

A Voice and a Choice for Students with Special Needs

Nofre Vaquer 04 April 2011

What do children with special needs want? What do they need? What do their parents want? What do their teachers need? Although it is often hazardous to generalize, I trust the reader would agree with me on this answer: Children with special needs, their parents and their teachers want and need the same thing: a free and appropriate education that will give them the opportunity to become citizens in good standing who are productive members of society, and the ability to maximize their potential in preparation for an independent life. There are many ways to approach the education of students with special needs. As is often the case, all options have their strengths and weaknesses. But all are at risk of failing to achieve the intended outcome of an appropriate education when used as a template for each individual case and not as a general starting point.

Specialized schools offer an attractive solution to the special needs population by consolidating resources where students benefit from a higher degree of consistency, structure and routine geared toward their specific learning abilities. In this environment, educators

can maximize the results for each student. All students in these schools have special needs and therefore do not socialize with peers without special needs. School districts often discover that this model can be cost prohibitive because of its elevated relative cost per student ratio, compared to the cost of educating students in the general classroom. This model also negates important and necessary socialization opportunities.

Inclusion of students with special needs in general classrooms and mainstream scholarly life, when executed correctly with the proper support and resources can enhance the learning experience by providing not only an adequate education, but also much-needed socialization. These classrooms are often less structured and consistent, offering less routine than specialized school classrooms. They place a heavier burden on the teachers, as curricula must be modified to make them appropriate to all students, including those with special needs. A second teacher trained in special education is typically required in addition to any other related personnel to offer support. All these factors increase the cost of education.

Some experts also suggest placing the special needs population in self-contained classes within the regular school system, where trained teachers with modified curricula and materials could potentially obtain similar outcomes to those in the specialized schools model. This option could be considered a hybrid of full inclusion and

specialized schools.

I am a firm believer in inclusion. Students with special needs should be included in regular classrooms and receive the same free and suitable education offered to every other student. In my opinion, inclusion done appropriately in the general classroom has several advantages. Students who don't have special needs will learn about their peers and their unique abilities, and hopefully attain a sensitivity and awareness of people's differences. Students with special needs included in a general classroom, receiving a modified education, will maximize their learning and receive the extra benefit of socialization. Both groups will learn, collaborate, and grow together. Students certainly learn from their teachers; however, they also learn from their peers. This learning experience may or may not have immediate tangible results, but will remain with all students, regardless of ability, for the rest of their lives. It will also help ensure that future generations will have little tolerance for segregation or discrimination.

Having students included in the mainstream of school life depends upon having well-trained and resourceful teachers, possibly special education-trained teachers, who can adapt and modify the appropriate curriculum to any need. The classrooms may be less structured and require additional resources to make sure the students' needs are met. These fundamental requirements will offer continued support over time, and they will greatly reduce

the impact on funds dedicated by federal, state and local governments to programs for adults with disabilities.

To be successful in inclusion of special students and reap the benefits I believe it represents, the process must begin on day one. Special students should remain in the general classroom until graduation. Inclusion requires well-trained teachers who can think outside the box in order to teach the same curricula to students with a full spectrum of abilities. It also requires experienced personnel who can provide the support and accommodations needed to allow students with special needs to excel through their education.

So what is the best option, if any? They all represent expensive propositions in an environment of finite resources. In the end, however, the greatest expense is leaving the system in its current state, which reflects both immediate lost opportunity and obvious future human cost. We should ask ourselves *when* to invest in a model rather than how much will it cost, because the consequences are far greater than the cost.

Final decisions should always be left in the students' and parents' hands. To do that, we need options. If inclusion is accomplished with the appropriate resources and the firm belief that the rewards are far greater than any cost, financial or cultural, all other options become irrelevant. Society will greatly benefit from both the apparent and the not-so-tangible rewards of having an inclusive student

system from beginning to end. The greatest proof and guide is history and its constant reminder of the human cost of expensive mistakes, wasted time and misused financial resources.

Nofre Vaquer is the Director of The Arc of Philadelphia, a 62-year-old not-for-profit organization that advocates for the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and actively supports their full inclusion and participation in the community throughout their lifetimes. He is a graduate of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia with a BS in Marketing and an MBA in Finance. He has worked in the private sector in the fields of operations, finance and project management and now dedicates his energy to supporting the interests of the intellectual and developmental disability community. He is a proponent of inclusion in the classroom, having witnessed it firsthand when he shared several school years with students with special needs.