

"Special Education for Exceptional Children": The History of the Special Education Program at the Science Academy of South Texas 1957-2003

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The Science Academy of South Texas, one of four magnet schools in The South Texas Independent School District (STISD), opened in 1989 specifically to bring educational opportunities in mathematics and science to students in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. STISD is the only all-magnet school district in the state of Texas and The Science Academy is the only mathematics and science magnet school in the Rio Grande Valley. STISD serves a tri-county area—Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron counties, which include Brownsville, McAllen, Harlingen, and the small towns in-between. Unlike many magnet schools, The Science Academy was created not to desegregate the school districts in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (the Valley), but, rather, to offer students in the Valley educational opportunities and curricular offerings not found in their home schools.

STISD was created originally to give special education students in the Valley a place to receive training and an education. Consequently, STISD's goal always has been to provide unique educational opportunities to all students, regardless of abilities or disabilities. The district began educating special education students as its primary goal, and that history continued with the opening of each school in the district, including the Science Academy.

The precursor to STISD, the Rio Grande Independent Rehabilitation District (RGIRD), was initiated in 1964 by a small group of Valley citizens to provide special education programs for Valley children who previously were unable to be educated in the public schools.¹ In order to continue to help serve students, the RGIRD joined with the Rio Grande Association for the Mentally Retarded and established a diagnostic and evaluation center as well as a residential day school. The District bought the South Texas Habilitation Center in Hidalgo County and updated its buildings to house a residential program and a training program for its students.²

Opening for its first school year in 1957, The South Texas Habilitation Center was a regional training school for retarded young people between the ages of sixteen and thirty. Vocational training in homemaking, agriculture, and industrial shop was offered to its students. The center was created as a pilot training program "to provide vocational training to retarded young people to enable them to return to their own communities whenever possible, to take their places as useful, adjusted members of society, and to be either partially or fully self-supporting."³

The school continued to grow as more students were recommended to the program, and by 1966 a residential-day complex was created at the Edinburg school.⁴ By 1968, Harlingen also had a residential day complex.⁵ As time progressed and federal and state mandates required that handicapped students be educated in the "least restrictive

environment" (LRE) possible, the student population in the district changed from a mildly handicapped population to a more severely handicapped population.⁶ As these laws were put into effect, the two segregated campuses in Edinburg and San Benito, which offered educational services exclusively to handicapped students, were beginning to see fewer and fewer referrals from the surrounding school districts. The students that were referred to the district by the home districts changed in that more severely disabled students comprised the most frequently referred case for which the home district sought help.

As these changes occurred, STISD switched its focus of education for handicapped and special needs students to a focus of educational opportunity for all students with the creation of the South Texas High School for Health Professions in 1984 and The Science Academy in 1989. In a "Five Year Vision Plan" created by STISD in 1991, the district explained its goals for special education students and the LRE.

The goal for which we reach as well as its inherent importance to the handicapped student we serve must be kept clearly in mind:

The basic intent of LRE, and apparently the commitment of STISD, is to explore ways in which the meaningful interactions between students with disabilities and their peers can be developed, maintained, and enhanced....In addition, integration efforts should enhance the interaction between a student and the people who live in his/her local community (example: neighborhood school concept). Finally, integration efforts should allow for the IEP (Individual Education Plan) team to successfully arrange regular classroom, non-classroom, extracurricular and community activities which promote the competence and integration of each student. It is noted that integration in this sense has both placement and curriculum implications.⁷

STISD viewed itself as a "leader of public schools" which through its work with the educational community identified educational needs within the Valley and then created clear, simple goals to address those needs.⁸ One of the needs that the Valley school districts identified was help in providing educational programs to its special education students. Before LRE, Valley districts did not want to create special programs for their special education students. Principal Ed Argueta explained:

They didn't have the programs, they didn't have the teachers, they didn't have the ability, they didn't know

the law, they didn't know the regulations. And South Texas ISD was created with that in mind initially, and we were the resident experts of how to deal with these students, and we had the facilities. Now the government says you have to have a very good reason why you cannot serve these students within your home district. So districts now find it very hard to get rid of a student from their district. They have to really have somebody that has unique needs that the district can say, "There's no way that I can meet these needs."⁹

Once LRE mandates were established, the school districts were required to have the facilities and programs to accommodate the needs of every student regardless of handicap. As a result, local school districts turned to STISD for help in creating such programs. STISD formed an Itinerant Team in order to help districts meet the needs of their special education students.

Helping Other Districts Meet Students' Needs: The Itinerant Team and Satellite Units

In 1989, the STISD school board established an Itinerant Team to help other Valley school districts comply with LRE regulations. This team of special education professionals were contracted out to other districts throughout the Valley to provide psychological and instructional services. "The team promotes education in the least restrictive environment and provides special education programs to handicapped students who cannot be served by their district without additional help."¹⁰ During the 1990-91 and 1991-92 school years, twenty-seven of the twenty-eight districts in the Valley contracted the Itinerant Team's services. At the time, the Itinerant Team was limited to psychological assessments, behavior management training, counseling, deaf infant and parent training services, and staff development training.¹¹ STISD's goal in helping the Valley school districts was to "develop a more proactive and positive attitude towards special education services and least restrictive environment concepts for all children."¹²

Another way that STISD helped Valley schools educate their special education students was through the establishment of the Satellite Units. In 1991, superintendents from all over the Valley met and discussed pressing needs for the districts. Out of those discussions emerged the need to work with emotionally disturbed (ED) students in their home districts. Because these students were severely ED, they could not be integrated into the regular education program; LRE required that the home districts meet the needs of these students. So, inter-district agreements were initiated between STISD and other Valley school districts.¹³

Superintendent Schraer approached Glenda Quintanilla to have her supervise the Satellite Units. Quintanilla, a special education teacher, joined the faculty of Med High in 1989 and moved to the Science Academy when it opened its new facility in 1992.¹⁴ At the time the Satellite Unit supervision was to be a two week commitment, but that two weeks turned into the 1992-1993 school year. In addition to her duties at Science Academy, Quintanilla was responsible for setting up the Satellite units. She hired

assistants for the program to help work in each unit. At the time the satellite units began, Raymondville, Lyford, La Feria, and Mercedes had STISD units on their campuses.¹⁵ Because they were unable to find another supervisor, Quintanilla continued in this role until the end of the year. The satellite units became a successful program and a principal and a supervisor were hired to run the program full-time for the 1993-94 school year. Quintanilla thoroughly enjoyed her time working with the Satellite units.

I traveled to the districts. I was on the phone constantly, whatever they needed, the teachers needed, we would get. We had the students; they were served at their home district with our teachers, our materials, our buildings. Whatever they needed, we took to them. The districts said we need help with their ED students, so South Texas came to the rescue, AGAIN. (Her emphasis.)¹⁶

The Satellite Units' success continued through the 1992-1993 school year when Port Isabel, Rio Hondo, and Mission began using the services.¹⁷ By the 1996-1997 school year, however, declining enrollment forced STISD to consolidate two units. Five more satellite units were closed by the spring of 1997. By 2002, two units continued to be open.¹⁸

Dwindling Enrollment Leads to Changes

The Satellite Unit program was not the only one that had to make major changes during this time. As a result of LRE and dwindling referrals to the schools in Edinburg and San Benito, STISD dissolved the Edinburg school, renovated the existing facilities, and opened the Teacher Academy in 1991. The San Benito school remained a special education-focused school until its focus was changed to South Texas Academy of Medical Technology (Med Tech) in 2003. The students who attended Edinburg's self-contained special education programs remained at Teacher Academy, while the other special education populations were distributed between Med High and Science Academy.¹⁹ By the Fall of 1993, the new group of special education students were officially Science Academy students.²⁰

Science Academy's Special Education Students

Even though a group of special education students were new to the Science Academy in 1993, special education students had always been part of the school. When the new facility opened in 1992, a Special Education wing was designed and built specifically for the special education faculty and students. In fact, the first Science Academy yearbook, *The Catalyst*, includes a page devoted to the special education faculty and students. A story about the special education program is included with pictures of seven special education students and a picture of the four staff members.

Ever wonder what goes on in the classes beyond the double doors in the first hall? The four rooms are occupied by the Special Education classes. We are all

acquainted with the familiar faces of Frankie and Annabell, but what do their classes consist of?²¹

Quintanilla's first students at Med High and then Science Academy were emotionally disturbed (ED) and learning disabled (LD) students. The special education department consisted of the self-contained program and a pull-out program for emotionally disturbed (ED) and learning disabled (LD) students. These students were mainstreamed into four courses at Science Academy and spent the remainder of their day with a specialized staff member. "The objective of the special education program is to try and mainstream the students so that they may learn to cope with a regular education setting."²²

The Self-Contained Special Education Program: On the Job Training

Quintanilla's program for the self-contained special education students at Med High/Science Academy was community based education, also called on-the-job training (OJT). For OJT, students had two training sites within the community where they would work before and after lunch. Students were transported to and from school on STISD buses, and Quintanilla organized and supervised the students. Two of the other staff members accompanied students to the job sites.

When I started at Med High, all I had were kids out in the community. I had them full time. They were mine from the minute they stepped off the bus until they got on the bus in the afternoon. We did a lot of OJT on campus, at the library, at the main office. We had students working at central office, and they were working and getting paid. I had a couple of students that would get a monthly check. I had students training at the cafeteria, on the custodial staff, I had them everywhere on campus. We did that for a while, and then we ventured out into the community when we got brave, and I figured they were ready to go out and start working in the community.²³

Even though some students were paid by the training sites, a salary was not a program requirement. In 1989, the OJT program for Med High and Science Academy had thirteen students enrolled, and eight were placed in training sites within the community: Alegro's Flower Shop, Mercedes Upholstery, Farmer's Market, Montoya's Service Station, and a few others. Six other students worked around campus and in STISD offices.²⁴ During the 1992-93 school year, training sites included the Cortez Coffee Shop, New Creations Car Wash, and the City of Weslaco.²⁵ Even though the special education population has continued to dwindle over time, OJT still continues to the present. During the 2002-2003 school year, OJT had two students in the program, one working at Wal-Mart and the other at a local restaurant.

Vocational Courses for Self-Contained Special Education Students

When OJT began, students were separated from the general education courses that the Science Academy offered. However as time progressed and the student population changed, the Special Education department had to adapt to the different needs of its students. As a result, vocational courses and inclusion courses for the self-contained special education students were begun. In the early 1990s, vocational instruction was offered for special education students in trades and industry, horticulture, and home economics. The goal of the community-based instruction program was "to help handicapped students develop independence in their daily lives, and Vocational adjustment classes provide students with either vocational, job training or full or part-time employment."²⁶

Vocational Inclusion Courses

One of the programs that was implemented at Science Academy was the inclusion program between Manuel Vega's vocational students and the students in Dale Coalson's technology courses. Vega taught in the special education department and mainly worked with ED and LD students who were unable to be mainstreamed into regular education courses; Vega's courses consisted of Life Skills and Industrial Trades courses, emphasizing construction/building. When Coalson and Vega realized that there were overlaps in content in their respective courses, they decided that some of Vega's students would attend Coalson's courses.

Our philosophy was this: when you can plug curriculum into these kids, do it. When it's not appropriate, pull them out. Let's say I was teaching Introduction to Drafting, and Vega had four kids who were able to listen in on that, they had the skills, they sat in my class with the rest of the kids, they did the assignments, they had an aide who came with them and helped assist in modifications. When we got to the point where the regular ed kids started going right past them, we pulled them out. They didn't just sit there; we worked as long as we could get something out of that instructional lesson, then we stopped. And then we'd find another avenue, and put them back in. And in between there, they had their own instruction that they were doing. It was a fantastic inclusion program.²⁷

Another way that the special education inclusion students would work with the regular education students was through the production laboratory at Science Academy.

From the faculty's visits at Rice University through the Rice summer program, teachers and staff visited many of the engineering and design laboratories at Rice. They found that the engineering graduate students who had a budget for their projects would hire machinists to actually build the graduate students' plans and designs. The technology teachers took this idea back to Science Academy.

We said, we'll do that in high school. And for a while, we had that working. We taught special ed students [in the technology courses], and we got a lot of recognition for that. Usually these two don't meet. We had [regular education] kids who could design wonderful things, and then would go work with the Industrial trades kids, and they, some of them were from really terrible homes, had some really serious problems, but they can build. And you get these two people talking across the table where they would never meet in a high school.²⁸

Unfortunately, the population of special education students at Science Academy dropped substantially as the other school districts in the Valley began to implement their own special education programs as a result of LRE.

Another educational result of the special education inclusion courses occurred when the special education students became "teachers" in the regular education technology courses. The special education students, as a result of their courses with Vega, were very good at using power tools; Coalson's students, however, were not as adept. Vega's students taught the general education students about tools and tool safety because in many instances, the special education students knew more about the tools than the teachers.

Vega's kids would teach my kids safety. They would bone up, "you're going to teach the band saw." They'd learn every single tiny part, because they wanted to impress those girls that they knew their band saws. It worked. It was a cool program.²⁹

Unfortunately, these inclusion programs for self-contained special education students were discontinued in the late 1990s as the special education enrollment declined. Instead of completely abandoning the vocational courses, however, the Architectural Science program evolved from the inclusion course that Coalson and Vega had created. Instead of Vega's students taking part in Coalson's courses and teaching tools to the regular education students, the special education students used their knowledge and expertise of carpentry and tools and began work with Habitat for Humanity.³⁰ At present, two vocational courses exist for the special education department: General Mechanics (auto repair) and Architectural Science.

The Science Academy Print Shop: The Gutenberg Press

The success of Vega's and Coalson's inclusion program prompted discussions among Mark Schroll, one of the technology teachers, Quintanilla, Coalson, and Principal Jeff Hembree as to what other types of programs could be created for the special education students that would provide direct involvement with general education Science Academy students. With the blessing of the other teachers, Schroll proposed that a Science Academy print shop be created where general education students would have a formal method for obtaining copies and transparencies for school projects and presentations. The Print Shop would be used as

a training facility and work-site for the Community Based instruction program.

The general idea is to extend the "real world" aspect of the students' training by offering printing services to the students and faculty of the Science Academy. It is to be emphasized that the services offered by the formation of the print shop are only an extension of a class activity and are not the primary function of the print shop.³¹

The print shop, which became known as The Gutenberg Press, became an essential part of life at Science Academy. As general education students' needs arose for bound copies of presentations and other related services, The Gutenberg Press adapted to meet those needs. With the help of Quintanilla and other special education staff members, the special education students created transparencies, printed and bound books, hole punched, collated, stuffed envelopes, and almost everything else that a basic print shop did. "We were a mini Kinko's and it worked well. We did a lot for the students, we did a lot for the administration building, all the applications that are sent out to colleges and universities, we printed, stuffed, and labeled. My students did that."³² The Gutenberg Press was such an important part of life at Science Academy that the yearbook *The Catalyst* has a page devoted to the Press for each of the years that the program ran.

By the 2000 school year, the population change in the Special Education program along with the readily available mass-market print shops near the Mercedes campus and the rest of the Valley forced the school's print shop to close. Quintanilla's focus then turned full-time to meeting the needs of the special education students who were enrolled in general education courses but needed extra help or modifications. Out of this need, the Content Mastery Center was created. Quintanilla became a contact teacher for mainstreamed special education students and ran the Content Mastery Center.

Special Education Programs for ED and LD Students

In addition to organizing the OJT program for Science Academy, Quintanilla is also responsible for running the other special education programs for the mainstreamed students who receive special education services. Each special education student at Science Academy has specific needs that must be met in order for him/her to be successful despite his/her disability. Most students who are mainstreamed into the regular education courses at Science Academy are considered LD students, which includes dyslexic students, students with auditory impairments, speech impairments, mobility impairments, and other learning disabilities. ED students also make up some of the mainstreamed special education students. All mainstreamed special education students have a contact teacher, a special education teacher who keeps in contact with the students' teachers and parents. Quintanilla and Josie Garcia are the main faculty in the special education department and as a result, are contact teachers for the special education students. As contact teachers, Quintanilla and Garcia monitor students by periodically checking in with a student's teachers to find out

about the student's progress as well as sending individualized reports home to parents. These individualized reports help to keep students, parents, and teachers aware of each student's progress as well as providing an opportunity each time for students to receive specific help if they need it. Another way that the mainstreamed students can receive help is through the Content Mastery Center at Science Academy.

Content Mastery

The Content Mastery Center (CMC), housed in Quintanilla's classroom, is where mainstreamed special education students get help from Quintanilla and her staff of aides.

[Mainstreamed special education students] are 100% mainstreamed, in the regular program, doing what your "average intelligence student" is doing, but with disabilities. In other words, Josie is regular but I have learning problems. I'm still sitting next to her in the same class, doing everything she is doing. I just need extra help, and that's when they come to us. I have two assistants, and we all help them. We help them finish those projects, learn the vocabulary, if they need extra time to find the definitions, or get on the internet, if they are working on something that requires internet assistance.³³

All special education students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that lists the various modifications each student is required to have. Teachers have copies of the modifications and know if a student needs extra time working on a project or test, or other modifications which may require a student visiting the CMC classroom.

Quintanilla and Garcia are responsible also for training the Science Academy staff in the areas of special education. Various topics of training sessions include how to modify lessons and assignments and how to work with emotionally disturbed students. If a teacher needs help modifying an examination or assignments, Garcia and Quintanilla are available. "The most important thing is that the teachers need to know that we are a resource."³⁴

In some cases, special education students have transitioned out of the special education department. These students learned how to modify and adapt to the regular education classroom so well that they do not need support services such as CMC. However, Quintanilla continues to monitor these students. During the 2002-2003 school year, she had three students who received no other services from special education other than her three-week progress check-ups. Quintanilla continued checking in with these students so that if a problem ever arose, she and Garcia would be able to help students get back on track and excel in their academics. Higher Learning Opportunities for All

Most important for Quintanilla and Garcia is their belief that even if a student has a learning disability, "that doesn't mean that you are dumb. It means that you just need a little extra help."³⁵ As a result, all students in the special education department are encouraged to attend college—as are all students at Science Academy—whether it be a local community college or university, or, in the case of the self-

contained special education students, the Texas State Technical College (TSTC). The self-contained students' program is directly linked to the program at TSTC; if a student finishes learning his/her trade at Science Academy, they have the opportunity to continue their training at TSTC. Many of the skills that the students learn at Science Academy are also taught at TSTC, which allows students an easier transition into their new learning environment.³⁶

Quintanilla and Garcia believe another of their responsibilities for their students is to give students the knowledge of how to find services if they need help—they want their students to learn to be as independent as possible even with their disability or learning disability. In order to help facilitate a smoother transition to college for students. Garcia arranged for the various agencies such as the Texas Rehabilitation Commission to visit with students and inform them on the types of services and assistance for which they are eligible. In March of 2002, Garcia took her students to the office of Support Services at TSTC and to the Learning Center at The University of Texas-Pan American to show students where they can go for help and to acquaint them with the types of support services that are available to them at those campuses.

Helping Other Districts

The strength of the special education department at Science Academy is their personal touch—from monitoring students who have transitioned out of the program to encouraging each and every special education student to pursue higher learning. "We accommodate a lot, and maybe because we are a magnet school, we have more of a personal touch. That is what makes it unique. You are not a number. Anywhere else, you are a number. Any other district, you are a number. Not here. Here the students are not numbered; they have names and faces."³⁷

The desire to help students is not unique to the Science Academy; it is the fundamental goal of STISD, just as it was for the Rehabilitation District begun in the 1960s. All students deserve to have the opportunity to learn. Even to this day, if a district in the Valley cannot accommodate the needs of one of their special education students or need help, they call on STISD.

I don't think South Texas ISD has ever said NO [her emphasis] to a need. But if Mercedes ISD calls and says, "[Superintendent] Guerra, we need something, we can't provide it," even if we don't have it, we will create it. We will help that student. We will find a way to do it. They'll get the resources, they'll get the teacher, whatever is needed. And I have seen that in the thirteen years I have been here. We won't say no to our other districts. That has been our mission. We are here, we are a magnet school, we are here to serve the needs of the students, and we have always done it. It has never been a question that we are not going to do it. We have always helped.³⁸

The dedication to helping students is not limited to helping special education students, as was the original goal of

STISD. Instead, STISD and Science Academy strives to help each and every student it serves, regardless of a student's special needs.

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¹⁴ Glenda Quintanilla and Josie Garcia (Special Education teachers, Science Academy) Taped interview with author, December 20, 2002, Science Academy, Mercedes, Texas.

¹⁵ "STISD 1991-1992 Performance Report" p. 11, in "1991-1992 Performance Report" file in STISD archives.

¹⁶ Quintanilla interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Boardworks*, April 22, 1997, in "Boardworks File" in STISD Archives.

¹⁹ In 1993, because of lack of interest in the school's focus, it changed from a teacher academy to the South Texas Business, Education and Technology Academy (BETA). The school is the only magnet school in STISD that offers education at the 7th and 8th grade levels as well as 9th-12th.

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