

Communication Challenges and Their Impact on Effective Special Education

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Since 2010, CASDA faculty members have conducted special education program reviews for school districts throughout the state. This report is a brief outline of common challenges identified in these reviews. Its purpose is to provide a reference for district and building leaders as they assess the effectiveness of their special education programs.

Each review's methodology includes a thorough document review examining NYSED special education data, representative samples of IEPs and/or 504 accommodation plans, policy and procedure manuals for instructional staff and paraprofessionals and website information. Faculty members then conduct classroom observations, focus group sessions with stakeholders and individual interviews with administrators, instructors and staff. This process allows CASDA to evaluate objective data and understand a diverse range of perspectives on the program's strengths and areas needing improvement.

Engaging in this thorough review process in several urban, suburban and rural districts has allowed CASDA to recognize themes that may be relevant to other districts. Many of these challenges could be addressed through more robust, focused and effective communication at the district, building and classroom levels.

The absence of clear communication, both within special education departments and between special education personnel and general education instructors frequently serves as an obstacle to providing students with rigorous instruction and appropriate supports. In a discussion of co-teaching, educators in a small rural district "expressed not understanding the continuum of services" and that "the roles and responsibilities of the consultant teacher are not fully understood by all and vary from building to building and teacher to teacher." Another rural district found that "both special and general education teachers reported there is no explicit communication about the special education programs or the roles and responsibilities of general and special education teachers. For example, a special education teacher may be used more as an aide in the classroom rather than functioning in the role of a highly qualified teacher."

A third district echoed this sentiment stating "both special and general education teachers reported an absence of explicit communication about the special education programs and the roles and responsibilities of general and special education teachers." They observed that "there was little discussion at the CSE table regarding collaborative decision making based on data to determine the needs of students." This phenomenon is not limited to smaller rural districts. A large urban district reported that "insufficient planning, preparation, training, monitoring and communicating between general and special education faculty is a barrier to students having access to appropriate programs in the least restrictive environment."

Poor communication within districts about best practices and procedures leads to undeniably negative consequences for student learning. It can also foster unnecessary conflict amongst teaching staff. One district reported that "several staff interviewed identified some 'trust between general and special education staff.'" They cited "concern that special educators do not always know the content being taught" and expressed "a fear of releasing instructional control, particularly when there has been not common planning time."

Effective special education in the least restrictive environment often requires complex information to be accessible and clear to special and general education administrators, faculty and staff. Quite simply, educators cannot properly serve their students if they do not understand their needs and the programs available to support them. Districts reviewed by CASDA almost uniformly indicated that their programs were inhibited by the absence of widely disseminated written documents to guide practice.

One district reported that “a CSE/CPSE Manual/Handbook has not been developed or shared with all stakeholders (administrators, special educators and related service providers) to ensure consistency and clearly understood expectations district-wide.” Without these documents in place, it is hardly surprising that “a majority of staff” would be unable to describe the continuum of services across the district. Another district in similar circumstances indicated that “there is confusion and limited transparency at times when CSE decisions are made.” Another identified a related issue, stating “there is no criterion for the placement of students using learner characteristics in any of the special education programs. Placements appear to be made by the CSE based on availability of programs rather than what is most appropriate to provide a free public education in the least restrictive environment.” This was also present in a large urban district which found “students are placed based on program availability versus student need. The result is classrooms with wide ranges of instructional and behavioral needs.”

Schools reported similar difficulties with entry and exit criteria for students receiving related services as part of their IEPs. One district found “no evidence of entry or exit criteria within the district to determine the need for related services. Due to the lack of clear indicators, there may be an over-classification or over-prescription of services.” This absence of well-defined criteria makes evaluating the effectiveness of related services considerably more challenging. The resulting “over-prescription of services” may not be appropriate or necessary for services and has a material impact on department spending.

The issues identified above are by no means exhaustive. Highlighting how absent or inconsistent communication can affect special education practice may provide a lens through which district and building level administrators can “check the pulse” of their special education programs.

The following questions drawn from a synthesis of more than a dozen reviews may be helpful in identifying potential issues within your special education department:

1. Does your district have a written CSE/CPSE policy and procedure manual? Is it shared comprehensively among all relevant stakeholders? Can your staff effectively describe the continuum of services?

2. Are students placed according to research supported, well defined learner characteristics? Are students grouped according to similarity of need?

3. Does your district/building have regularly scheduled department meetings during which information such as SED memos, new regulations and best practices can be discussed? Are the minutes recorded and available for reference?

4. Do staff members understand the roles and responsibilities of special education and general education teachers in integrated co-taught classrooms?

The answers to these questions can provide a thumbnail sketch of a special education program’s effectiveness and suggest areas in which districts should seek to improve.

CASDA can help support your special education program. For more information on program reviews, IEP development support, integrated co-teaching practices and more, please visit casdany.org/diverselearners or contact CASDA Executive Director Mike Piccirillo at mpiccirillo@casdany.org.