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“I’m So Excited About This!” A Shared Administrative Vision for Inclusive Practice

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Abstract
Introduction by: John J. O’Kane, Assistant Professor, Teacher Education, Roberts Wesleyan College

Those of us who have long sought to promote meaningful program innovations and structural changes to advance the more normalized teaching model, often referred to as “inclusion,” fully understand the critical need for administrative support of the process. “I'm So Excited About This” clearly and succinctly describes the significant contributions of Hilton Central School District’s leadership at both district and building levels in advancing an inclusive continuum of services as the approach to integrating special and general education. This strategy is based on three key and fundamental beliefs: Hilton's students belong in Hilton's schools; general education settings afford the best opportunity for success; and special education is a service, not a place. This narrative history powerfully articulates and affirms the importance of a shared vision, mutual collaboration, and a common core of beliefs that promote learning for all students.

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Chapter in Duets and Dialogue: Voices on Inclusive Practices in Our Schools, edited by Marie Cianca and Cathy Freytag. The full book can be found here: http://www.inclusion-ny.org/duet-dialogue

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Reading 2: “I’m So Excited About This!” A Shared Administrative Vision for Inclusive Practice

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“I’m So Excited About This!”

A Shared Administrative Vision for Inclusive Practice

Katrina Arndt and Laura Whitcomb

The title for this essay is a quote from the Village Elementary School principal in Hilton who was very pleased to be engaged in the work of changing a 15:1:1 self-contained special education program for grades five and six to an integrated-co-teaching program. This work is the focus of our essay, which explores the success that can evolve with shared administrative support for inclusive practices. In Hilton supporting inclusive practice at all grade levels is ongoing. Our focus on the fifth and sixth grade classrooms reflects our commitment to exploring the experiences of one group of teachers and administrators.

Hilton Central School District in Western New York is a midsized school district adjacent to the Rochester area. Hilton has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school; the high school serves around 1500 students, the middle school has about 700 students in grades 7-8, and the three elementary schools serve around 2200 students between them (About Hilton Schools, n.d.). Hilton has a long history of low turnover for teachers and administrators; the result is a faculty strongly committed to the district. The security of long relationships has created a strong foundation for innovation and risk-taking in many areas, including exploring how to best serve students with disabilities. In this essay, we review the history of inclusive practice in Hilton, discuss how the district has developed inclusive practices, and provide recommendations for practice.

Inclusive Practice in Hilton

In the last thirty years – from 1980 to 2010 - Hilton’s inclusive practice has shifted from a reliance on special education services provided by private schools and Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) programs to retaining most students with disabilities in district. Before the late 1980s, Hilton –like many surrounding districts - utilized BOCES and approved private schools for services for students with disabilities who needed levels of specialized instruction or support not available through the district. This involved relying on these agencies to recruit, hire, and supervise special education teachers, who were then assigned to teach classes of students with disabilities who came from Hilton and other local districts.

Just as special education law and practices evolved from its beginnings in the 1970s, Hilton’s special education service delivery model evolved as well. Students with significant learning disabilities, emotional disabilities and developmental delays were gradually brought back to the district beginning in the late 1970’s. Students who had been attending approved private schools and BOCES classrooms began attending district-based special classes as programs were developed in Hilton to meet their needs. Programs included self-contained classrooms with ratios of students, teachers, and teacher assistants of 15:1:1, 12:1:1, 8:1:1, and 6:1:1. Some of those classrooms continue, while other classrooms have been dissolved as more co-teaching and inclusive practices have been instituted. A new model of service delivery
in many states is co-taught classrooms with a general education teacher and a special education teacher together for the full day. Over time, the Hilton school community has become accustomed to integrating students with disabilities in local school buildings and programs. As the district’s capacity to deliver specialized instruction grows, fewer students are referred to out of district placements and more students received their special education services in the general education classroom.

The New York State Department of Education is clear that there are important reasons for students with disabilities to be part of State assessment and accountability systems. The New York State Department of Education notes that:

Including students with disabilities in accountability systems has resulted in parents, teachers, and administrators paying more attention to grade-level standards and ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum and an opportunity to learn grade-level content. Together, the IDEA and NCLB work to provide the specialized and individualized instruction and school accountability that is critical to improving achievement for students with disabilities. (Modified Academic Achievement Standards, 2007)

As Hilton examined ways to help students with disabilities meet higher expectations, it became evident that self-contained classroom options did not ensure students access to the content and skills that define the general education curriculum. So, new settings and models of inclusive practice were developed, including less reliance on the in-district special classes and more provision of consultant teacher services designed to push into general education classrooms and resource room services to support skill and content.

Hilton Central School District’s ongoing assessment of special education programs led to phasing out the district-based 15:1:1 special class option at both the middle school and high school level several years ago. These special classes had been designed for students with significant learning and or language disabilities. With the strong support of the middle and high school principals, students were successfully integrated in general education classrooms and are achieving at higher rates than when they were in self-contained programs. This successful integration at the secondary level has been supported by a strong consultant teacher and resource room model. Students formerly in self-contained programs receive support, accommodations and case management by special education teachers working collaboratively with general education teachers.

The natural next step for Hilton is to continue phasing out the 15:1:1 special class self-contained model at the intermediate level of elementary school. So, in 2009-10, with enthusiastic support from the elementary building principal and assistant principal, a yearlong staff development plan was implemented in order to enhance inclusive practices for all teachers working in a consultant teacher-general education teacher partnership and to prepare specific teachers for an integrated co-teaching model. In 2010-11 the district will not operate the 15:1:1 special class at grades 5-6 and will instead provide integrated co-taught classrooms at both grade levels. Students formerly in the self-contained classroom will now be educated
with their nondisabled peers in an instructional setting that provides a general education teacher and a special education teacher and a teacher assistant for the full day.

**Inclusive Practice in Action**

In our discussions about this essay, we realized that underlying all the practical realities of inclusive education in the Hilton Central School District are three strong beliefs, shared by building and district administrators. First, a sense that children from Hilton should be educated in Hilton is explicit; second, the “earn your way in” mentality that can be a barrier to inclusive classrooms is challenged; and third, the idea that special education is specialized instruction—not a particular classroom setting or particular teacher’s services - is clearly articulated and repeated. Professional development for building teachers and staff is aligned with these foundational ideas about what inclusion can and should be.

**We Want Our Kids**

The history of BOCES in the late 1970s is one of service provision for smaller districts with few resources for students with disabilities. BOCES served an important role in helping districts educate previously excluded students. As more districts recognized the possibility of including children with disabilities, BOCES has evolved into new roles in consulting services, professional development, and continuing to serve students with the most severe disabilities. Hilton has gradually brought more and more students with disabilities back into the district, supporting the belief that children from the community should be served with their nondisabled peers, in their home district.

This philosophy grounds inclusive practices in the elementary, middle, and high school, and focuses discussion about students with disabilities on practical solutions at the building level. The shared commitment to “all means all” leads to productive discussion about shifting classroom composition, educating teachers, and continually adjusting how instruction is provided for all learners. While this is not always easy, the shared commitment to inclusive practices between the superintendent, special education director, other instructional directors, and the principals focuses discussions on solving problems and moving forward.

This experience confirms what Tomlinson, Brimijoin, and Narvaez (2008) note about the nature of leadership— that at the building level, “the pivotal leader for change is the principal” (p. 23). In Hilton, there is a shared mission and vision among all stakeholders with respect to meeting the needs of each individual learner. This shared mission and vision, coupled with strong district-office administrative supports and enthusiastic building leadership has led to ongoing change and improvements in inclusive practices across the district.

**Grades Do Not Always Reflect Learning**

Affirming that students with disabilities need access to the general education curriculum is key to supporting inclusive practice. In Hilton, an understanding that the general education classroom is the best place to access the richness of the full curriculum is evident. The Director of Special Education believes that we may not always know what a student is capable of
learning; unfortunately, in the absence of traditional measures of success, students with disabilities have often been segregated in self-contained classrooms.

Instead of this traditional and limiting practice, the Director of Special Education helps teachers focus on individual achievement – and notes that grades are just one measure of success. Her philosophy is based on current recommendations about effective differentiation. Tomlinson & McTighe (2006) noted that shifting grading practices toward effective assessment includes thinking of assessment as “a photo album – a collection of evidence - rather than a single snapshot” (p. 135).

Special Education = Specialized Instruction

Special education is not a place; it is a service. The misconception that “those kids” belong somewhere other than the general education setting is a long standing one, and one that we continue to challenge. Teachers need to be prepared to provide high quality differentiated instruction for all students – and with appropriate supports and services, we believe this is possible. A concern for many teachers is that they are not prepared or knowledgeable about how to provide instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Integrated classrooms help address this concern and there are far reaching benefits to everyone in the classroom when two highly qualified teachers are available to help a heterogeneous group of students.

Recommendations for Practice

Other districts considering how to move inclusive practices forward may consider this recommendation from Hilton: know and accept what your district’s capacities are. That is, be willing to examine what your district is doing well, what could change, and how to begin to implement change in deliberate and thoughtful ways. Hilton’s Director of Special Education notes that there is still a small group of Hilton students who have complex and severe needs. The complexity of these needs is more than Hilton is able to support in district based programs at this point.

While she is not pleased that some Hilton students are placed out of the district, the students are well supported and are getting what they need in their specialized programs. Trying to effect change in too many places at one time is often not useful; instead, Hilton is focused on manageable, measurable goals related to inclusion. In 2009-2010, the focus is on supporting the development of integrated co-taught classrooms in 5th and 6th grade.

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Extended Learning Opportunities

1) What are the apparent strengths of the dissolution of the 15:1:1 classrooms and their replacement by an integrated consultant teacher-general education teacher partnership?

2) What do the authors suggest about the need to rethink our traditional view of assessment when they claim that “Grades do not always reflect learning?”

3) Why do you believe that it has taken nearly thirty years for many schools in this region to accept more direct responsibility for educating all students in the home district?

4) How might you personally help to promote what the authors describe as “a shared vision among all stakeholders?”

5) Can you envision a time when even students with “complex and severe needs” would be educated in their neighborhood schools? If so, how do we get there?