

To: Superintendent of Schools
From: Director of Special Education
Date: July 28, 2003
Re: Inclusion Policy at the Middle School Level

The recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), has prompted us to review our practices for inclusion in Mason County. Inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classroom at the middle school level occurs less often than in our elementary school settings. The IDEA requires the consideration of the least restrictive environment (LRE) for all students with disabilities. According to the legislation, consideration for LRE is defined as "procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily." ([IDEA] §1412 [5][B][1990]) It is believed that we are not living up to these criteria in our middle school special education program.

In research completed by McDonnell and Hardman it is noted that the attitudes of school principals are key in determining the success of the special education services and integration of students with special needs into regular education classrooms (1989). In addition, significant change can only occur successfully if the individuals who will be asked to implement the change are involved in and support the process of change (Riley, 1993). This proposed policy for inclusion adopts the preceding conclusions. However,

the studies referenced are largely based on observations at the elementary school level. Therefore, it is especially important to reference a study conducted by Tanner, et al. to provide more relevant conclusions in regard to inclusion at the middle school level. The study conducted by Tanner, et al., examined the beliefs and practices of middle school principals, special education and regular education teachers. The study focused on attitudes towards inclusive education for students with disabilities, the need for collaborative strategies and perceived barriers to inclusion. The researchers looked for commonalities in attitudes in relation to number of years in their position, number of years in education and number of courses taken in school law (1996). The study yielded the following conclusions from which the proposed Mason County Inclusion Policies are based:

- Regular education teachers were significantly less supportive of inclusion than that of school principals and special education teachers. (This is attributed to the idea that school principals are more likely to understand the implications of IDEA and special educators have a better understanding of the abilities of individuals with disabilities)
- Special education teachers were more in favor of collaborative strategies than regular education teachers. (This may be attributed to the pressure regular education teachers feel to meet the needs of all students in the classroom.)
 - Experienced educators were more likely to support collaborative strategies than beginning teachers. (This is attributed to confidence level of beginning teachers)
- Principals with less experience (1-6 years) were more likely to champion inclusion than those with more experience. (This is attributed to more recent training in special education).
- Supports needed for inclusion must include staff training and time for collaborative planning.

It is proposed that the middle school special education programs be redesigned to ensure that more students with disabilities are successfully included into regular

education classes. This plan will not only allow for more appropriate educational practices for **all** students, but will provide appropriate supports to teachers and administrators. The policy consists of four main initiatives, (1) to develop eligibility criteria and review procedures that will ensure that all students with disabilities, to the extent possible will be included into regular education classrooms; (2) to provide shared planning time for collaborative teaching teams; (3) to develop a mentoring program for inexperienced teachers; and (4) to develop training in the areas of special education, collaborative teaming techniques, and instructional strategies.

The current eligibility criteria for placement decisions should be revised to ensure increased inclusion. According to IDEA, students with disabilities should be included in regular education classes unless, one the nature or severity of the aids and services needed to meet the goals of the students Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), cannot be achieved satisfactorily, or two, the degree of disruption caused by the student or instructional strategies is such that it interferes with the ability of the non-disabled students to learn. Our policies should reflect this standard. All students who are eligible for special education services should automatically be placed in regular education classrooms, unless they meet one of the exclusionary criteria. With this standard in place at all middle schools, it is likely that we will eliminate the need for a number of self-contained and resource classrooms. The teachers in these settings would be reassigned to work in the newly developed inclusive classrooms. Funding would need to be provided for additional staff support in inclusive classrooms.

Assigning special education teachers to regular education classroom requires a significant change in the dynamics of the classroom. The collaborative team approach

discussed in the research done by Tanner, et al., refers to an approach to teaching that meets the curricular needs of children with and without disabilities in the same classroom. Using the collaborative team approach, the general education teacher takes responsibility for the content of the material and the special education teacher is responsible for accommodations. The two teachers are equal partners in the classroom (1996). With this in mind, it is extremely important that time is available weekly for team planning. The structure of the middle school environment is such that it would allow for such planning. Further research is required to determine how much time is needed.

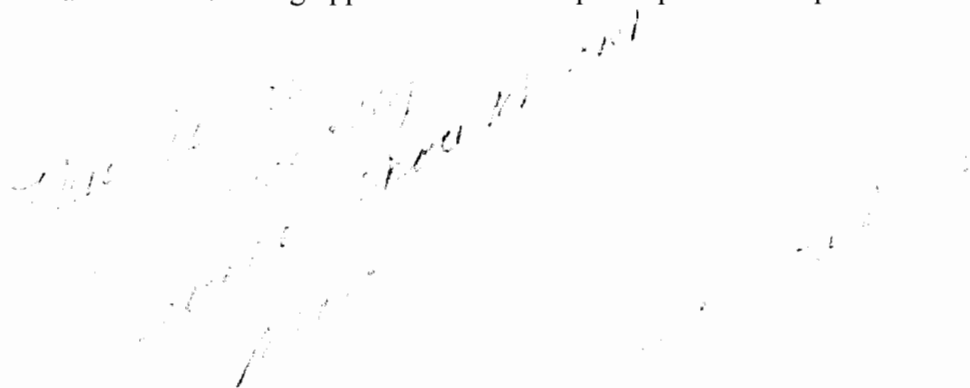
The research demonstrated that new teachers were less likely to be open to the idea of collaborative teaching. This was attributed to the fact that new teachers may be less confident about their abilities than experienced teachers. Assuming this, the school should develop a mentoring program that would pair experienced teachers with those less experienced. This practice would provide the new teachers with opportunities to share curriculum ideas and brainstorm solutions for the more complex and unexpected problems that may develop as a result of the fully integrated environment.

Finally, a significant amount of time would be allocated for staff development in the areas of special education law for principals, instructional strategies for both regular and special education teachers, and collaborative teaming techniques for everyone. The training would be geared towards developing a common ground of knowledge for all participants in the process. Principals at the middle school level, particularly those who have not taken courses in special education recently, need to understand the benefits of inclusion. Regular education teachers, who were the most reluctant to support inclusion; need to increase their knowledge of the instructional strategies for students with

disabilities. School principals, regular education teachers and special education teachers all need to understand the principles of collaborative teaming so that proper techniques can be implemented and adequate resources can be provided.

It is unrealistic to expect that our middle school programs can move from a system of self-contained classrooms and pull-out programs, to a fully inclusive environment in one year. This policy would provide a revised eligibility and review process to ensure that students are appropriately placed. In the first year efforts should be made to eliminate the resource pull-out programs that include students that presumably need fewer supports. After the first year the self-contained classrooms would be eliminated and or consolidated. It is expected that funding for both additional staff support and training would be needed. This need would be offset by the reduction of teachers needed for self-contained and resource classrooms, the reduced need for substitute teachers in collaborative teaming classrooms, and the reduction in the cost of transportation for students who no longer would need to be bussed to alternative schools.

This policy would ensure that our students, to the extent possible are educated in the least restrictive environment with their non-disabled peers. To enable the collaborative teaming approach to work, the policy would provide sound eligibility standards and procedures for review, additional time for shared planning; mentoring for inexperienced teachers and training opportunities for all participants in the process.



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References

McDonnell, A.P., and Hardman, M. L. (1989). The desegregation of America's special schools: Strategies for change. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 14(1), 68-74.

Riley, R.W. (1993, September). A new direction for education. *Principal*, 73, 5-8.

Tanner, C. K., Vaughn Linscott, D. J., & Galis, S. A., (1996). Inclusive education in the United States: Beliefs and practices among middle school principals and teachers. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. (<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v4n19.html>)