help teachers identify solutions to instructional challenges through precise, classroom-based assessment and collaborative problem solving. One trainer aptly described the IST approach as a "systematic search for what works."

Too often, students with special needs do not succeed because those responsible fail to coordinate school-based services and services from community agencies. The IST process helps schools create a seamless system



Photos courtesy of Joseph F. Kovaleki



Support Team members use assessment to identify and refine teaching strategies.

of support for students and teachers, ensuring that students do not “fall through the cracks” (Reynolds et al. 1987).

While team membership varies from school to school, every IST includes the principal, the student’s regular teacher, and a support teacher. Parents are encouraged to participate, and—depending on the student’s needs—school psychologists, remedial mathematics and reading specialists, guidance counselors, speech therapists, school nurses, and others also may be involved. While some schools develop a relatively stable team membership and meet on a regular basis, there is no specific length of membership or schedule of meetings.

Both teachers and parents can request instructional support. After receiving a request, Instructional Support Team members work with the classroom teacher to identify what will work for the student. They do so by systematically manipulating instructional variables and appraising student responses.

Support teachers are important members of the team. They are responsible for helping classroom teachers meet the goals set by the entire team. They work with students to assess their needs in the classroom, and they model strategies to help teachers, parents, and others who provide direct services. Such classroom-based collaboration also helps teachers generalize strategies for use with other students. Support teachers spend a maximum of 60 days on each case.

The Instructional Support Team serves as a bridge between special and regular education programs. Team members help the regular teacher develop accommodations to help students with disabilities succeed in the general education environment. They also help the regular teacher make the best use of the support services required by Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Instructional Support Training

The Instructional Support Team Project, an initiative of the Pennsyl-

vania Department of Education, provides training for IST members. Training consultants work on-site to help schools design, plan, and conduct multiyear training efforts that involve parents, community members, and professional staff members.

On-site training and support services allow district personnel to participate without the schools incurring additional costs. During the first year, IST consultants provide training in the critical components of instructional support, model the instructional support process, demonstrate effective instructional strategies, facilitate guided practice for support teachers and team members, and coordinate local networks of support teachers and principals. In subsequent years, regional intermediate units provide follow-up training and assistance.

All team members receive specialized training. For example, the Pennsylvania Principal Training Model is a multiday workshop and seminar where principals can work with other principals who have experience with the process. The model also provides regional networks for follow-up and ongoing support. In addition, the Instructional Support Team Project provides participants’ and trainers’ modules for each of the five training components of the Support Team

initiative. These modules are based on school effectiveness research (Stellar 1988, U.S. General Accounting Office 1989) and on pilot programs in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. **The five training components are**

1. Collaboration and team building. Collaboration is the central element of effective instructional support. Three aspects of collaboration are incorporated in the program: team building, problem solving, and team maintenance. Team building and maintenance procedures ensure that the team is effective and that it continues to function efficiently. Problem-solving procedures help the classroom teacher address student difficulties, set measurable goals, and identify effective

instructional strategies. Team members help establish and support classroom strategies, evaluate their success, and make plans to continue successful interventions.

2. Instructional assessment. The instructional assessment process is used to identify gaps between the demands of the curriculum and the student's skill level and to determine appropriate instructional techniques. Instructional assessment also provides information about the effectiveness of the strategies used and helps the IST determine whether further evaluations for special education eligibility are necessary.

During the intervention period, the IST uses instructional assessment to identify and refine instructional strategies that have a high probability of success, and to guide instruction as the

student learns. Unlike traditional norm-referenced assessment, which tests the student on unfamiliar material, instructional assessment looks at performance as it relates to course content and provides teachers with information they can use to plan more effective instruction (Gickling and Thompson 1985, Tucker 1985).

3. Instructional adaptation. Students can experience a broad range of learning difficulties beyond those served by Title I or special education programs. They may have problems reading text, participating in class discussions, organizing information, working independently, or communicating in writing. As they approach middle school, students may have

trouble taking notes, studying for tests, or applying general study skills. Despite these difficulties, they can progress in the general education environment when adapted instructional materials and assessment techniques are available.

Adapting materials involves changing their format without changing their content. For example, Project ADAPT (Huck et al. 1989), also developed in Pennsylvania, uses structured study guides, information organizers, skeletal outlines, what-you-need-to-know charts, concept and application activities, games, and manipulatives. Assessment adaptation techniques include modifying tests so students can display knowledge without being penalized for poor test-taking skills (for example, providing alternatives to

written tests, varying testing materials, simplifying response levels, and changing grading procedures).

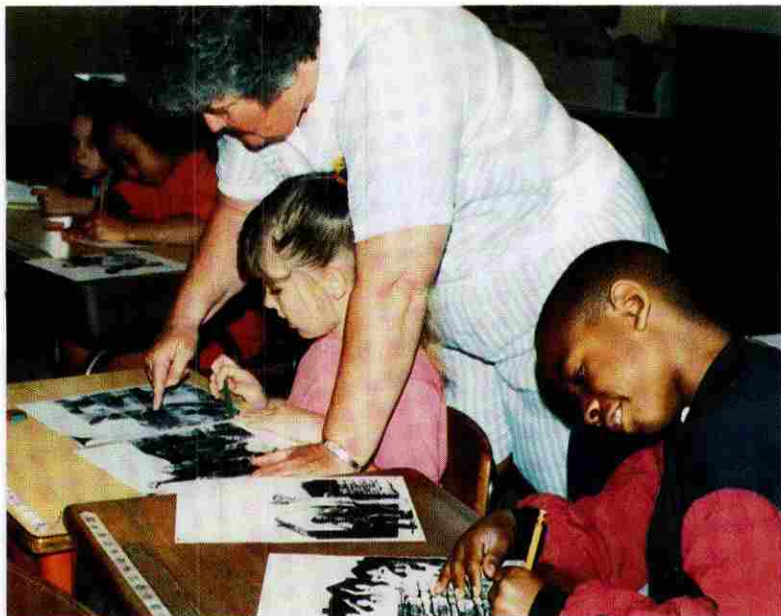
4. Student discipline. The Instructional Support Team approach to classroom discipline incorporates procedures that emphasize establishing effective interaction patterns between adults and students (Valentine 1988). Teachers learn to analyze classroom communications for clarity and to work with parents to achieve instructional goals. When student behavior does not meet expectations, teachers use supportive, nonpunitive back-up techniques. These procedures—summarized in an individual discipline plan—emphasize supervision rather than punishment. School psychologists, guidance counselors, and mental health specialists from community agencies may help the IST when behavior problems are especially difficult to manage.

5. Student assistance strategies. Many youngsters experience stress or trauma that places them at risk for failure in school. The student assistance component of the program addresses behavior problems by helping school staff to help students develop decision-making, problem-solving, and socialization strategies (for example, Clabby and Elias 1986, Gresham 1985). Students who possess such skills are less likely to present discipline problems.

Evaluating the Process

The regulations that established the Instructional Support Team Program also established an evaluation process. This process features an on-site visit by a three-person team during a school's second year in the program. Evaluation team members are practitioners and training consultants from other districts. They interview IST members, parents, teachers, and students; observe classrooms and team

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meetings; and review student records.

They look at how the Instructional Support Teams are organized and managed, how students are assessed, how interventions are designed, and how students are identified for instructional support and screened for multidisciplinary evaluation. The state uses evaluation team findings to determine whether districts or schools need additional training and support. Schools that meet basic validation requirements can use their state special education funds for IST-related expenses in ensuing years. To date, approximately 98 percent of the schools reviewed have met all basic validation requirements.

As part of the validation process, schools also report outcome data, including numbers of students served, special education referrals and placements, and retentions in grade.

Results, thus far, are as follows:

■ *Students served.* The longer a school is involved in the Instructional Support Team Program, the more likely its teachers are to use the process. In 1992–93, for

example, schools in their first year of training identified 7.4 percent of their population for instructional support; those in their second year identified 9.6 percent; and those in their third year identified 10.7 percent. On average, about 10 percent of a participating school's population is served each year by an Instructional Support Team.

■ *Referrals and placements.* A primary goal of the Instructional Support Team Project is to reduce referrals for multidisciplinary evaluation and inappropriate placements in special education. Schools that are using the IST approach have demonstrated referral rates that are one-third to one-half those of schools that have not yet implemented the process.

■ *Retention in grade.* Another goal of the Instructional Support Team Project is to reduce the number of students retained in grade. Project data indicate that, during a three-year period, schools have reduced retentions by as much as 67 percent. This reduction in retentions may result in a decrease in the dropout rate as these students enter high school.

The Instructional Support Team approach is a cost-effective, efficient, transportable, and durable way to help teachers ensure that special needs students can succeed in the regular classroom. And its emphasis on peer training and the enhancement of local institutionalized support can set the stage for lasting change. ■

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