

The Special EDGE

Autumn 2009

Volume 23

Number 1

Standards and Students with Disabilities

Keys to Creating Standards-Based IEPs



By Margaret McLaughlin, PhD, Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education, College of Education, University of Maryland

Creating an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a student with a disability is an exercise in decision making. In the case of a standards-based IEP, the decisions require an in-depth knowledge of grade-level curriculum content, coupled with an extensive “tool kit” for assessing student performance and designing instruction. These key decisions involve the following:

- Determining how the child’s disability affects his or her performance and progress in the general education curriculum and the present level of performance in the grade-level curriculum
- Developing standards-based, measurable goals
- Determining how progress will be monitored
- Specifying accommodations, services, and supports that are (to the extent possible) based on peer-reviewed research
- Determining where services will be provided and by whom, with preference for the general education classroom

Determining a Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance

Assessment must address three critical areas: what a child has already achieved academically and

functionally; how a child’s disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum; and how a child’s social and behavioral development affects academic and functional performance. Although assessment is the foundation of a standards-based IEP, members of the IEP team must also understand the general education curriculum, which outlines what exactly you are looking for in a student’s performance and achievement.

Understanding the General Education Curriculum

There is a critical distinction between the curriculum that is taught and the curriculum that is intended.¹ The taught curriculum includes teacher behaviors, such as questioning or lecturing; time allocated for instruction; grouping arrangements; classroom rules; and materials such as textbooks, worksheets, electronic media. The taught curriculum can also include less formal teacher comments or conversations that reflect beliefs and attitudes about the topic. Remember . . . not everything that is being taught is necessary to learn!

1. Victor Nolet and Margaret J. McLaughlin, *Accessing the General Curriculum: Including Students with Disabilities in Standards-Based Reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005.

The focus for the IEP should be on the intended curriculum, which is the content, or the essential knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn as a result of their school experiences. This intended curriculum involves an explicit body of knowledge related to a particular area, such as math, language arts, physical education, and so forth. Perhaps most importantly, the curriculum specifies the sequence in which information is taught and learned across a grade level or at key benchmarks. Finally, curriculum can also dictate how much instructional time should be allocated for various topics and activities by the number of standards or substandards in a particular subject area.

Keys, continued on page 4

Inside This Issue

Overview of the Standards Movement	3
Alternate Service Delivery Models	7
California High Schools Shake Things Up	9
Math Teacher Gets Cosmic	16
Insert	
Standards-Based IEPs: How to Do It	

Director, Special Education Division,
California Department of Education
Mary Hudler

Contract Monitor and Project Liaison
Janet Canning

Project Manager
Anne Davin

Editor
Mary Cichy Grady

Editorial Assistant
Giselle Blong

CDE Consultants
Meredith Cathcart
Georgianne Knight
Allison Smith

Content Consultants
Linda Blong
Geri West

Special Contributors
Sharen Bertando
Silvia DeRuvo
Margaret McLaughlin



Mary Hudler, Director
California Department of Education
Special Education Division

The letter for this issue of *The Special Edge* is my opportunity to tell you that after working for 44 years in education, 39 of which have been devoted to special education, I have decided to retire in March 2010.

My work in special education began in 1972, before the passage of Public Law 94-142, "The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975." Since that time, I've seen many changes—in terminology, in laws and

regulations, and in people's hopes for students with disabilities.

In 1972, I began teaching at and serving as the principal of a nonpublic school for students with learning disabilities and behavior disorders. I also ran a pilot, phonics-based language program for adult students who were released from state hospitals during Governor Ronald Reagan's enactment of deinstitutionalization.

At that time, one of my students was a man in his fifties who was hard of hearing and who had some visual acuity problems; his diagnosed disability was "mental retardation." He had been in an institution for the majority of his life, but books were very important to him; he carried them with him even though he could not read.

After several weeks of instruction, it became apparent that he could be taught to read. Over the next several months, he worked very hard, and at the culmination of the course, I knew he was able and ready to read, but he did not yet realize it. One day in class I opened a book to a story I knew he could read and asked him to read in front of the other students. I taped the reading. After he finished everyone applauded, and he looked surprised. I told him "Congratulations. You are now a reader!" He didn't believe it. I asked him to reopen the book, and I turned on the recorder. He was amazed as he heard himself read the story. He started to cry, and we all joined in, sharing his tears of joy!

It has been my life-long privilege to serve students with disabilities and their families. Although change is inevitable, our dedication to holding high aspirations for these students must remain a heart-felt constant. I consider myself very fortunate to have had such a wonderful career and to have shared with others a passion for work that makes a positive difference in the lives others. As you—students, parents, and educators—continue in this work, I wish you well.

—Mary Hudler

The Special Edge is published tri-annually by Napa County Office of Education's CalSTAT Project (California Services for Technical Assistance and Training). Funding is provided by the California Department of Education, Special Education Division, through contract number CN077046 with Napa County Office of Education (NCOE). Contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of Napa County Office of Education or the California Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement.

Circulation: 51,000

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Contact *The Special Edge* by phone at 707-849-2275; or mail to the following:
The Special Edge
c/o NCOE/CalSTAT
5789 State Farm Drive, Suite 230
Rohnert Park, California 94928
or e-mail giselle.blong@calstat.org.

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Standards and Students with Disabilities



By Margaret McLaughlin, PhD, Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Education, College of Education, University of Maryland

The education of students with disabilities in U.S. schools is being shaped today by two sweeping laws with long legislative histories: the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, PL 108-446) and the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, PL 107-110). However, current policies had their origins in a movement that began more than 20 years ago, a movement referred to as “standards-based reform.” Events such as the release of the 1983 “A Nation at Risk” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, April, 1983; www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/title.html) and the 1989 Educational Summit held in Charlottesville, VA, led to calls for greater curricular rigor and for imposing state standards for what students must achieve. The passage of the Goals 2000: Educating America Act (PL 103-227), and the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, PL 103-382, Improving America’s Schools Act) further defined the state’s responsibility for ensuring that all students met new and challenging standards. Specifically, if states wished to access federal Title I funds, they were required to provide each school-age child access to the same rigorous content and to hold their schools and school districts accountable for ensuring that children reached, at minimum, state-defined levels of proficiency on those standards.

The Beginnings

From the beginning of the standards movement, special education professionals and advocates for children with disabilities questioned how the new policies would be implemented for students with disabilities. Not wanting to exclude these students from such benefits as increased funding and public accountability, advocates sought to reconcile key policies and principles of

the IDEA with the emerging standards movement. The possibility of a conflict between the standards-driven reform model and special education policies was acknowledged more than a decade ago by a National Research Council committee, which concluded that the two policies were not incompatible; there were, however, definite areas of misalignment (McDonnell, McLaughlin, and Morison 1997). Since that time, changes have been made to both the ESEA and the IDEA in an attempt to create a better fit between the two sets of policies. Despite adjustments to both federal policies, educators continue to face challenges as they attempt to implement the core provisions of each act.

The 1994 Improving America’s Schools Act laid the groundwork for the current federal policies that require states receiving Title I funds to develop challenging content and achievement standards in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science and to develop and implement a single, statewide assessment and accountability system covering all students and schools. The law stipulated that all students, specifically referring to students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency, should participate in the state assessments, and that the results for all students must be publicly reported [34 C.F.R. § 111(b) (3) (F)].

New Provisions

In 1997, a number of new provisions were added to the IDEA. Notably, these amendments required that students with disabilities participate, with appropriate accommodations, in local and state assessments and/or an alternate assessment, if needed. Further, the scores from these assessments were to be reported in the same manner as those of their peers without disabilities. However, these amendments did not specifically mandate the inclusion of the scores of students with disabilities

in accountability systems (McLaughlin and Thurlow 2003). Further, the 1997 IDEA did not specifically address how state standards were to apply to students with disabilities. Thus, it was not until the passage of NCLB that there was an explicit federal law that required students with disabilities to fully participate in the state reforms, including access to content standards, assessments, and accountability.

In December 2004, Congress again reauthorized the IDEA and continued to align the educational provisions of this special education law with the requirements of NCLB. This alignment, for the first time, defined the qualifications of special education teachers. Two other new provisions in IDEA also were important to the understanding of standards and students with disabilities. Early intervening services and response to intervention (RtI) both call for general educators to have a greater role in the prevention of inappropriate identification of students as eligible for special education. Taken together, all of these new requirements signal the intent to create greater alignment between general and special education. The requirements recognize the often very fuzzy line of responsibility for educating a child with a disability.

Where Are We Now and What Can Special Educators Expect?

A big question that special educators may now be asking is “What’s next?” Are we done with developing standards? Are we finished with changes to the IDEA?

The answer is “No.” The standards movement continues; in fact, momentum is building for establishing “nationally agreed-upon standards.” The National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers have launched the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which 49

Road continued, page 5

It is also the role of the intended curriculum to address the levels of complexity, such as simple facts, verbal chains, and discriminations (“the number of oranges in a pound,” “state capitals,” “months of the year,” “big, bigger, biggest”); concepts (objects, events, or actions that share a set of characteristics; examples vs. non-examples); and rule relationships (causal or interdependent relationships among facts or concepts; “what goes up must come down”).

Standards, in turn, define the limits of what is and is not part of the curriculum in a particular area; they define the overall knowledge or scope, as well as the breadth of knowledge at each grade level.

Ongoing Assessment

These widely ranging dimensions of a curriculum make it critical for an IEP team to have an assessment plan that includes a variety of strategies that will directly measure a child’s performance in those areas of the intended, grade-level curriculum. This plan requires assessments that accomplish the following objectives:

- Assess performance across all levels of complexity that are impacted by the disability and include evidence from:
 - ♦ norm-referenced assessments;
 - ♦ individual inventories and timed probes (Individual Reading Inventories, writing prompts, error analysis, etc),
 - ♦ examination/discussion of student work, including comparing student work to others that exemplify what a proficient or ideal performance should look like.
- Provide both quantitative data and qualitative information.
- Directly inform what the child must be taught, as well as how.

Focusing on the Content Standards

Members of the IEP team also need to understand how the intended curriculum may be taught, including which materials or texts might be used or which activities may be part of the typical instruction. For instance, does

a specific topic frequently require the student to develop certain products, participate in certain types of independent activities, etc.? Remember, some strategies and content might be part of the “taught and not intended” curriculum. While it is important for IEP teams to consider how any such instructional activities might need to be accommodated, it is especially important for them to consider how students might be given an alternate assignment that still allows the student to focus on the standard.

Developing Measurable, Annual Goals

The IEP must contain annual academic and functional goals that are designed to meet those needs that directly result from the child’s disability.

*“Ready” means “never”
if we continually
focus on the
lowest-level skills*

The purpose of these goals should be to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. In general, IEP goals must be measurable and directly linked to grade-level standards.

Too often, the IEP team begins its deliberations at the goal-setting stage without a deep understanding of a child’s performance in all aspects of the curriculum. Goal setting should flow from the information gained through a comprehensive assessment, rather than from simply creating goals that repeat verbatim one or more of the specific, grade-level standards.

In short, the IEP team must perform curriculum triage. The team must know exactly which of the skills, concepts, or rule relationships in a specific subject area are critical to progressing in the general education curriculum. They must identify the skills and knowledge that are most critical, and they must consider the full scope and

sequence of the curriculum. This triage process means they must look back as well as forward into future grades.

IEP team members must also understand what aspect of the standard is impacted by the disability and will require that a goal be set. These decisions will vary with the age of the child, but the starting point should always be the child’s grade-level curriculum. “Ready” means “never” if we continually focus on the lowest-level skills because then the student will be denied the opportunity to develop the more challenging and perhaps more critical skills and knowledge needed in future years.

Consider the following “standard” in middle school mathematics pertaining to algebra: Developing patterns, relationships, and algebraic thinking, which includes the following two objectives: (a) use patterns and relationships to develop strategies to remember basic multiplication and division facts (such as the patterns in related multiplication and division number sentences (fact families) such as $9 \times 9 = 81$ and $81 \div 9 = 9$; and (b) use organizational structures to analyze and describe patterns and relationships.

It may be tempting to simply repeat the language of the standard. However, the IEP team needs to understand the essence of the standard. What do we want students to do with respect to the standard by the time they finish middle school, and how will we know what that “doing” looks like? What types of problems—both real-life and paper-and-pencil—should the student be able to solve? How should students be able to explain concepts they have learned? Once we’ve answered those questions, then we can decide what we want the student to accomplish. Clearly, this kind of goal cannot be stated exclusively, if at all, in traditional behavioral terms (e.g., “the student will complete problems involving division of two-digit numbers with 85 percent accuracy”).

Reporting Progress

The IEP must include a description of how the child’s progress toward meeting the annual goals will be measured and when periodic reports will be provided on the progress toward meeting

the annual goals—typically through the use of quarterly, periodic reports, for example, or with report cards. The IEP should document those specific levels of improvement on curriculum-based measures (and other products) that will show that the student is advancing toward the goals. Grades may not be enough because they may reflect only performance on the taught curriculum and not progress toward understanding a specific concept within the intended standards. The IEP team should also specify who will monitor a child's progress and what will be done if there is no progress.

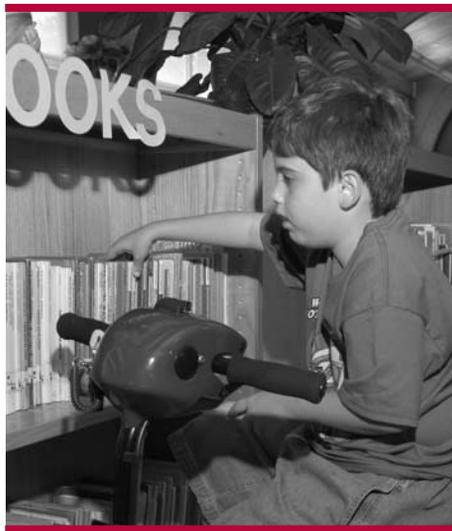
Not Participating in General Education

Ideally, most children would be taught in general education classrooms with their same-aged peers. However, this is not always possible. As such, the IEP must contain an explanation of the extent, if any, to which a child will not participate with non-disabled children in the general education class and other activities, as well as a justification for any decision to remove a child from the general education classroom. In order to meet the IEP goals, a child may need a level of instructional support that can be delivered only in an individual or small-group setting. For instance, the IEP team may decide that a student needs a very structured writing program to supplement the in-class support and accommodations. This kind of program may require a one-on-one setting for some period of time. In addition, the team may decide that the student will receive the program in a specialized setting, with a special education teacher or trained paraprofessional. When this kind of situation is warranted, the team needs to be clear and flexible: clear on the anticipated outcomes of the program and how progress will be monitored; flexible in how personnel and other resources in a school can be used creatively to provide targeted instruction.

Conclusion

The education of students with disabilities will continue to occur within the context of standards, and IEPs must focus on identifying the

accommodations and special education and related services that each individual child needs in order to fully access instruction in grade-level subject matter content and to progress toward predetermined achievement goals. To implement these changes, special and general educators need to work together in new ways that go beyond some of the current collaboration and co-teaching practices. Deep subject matter content knowledge and strong assessment and teaching skills need to be braided together to create IEPs that are more than paper documents, rather they become clear road maps for the education of children with disabilities.



Creating meaningful, standards-based IEPs will not happen during one meeting or event. This process has implications for what must occur in day-to-day, week-to-week instruction in schools. In fact, it is occurring in individual schools across the country. The effort now is to embrace the changes as real opportunities and not barriers—to change our lens from one that focuses on what a child with a disability cannot do to one that sees how to give children every opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills that will be vital to their futures and their lives. ♦

A number of online resources address the topic of linking the IEP to general education content standards. One excellent overview of research and models for developing these IEPs is available from CAST at www.cast.org/publications/nca/nca_iep.html.

states and territories have joined. The governors and state commissioners of education are committing to developing a common core of state standards in English language arts and mathematics for grades K–12. These standards will be research- and evidence-based, internationally benchmarked, and aligned with college and work expectations; and they will include rigorous content and skills. The U.S. Department of Education is providing support to states to develop these standards. Clearly the effort will expand standards throughout the curriculum and promise to be even more rigorous.

So, what does this mean for special educators? During the past 10–15 years, teachers and professionals have often been pulled between the implementation of universal standards and their traditional understanding of special education and beliefs about students with disabilities. Much of the strain that special educators face centers on the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The IEP and Standards

The standards movement, specifically the changes that have been made to Title I of NCLB and IDEA 2004, has made visible some fundamental issues with the structure of the IDEA. This law is both a civil rights law and an education law. The core civil rights protections of the law, including the “zero reject” provisions for children with disabilities, and the accompanying procedural safeguards, constitute the rights portion of the law. The educational aspects of the law are embedded in the entitlement to an appropriate education as defined through the IEP. While there are procedural (i.e., prescribed timelines and processes for its development) and substantive (i.e., the program must result in educational benefit) requirements, the determination of an appropriate education is made on a student-by-student basis (Yell 2006).

As standards have focused schools on ensuring that students with disabilities have a real opportunity to access the

Road, continued on page 6

subject-matter content that is deemed important for all students, the IEP has begun to change as well. Specifically, educators are aligning IEP goals with state content and achievement standards. Referred to as “standards-based IEPs” (NASDSE, August, 2007), the practice involves directly linking the IEP goals to the state grade-level content standards and assessments. With these IEPs, each child receives an individually designed plan of services and supports that are geared to moving the student toward attaining state-determined standards. For some special educators, these IEPs appear to contradict the principle of individualization and to subvert the procedural rights for determining what constitutes a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for a student.

Why Do We Need Standards-Based IEPs?

The “purpose” section of the IDEA states that the goals of educating children with disabilities are to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a FAPE that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and that prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living [20 U.S.C. 1400, Sec 601 (d)]. These goals are not dissimilar from those for all children. Yet, as Green (1983) argues, “We cannot [provide] an education that is uniquely suited . . . for each individual and at the same time give to each an education that is as good as that provided for everyone else.” (p. 319).

All students with disabilities need meaningful and equal opportunities to master the skills necessary for post-school success; these skills include high levels of proficiency in key areas such as literacy and mathematics. A variety of reports have documented the importance of high levels of achievement across all sectors of the economy. The 2000 SCANS report notes that all employees must be competent in three major skill areas: (1) basic skills, including reading, writing,

mathematics, speaking, and listening; (2) thinking skills, including thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, seeing things in the mind’s eye, knowing how to learn, and reasoning; and (3) personal qualities, such as responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity and honesty (<http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/whatwork/whatwork.pdf>). A study of major corporations indicated a major gap between the skills most needed in the workforce and those possessed by new employees. These skills include professionalism/work ethic, oral and written communication, teamwork/collaboration, and critical thinking/problem solving. A recent study (ACT 2005) found that the mathematics and reading skill levels required to work as an electrician, plumber, or upholsterer were comparable to those needed to succeed in college.

Given the importance of these skills to a child’s future, it is imperative that children with disabilities have IEP goals that reflect the same content and

level of expected attainment that guide the education of other children. An education where standards are separated from the IEP cannot provide a full and meaningful opportunity for a child to learn what he or she will need as an adult. ♦

A complete list of references for this article is available at www.calstat.org/infoAdditionalResources.html. The following documents from that list are also available online:

Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Disabilities: The Role of the IEP at www.cast.org/publications/ncacl/ncacl_iep.html.

Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers’ Perspectives in the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce at www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf.

The Condition of College Readiness 2009 at www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/CollegeReadiness.html.

Tools

That Support District and Program Improvement

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires school districts that receive funds under Titles I, II, and III to meet certain student achievement targets by 2013–14. The California Department of Education (CDE), in conjunction with the California County Superintendents Association, the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC), and various district organizations and associations, has completed a review and revision of school and district program self-assessment tools that are designed to help school districts meet these targets and close the achievement gap. The tools are required for use in local educational agencies in Program Improvement Year 1 and are strongly encouraged for use in any underperforming school or district. They include the following:

- Academic Program Survey (APS) at three grade levels, which has been revised to make stronger references to the needs of students with disabilities and English language learners.
- District Assistance Survey (DAS), which appraises district structures around each of the seven areas of district work at California Education Code Section 52055.59.
- English Learner Subgroup Self-Assessment (ELSSA), which triangulates data to help identify the root causes of student underachievement.
- Inventory of Services and Support (ISS) for Students with Disabilities, which builds on the DAS and APS to target the specific needs of students with disabilities.

These tools are available on both the CA CC Web site at www.cacompcenter.org/eSEA-requirements and on the State Assessment Tools Web site at www.cde.ca.gov/talac/tilstate/assesspi.asp. Anyone interested in providing feedback on these tools should e-mail Lisa McClung at CDE at Lmclung@cde.ca.gov.

Using Standards to Shape Special Education

Three years ago, it looked as if the test scores for students with disabilities at Ray Wiltsey Middle School couldn't get any worse. As a result, this school in the Ontario-Montclair School District in Southern California was put under Program Improvement (PI)¹ status by the state, and under School Assistance Intervention Team (SAIT) status by the federal government—not promising marks for any school. Today, however, the school's students with disabilities are averaging higher scores than ever before, and the school itself has exited SAIT and has made significant progress toward working its way out of PI status. What happened?

A great deal, as it turns out. While special education teacher Mrs. Tracy Galongo and several of her colleagues at Wiltsey knew that something had to change in the way they were delivering services to their students, no one knew at the outset exactly what this alternate service delivery model (ASDM) would look like. However, the folks at Wiltsey were sure of a couple of things: they wanted to teach as many of their students as possible in the general education classroom, and they wanted to provide equal access to a standards-based, core curriculum for everyone.

What happened at Wiltsey—and at Woodside K–8 School in the San Juan Unified School District, a school that went on a similar journey to find an ASDM—demonstrates what committed educators are able to accomplish when they are determined to improve the educational experience of students with disabilities.

From the start, nearly all of the essential components of Wiltsey ended up

being called into question—schedules, curriculum, instructional methods, and assessments. The school then proceeded to dismantle its fairly traditional special education program, which had consisted of segregated settings, an alternate curriculum, and a focus on remediation rather than acceleration.



What did they plan to do instead? That to-do list was impressive:

- Make performance goals consistent for all students and base them on the state standards
- Write IEP (Individualized Education Program) goals that reflect California's grade-level standards
- Provide curricular accommodations that scaffold² the standards
- Shape instructional strategies and use assistive technology that supports access to the standards
- Ensure that the level of each student's need determines placement
- Create a school-wide system of interventions

1. Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals are subject to improvement and corrective action measures, which are referred to as Program Improvement.

2. Scaffolding instruction involves breaking down a complex concept or task into smaller, more manageable parts, with the eventual goal of the student gaining full understanding of the concept and/or autonomy in the task.

Two other major components supported these reform efforts at Wiltsey. One was the district's decision—also three years ago—to “level classrooms” by using student scores to group students according to their academic needs. These “levels” were fluid, however, with no hint of “tracking,” for as soon as a student was able to demonstrate proficiency at one level, he or she was moved up to the next.

The other component was the school's adoption of the three-tiered, response to intervention (RtI) approach to instruction, which proved readily compatible with the district's leveling efforts. In RtI, most students are taught using best practices at what is called a “benchmark” level, or “tier one.” Students who show signs of struggling or who are in danger of falling behind their peers receive early intervention supports, called the “tier-two” level, with supplemental materials and increased instructional time. At the “tier-three” level, students are given intense remediation. At Wiltsey, this third level includes a California State Board of Education-approved intervention program, with the goal of weaving standards into intensive remediation so that students can “get up to grade level” as quickly as possible. Students in all three tiers receive the essential, grade-level content.

In its reform efforts, the school faced some major challenges. For example, how would general education teachers get help—in the form of instructional strategies or emotional support—when many of them would be working with students with disabilities for the first time? Wiltsey addressed this challenge through focused staff development and by putting special and general educators together in teams. Specific groups of students were assigned to each of these teams, and the teams then followed and supported the students. This team approach also helped to address another

Models, continued on page 8

challenge: changing the attitudes of general education teachers toward their special education colleagues. But by working together, general education teachers soon came to appreciate and value the instructional strategies that special education teachers were able to contribute to the joint effort. Many general education teachers, according to Galongo, quickly saw that most of these strategies helped to make them better teachers for all students, not just those with disabilities. Finally, Galongo and her colleagues used data to address the challenge of changing teachers' views of the students with disabilities themselves. Many teachers held stereotypes of these students as having congenital behavior problems or as being too challenged to learn grade-level content. But when the students with disabilities started producing scores that were higher in mathematics, for example, than their general education peers, attitudes among teachers changed fast.

Galongo is quick to emphasize the critical role that administrative support has played in the school's reform efforts. Lisa Somerville was Wiltsey's principal when the major changes in service delivery were initiated, and she "was supportive the moment we shared the preliminary plan with her," says Galongo. "Our vision was her vision. She gave us the time and latitude to develop the model and the time for staff development. . . . She [was] our advocate not only at the site level but at the district level. Administrative support is a must if an ASDM is to be successful."

According to Somerville, "It took a lot of time, energy, and effort to make it happen for our kids . . . but if it's good for the kids, let's make it happen!" Her own superiors have given her high points for "dogged determination"—an essential quality, according to her, for helping people change; and she is especially proud of the fact that "our model became the district's example for the other sites."

What does the alternate service delivery model at Wiltsey Middle School mean for special education teachers? It

means that their roles in the school are more diverse and their status has risen significantly. It also means they work daily with general education students and teachers. Specifically, some are involved in co-teaching and team-teaching in general education classrooms. Others work in the school's learning center during and after school to provide extra help to students. They also work in self-contained classrooms with students who are integrated into an intensive intervention course for English language arts. In general, their influence is broadly felt throughout the entire school, and they work with students of all ability levels.

There are no labels at the school now, just two teachers in a classroom

The school has realized numerous benefits from integrating general and special education. First, the obvious: its students with disabilities have equal access to grade-level core curriculum that is taught by highly qualified teachers. Then, the general education students have the benefit of highly trained special education teachers teaching their classes; these teachers know how to support struggling students, whether or not the students have an IEP. For teachers, the model has created opportunities to work together to solve instructional problems and to provide targeted instruction that supports the success of all students.

Galongo likes to point to one change in particular: "There are no labels at the school now," she says, "just two teachers in a classroom and students who know that if they do well, they'll move up." According to Galongo, this focus on learning, not on labels, and on leveling classes has also resulted in "a significant reduction in anxiety among students—they're not struggling with content that is over their heads or with a pace of instruction that they can't manage. And they are learning." She also sees

"disruptive and inappropriate behaviors disappear as a result of a positive peer influence." According to her, the students with disabilities "now have role models. They see how students behave in the general education classroom, and their expectations for themselves become higher. And we expect them to learn, so students with disabilities now discover that they often know—and can learn—just as much as other students. Their self-esteem rises."

Students with disabilities receive the core curriculum in a variety of ways at Wiltsey; it all depends on their need. They may do just fine in the general education classroom without extra help; in that same classroom they may receive some instructional support from a special educator or an instructional assistant; they may receive support indirectly, as special educators and instructional assistants work with general education teachers to provide new strategies and materials; they may get help in the learning center; and they may be in a more traditional, pull-out or self-contained class, if that need presents itself. But wherever they are, they are receiving a curriculum that is based on state standards.

When asked why she thinks standards-based instruction is so important for students with disabilities, Galongo says, "These kids need whatever it takes to succeed in life. The standards are created to help them become the best that they can be. In the past I would never have said that my special education students could go to college. Now they are inviting me to their college graduations."

Another of her reasons comes in the form of a story: "I had a student last year who sat down to take the CST (California Standards Test) and burst into tears. She was crying so hard she almost couldn't stop; and she finally said, 'This is the first time I've ever known what was on a test!' She did well on the CST. She took her time. But she was so excited that she actually knew the material. It finally was not a lesson in frustration for her. This is what motivates me to keep working."

Models, continued on page 11

How Content Standards Help Students Thrive

Jennifer Gaviola has a pretty good sense of humor. It's arguable that humor was a job requirement when she took on a leadership role in special education at the Madera Unified School District (USD) a little over four years ago. At that time, only 4 percent of the school's students with disabilities were proficient in English language arts, and only 7 percent were proficient in mathematics. Current district superintendent John Stafford makes no effort to whitewash how things looked at the time. "There were many ways the district was not doing the right thing for kids with disabilities; we had poor assessment, poor placement procedures, lots of issues around IEPs [Individualized Education Programs]," he says. Subsequently, the state gave the district a Program Improvement¹ designation for its poor special education scores.

Gaviola makes no excuses. In fact, she makes a little fun. She refers to one of the high school classes that was offered when she first arrived at Madera as "death by Algebra." And she likens the work that was ahead of her and her colleagues to "building an airplane in the sky." By all accounts, however, she and the teachers and administrators who were dedicated to changing the trajectory of academic achievement for students in special education have managed one neat trick: in 2008, as students in both general and special education at Madera showed significant gains in their levels of proficiency, the scores of the students with disabilities increased at an even faster rate. And as of last year, the district is no longer under Program Improvement (PI) status for special education.

1. Program Improvement: Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals are subject to improvement and corrective action measures, which are referred to as Program Improvement.

What changed? The chart below gives a thumbnail before-and-after picture of special education at Madera USD high schools.

When asked why—and how—the district made all of these changes, Stafford talks about "a perfect storm of

NCLB has to do with highly qualified teachers. It used to be we couldn't find them. Now they are a requirement."

It's not as though the Madera school district offered the ideal demographics for school reform and academic achievement. With a student popula-

Madera USD: 2004

No universal expectations of access to core curriculum for all special education students

Lack of clear vision for mainstreaming opportunities and lack of accountability for least restrictive environment

Lack of training in research-based interventions

Lack of accountability and compliance with Individualized Education Programs

Lack of expectations of achievement for students with disabilities

No written plan or vision of special education process and program descriptions

Inconsistency among interventions at each school site, and lack of consistency for referral processes for special education

Madera USD: 2009

Daily access to core curriculum is provided for all students.

A clearly articulated vision and process are in place for mainstreaming students with disabilities.

Yearly district trainings are provided in research-based interventions in literacy, sensory integration, and behavior management. Special education teachers are included in district initiatives and training in core materials and strategies.

100-percent compliance is expected of all sites in annual and triennial IEPs, and all sites are monitored for that compliance.

The district expects that ALL means ALL when looking at student success.

A yearly, updated special education manual includes all program components and process descriptions.

RtI processes are clearly articulated and made available in a manual. (The district has realized a 175-student reduction in special education enrollment.)

"the right people in the right place at the right time, all interested in doing the morally right thing." He and Gaviola also talk about the legal pressures that were coming to bear, particularly from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Despite all of the work that lay ahead of her, Gaviola believes that she came to the district "at an ideal time; the school had just received its PI status, so there was leverage for change. Many people are not 100-percent happy with NCLB, but it did bring special education into the spotlight and made it an issue of district leadership. NCLB also gave us leverage. The other positive outcome of

tion of 18,700, the district is made up of roughly 50 percent English-language learners. And because of the average low socioeconomic status of its students, every school in the district is a Title I school. Also, the district was looking to reform special education in its high schools, which tend to be notoriously resistant to change because of their typically large size, departmental structures, and often-inflexible schedules for classes, athletics, and buses.

But Stafford, Gaviola, and their colleagues were determined. One of the first things they did was develop alternate schedules for core English and

High Schools, continued on page 10

mathematics classes that would include students with disabilities. At the same time, they made sure that these classes used grade-level content standards and that all students received those content standards through accommodations and supports “at a level that makes sense to each student. This new approach has made all the difference for our kids with disabilities,” says Gaviola. In every core content area—English, science, mathematics, and social studies—at Madera’s two high schools, at least two kinds of classes are available: inclusion classes that are taught by both general and special education teachers who use the state-adopted, core curriculum, with accommodations for the students who need them; and self-contained classes taught by special education teachers who use the district-adopted, grade-level curriculum with modifications.

One of the main challenges Madera’s high schools faced in developing their standards-based approach was scheduling common prep time for special and general education teachers who were co-teaching. But, according to Stafford, “It just made sense to have teachers who would work together for a common goal—the student—to also have a common prep time. We had the philosophy; we provided the structure.” Common prep time thus “was non-negotiable,” says Gaviola; “otherwise, the special education teacher just turns into a glorified aide.”

Gaviola is clearly pleased with the current system for students with disabilities. “We use a two-pronged approach: we give access to grade-level core curriculum while remediating deficits. If you do only one or the other, the gap these students experience will just keep getting bigger and bigger, and they will never catch up. This blended approach accounts for our success. Where we place students depends on their readiness screening, their test scores. Some students go into general education classes; some are in general ed with [support]—this is a configuration for all kids who are at risk [for school failure]. Essentially, we individualize

the students’ programs, depending on their skill levels.”

Madera USD made three dramatic program changes to support its new approach to special education. The first involved making sure that all students had access to the core curriculum and to assessments; this step included ensuring that all children were taught from core textbooks with appropriate accommodations and modifications. Then, the district decided to define equal access to include access to talented general education teachers. This decision meant that all Madera’s students in special education would be included in general education classes whenever possible, with both teachers and students receiving the supports they needed for everyone to succeed. Finally, the district invested heavily in a literacy intervention program. As Gaviola explains, “We wanted to make our kids readers, so we had a huge push to train all special education teachers in high school to be able to evaluate our students’ reading ability and specifically target the kind of intervention they needed.” All special education teachers learned how to remediate students’ deficits in the essentials: phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and writing. To whatever degree possible, special educators at Madera USD were determined that every student who graduated from their high schools would be literate.

Special education students at Madera are also now afforded a status they never had before. One of the first things Stafford did four years ago was to make sure that students with disabilities were scheduled first for the classes they needed. “We give the kids with the biggest need the biggest priority,” he says.

Gaviola talks about how all of the changes—“shaking up the culture in terms of the de-privatization of the classroom” caused “something of a battle with some teachers. Suddenly administrators were visiting all classrooms, and even teams of teachers led by administrators were making focused visits in all classrooms, with the expectation that from ‘bell to bell,’ great instruction happens in Madera every day for every child.

“That first year when we introduced

this new service delivery model was not fun. We received a great deal of negative feedback.” Gaviola is quick to point out that any reluctance on the part of teachers “had nothing to do with teachers not believing in their kids. They absolutely did. But it is very difficult for adults to change. And our adults had to change everything about the way they ran their classrooms.

“But now the teachers who were most reluctant and most difficult to convince are the biggest advocates of our new, collaborative approach. I remember specifically one teacher being especially incredulous: ‘Are you crazy? Special education students can’t do geometry.’ But I only had to talk about how much special education kids liked to draw—many of them would much rather draw than write. And geometry is so much about drawing. We now have an inclusion geometry class with 30 percent of the students on IEPs. This inclusion class is outscoring our general education geometry classes and it’s only the second year of implementing that class.”

Not surprisingly, Gaviola speaks highly of the leadership at Madera USD. “Our principals have embraced a philosophy of high standards and of inclusion for all. And the leadership at the district office has been outstanding—very service oriented. Our superintendent will come into a classroom and work with a teacher, modeling a lesson if that is what is needed.”

Administrators in the Madera schools visit classrooms three times a day, on average. According to Stafford, they check to make sure “that classroom lessons have a design, a direction, and a way of measuring progress.” From Gaviola’s perspective, these administrators work like coaches. “They encourage teachers; they tell them ‘I will help you do it.’ And they mean it.”

The educational component of the Obama administration’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act places a strong emphasis on reforming the effectiveness of teachers and administrators, improving content standards, and turning around low-performing schools. In these terms, the folks at Madera are well ahead of their game. ♦

Wiltsey has clearly realized success in its efforts to bring standards-based instruction to its middle school students with disabilities. What does a similar effort look like at the elementary level?

Woodside K–8 School in Citrus Heights, CA, started on its path toward providing standards-based instruction for students with disabilities at about the same time as Wiltsey. While every school's efforts are unique, these schools have two things in common: a learning center and the use of RtI.

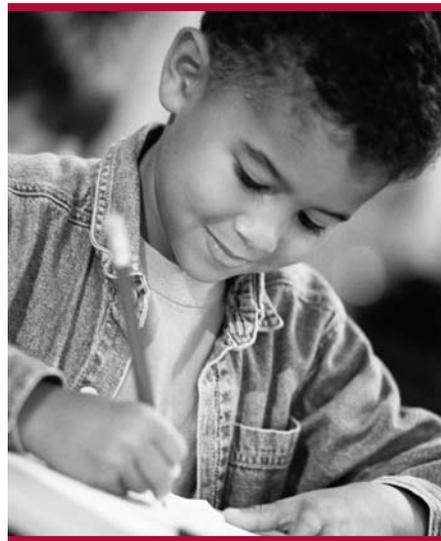
Woodside's resource specialist, Allison Russell, is one of two teachers with special education credentials who are called "learning center teachers." "At our school, the learning center is not one place," Russell says. "We have many different rooms where we provide 'learning center' support." Interestingly, the primary focus of this support—and of special education teachers in general at Woodside—seems to be that of keeping students from ending up "in" special education in the first place. The school's use of RtI is central to this effort. Instructional assistants, along with the intervention support provided in the learning center, creates what Russell calls "the RtI tier-two intervention"—extra practice in reading, for example, or vocabulary development. The school's use of RtI's three-tiered approach to instruction, according to Russell, works in consort with the learning center model to provide early intervention support for those who are struggling and to ensure standards-based instruction for all students.

Woodside uses what Russell describes as a "push in and pull out" strategy to support tier-two and tier-three interventions for students with and without disabilities. "We put special education teachers in the general education classroom to provide specific supports. And we have three instructional assistants who work almost entirely in general education classrooms in the first three grades to prevent kids from [falling behind]. Then we pull out small groups of students who need extra help on their basic skills. They work with a teacher

or with an instructional assistant.

"In our prior model, we had SDC [special day class] teachers working only with special education students. Now the line between general and special education is blurring. We provide whatever support any child needs."

Woodside principal Greg Barge is clearly pleased with the direction and progress his school has made. "Aside from meeting the needs of all students with learning difficulties, our model helps integrate students with true



learning disabilities into general education classrooms. I've seen tremendous growth in our students, both socially and emotionally. Labels truly disappear. What appears is a true commitment by our entire staff to help all students improve their academic skills."

Woodside has made reading a central part of its reform efforts. "We are using research-based intervention programs, especially Read Naturally, for English language arts; they serve as our core curriculum," says Russell. "We focus on making sure that the instruction is so targeted that, if a learning disability can be avoided, it is."

Russell says that this "approach to teaching all kids together developed organically out of the need to serve all students. We sort of made it up as we went along, and we're always reframing it and changing it. It does require constant flexibility."

While Russell herself seems to thrive on change and variety—she started her educational career teaching overseas—

she acknowledges that it hasn't been easy for everyone. "Change is difficult. It takes time to get things in place. General education teachers were a little slow in taking on kids with disabilities. In my 13 years as a teacher, I saw that many of [these teachers] truly believed that putting kids in special education was the best thing for them, keeping them all together in the same classroom, at the same lunch table, having them play only with each other at recess. But this never made sense to me—to isolate them and group them in self-contained classrooms that were just made up of a multitude of very intense needs. That is changing now. I am so excited about what we're doing. Now everyone is included. That's very important to me, because if you're not including everyone, you're excluding someone. That's not what education is about. I actually think this attitude is why I was hired."

Russell has a favorite story about a student with a disability. "She came into my classroom three years ago, shy and unsure of herself," as Russell recalls. "She would cry easily when she didn't know what to do. And her scores were far below basic.³ On top of this, she was trying to learn English as her second language.

"She might have stayed far below basic. But after being in an intervention program for two years, she is working at the basic level. And she has also become an 'intermediate' English speaker.

"Our current problem is that her test scores are too high to keep her in our intervention program. So she is in the general education language class. Our job now is to monitor her progress and make sure she gets just enough help: not too little, not too much—just enough to help her keep her confidence up and keep her progressing in the general education curriculum."

But the very best part, in Russell's view, is that she no longer finds this little girl in tears. "She is smiling now, and confident."

Maybe this is really why Russell was hired. ♦

3. On California's STAR tests, there are five rankings for test results, the lowest being Far Below Basic.

lot of support. So he adjusts the pace of his courses accordingly. One of Cheung's most popular is an algebra class that he stretches over two years. This way, he says, "students do not have to feel rushed." He believes that many students, even those without disabilities, find a one-year algebra course just too difficult, the pace too daunting, and the class size too large. His classes average 14 students.

The "different" classroom is another way to make the students feel supported. "I wanted to create an ambiance similar to that of a coffee shop," he says. "When I was in college, I would fall asleep when I studied in the library. However, I would be able to study for hours on end in a coffee shop. I came to realize that ambiance was the key to helping me focus—the smell of coffee, the white noise of people chatting, and the music playing softly in the background kept me focused." In addition to his classroom's lights, music, and painted walls, Cheung makes t-shirts for his classes and bumper stickers with a class logo he designed himself.

Cheung is also very committed to accommodating and teaching to the types of learning styles popularized by Howard Gardner (see http://pzweb.harvard.edu/PIs/HG_MI_after_20_years.pdf). In fact, he tests his students for their styles at the beginning of each school year so he can better understand what they need and convince them he is serious about acknowledging and addressing differences in the way they learn. He encourages them to make the most of their unique styles and to work in pairs, in groups, in any combination that helps them understand the material. He frequently tells them "you don't have to do this by yourself." Mostly, he just wants them to know that help and resources are there, and he is constantly looking for ways to provide them.

When he first began teaching at South Hills, Cheung realized that he needed more than traditional instructional methods to reach his students. So he scrounged up two, eight-year-old Macs and went to work. Since then, he

has used computers to create numerous approaches to providing the resources his students need—and this is where Cheung's educational approach gets cosmic.

He currently has a classroom full of Apple computers and uses them for just about everything: in place of overhead projectors, as portals for software programs, and as vehicles for delivering instructional support. Cheung has created his own class Web site, one that houses downloadable videos, podcasts, and PDFs. These various supports include worksheets, study guides, assignments, and explanations. With the computer's built-in camera, Cheung has



created video lessons that work through problems step by step and that allow students to move at their own pace, back up, repeat, and "have as much review as they can stand." Students can access all of these online items from their homes, a friend's home, and even their local wi-fi coffee shop. Students can study, refresh their memories, and even repeat a class wherever they are and whenever they find the need. This easy availability allows parents to get involved, as well.

Providing so many different kinds of supplemental supports within the classroom gives Cheung a major advantage: he can move around the room during class, directing and helping all students and making sure each is getting exactly the kind of support needed, and on a one-to-one basis.

Cheung's approach seems to be working on a number of levels. First, according to Starrett, the students love his classes; then, they consistently do well academically. Finally, parents deeply appreciate Cheung's efforts. One mother

posted a request on his Web site that he be made teacher of the year. Another wrote, "What you do with your Web site is amazing. It is obvious that you truly care about these kids."

Cheung has received numerous educational awards for his use of technology in the classroom. In fact, a development executive from Apple Computers recently visited his classes. This executive wrote to Cheung about "the impact you are making on your students. It's not a common experience to walk into a class and see students so focused and engaged in solving algebra problems. Even more remarkable is the fact that your students are identified as having learning difficulties, but their attention and work habits were truly impressive."

Also impressive are the test scores in 2008 for special education students at South Hills; they were so high that the school was nominated for a California Distinguished Schools award. Now that's cosmic. ♦

George Cheung speaks on technology in the classroom and professional development at other K–12 schools, universities, and conferences. Contact him at george@StudioThirtySeven.com. And take a virtual tour of his classroom at <http://StudioThirtySeven.com>.

GOAL for 2010

Grazer Outstanding Achievement in Learning (GOAL) is an annual award presented by the California Advisory Commission on Special Education to an educational entity in the state for its success in benefiting students with disabilities in one of the following categories: innovative programs, transition, community and parent involvement, general education-special education collaboration, and leadership that promotes inclusive education. Educators or groups interested in applying for this award can download the application form from www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sel/as/acse.asp. For more information, contact Anthony Sotelo at asotelo@cde.ca.gov or 916-327-3545. The deadline for the applications is February 28, 2010.

Internet Resources

www.k8accesscenter.org

The Access Center offers numerous resources to help students with disabilities learn from the general education curriculum.

www.cacompcenter.org

The California Comprehensive Center partners with CDE to provide tools for schools and districts to use in improving standards-based instruction and outcomes for students with disabilities.

www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/

The complete *California State Content Standards* are available at the above URL.

www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cfi/index.asp

Curriculum Framework and Instructional Materials for California are available at the above Web site.

www.leadered.com/pdf/Improving%20Spec%20Ed%20excerpt.pdf

Improving Performance for Special Education Students is packed with information and tools that schools at all levels can use to improve their service delivery models for students with disabilities.

<http://standards.nctm.org/>

The Principles and Standards for School Mathematics from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics can be found at the above URL.

www.projectforum.org/docs/SevenStepProcessToCreatingStandards-basedIEPs.pdf

A Seven-Step Process to Creating Standards-based IEPs is available as a free download at the above URL. This document is a companion to *Standards-Based Individualized Education Program Examples*, available at www.projectforum.org/docs/Standards-BasedIEPEXamples.pdf.

www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/index.asp

Tool Kit on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities; Tool Kit

on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities—Parent Materials; and *Tool Kit on Universal Design for Learning* are three useful resources available from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs at the above URL.

www.uscharterschools.org/cs/sped/print/uscs_docs/sped/reports.htm

Standards-Based IEPs: An Introduction, a primer on standards-based IEPs for those who work in and are responsible for charter schools, is available from the above URL, along with numerous other reports addressing issues related to special education in charter schools.

Especially for Parents

www.fetaweb.com/expert.htm

The third section of the document *From Emotions to Advocacy*, published by Wrightslaw, is titled “The Parent as Expert” and is available free at the above URL. The document provides information about a child’s disability, how a child learns and needs to be taught, how to measure a child’s progress, and how to write “SMART” IEPs.

www.eclkc.obs.acf.hhs.gov/bslc/Espanol/For%20Parents/parent_res_00012_072805.html

This clear, practical document, “A Parent’s Guide: Developing Your Child’s IEP” explains what special education is, how special education services can support a child, and what part a parent can play in the special education process.

Especially for Teachers

www.scoec.k12.ca.us/depts/selpa/iepforms.asp

California SELPAs developed IEP template forms and make them available at this site.

www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=1097

“Collaboration Between General and Special Education: Making It Work” discusses the challenges of working across departments and provides proven practices and a five-step process for making collaboration successful.

www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/wested/view/e/1968

Standards-Based Instruction: Is It Possible for Students with Disabilities? is one recorded Webinar among many available at this site.

CMA for 2010

The California Modified Assessment (CMA) is designed as an alternative assessment to the California Standardized Test (CST) for students who have IEPs. The CMA helps these students demonstrate their progress and learning in the California Content Standards. This year, tests have been developed for the following grades:

- CMA for ELA:
Grades 3–9 (including CMA for Writing in grade 7)*
- CMA for Mathematics:
Grades 3–7
- CMA for Algebra I:
Grades 7–11 (if they will complete Algebra I during the school year)
- CMA for Science:
Grades 5 and 8
- CMA for Life Science:
Grade 10**

CMA Participation Criteria can be found at www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/participcriteria.asp.

For more about the CMA and for a recently archived Webcast on the topic, go to www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sel/sr/cmawebupdates.asp.

* There is no Writing in fourth grade for CST or CMA.

**The CMA for Life Science is given in tenth grade only. A student enrolled in tenth grade must take either the CST for Life Science with the appropriate accommodations and/or modifications, the CMA for Life Science with the appropriate accommodations, or the CAPA Level V. There are no exceptions.

Why buy . . .

The RiSE (Resources in Special Education) Library freely lends materials to California residents; the borrower only pays for return postage. The items listed on this page are a small sample of what the library offers. Go to www.pbp.com/services/libraries to view all holdings. To order materials, either phone or e-mail RiSE librarian Judy Bower: 408-727-5775; judy.bower@pbp.com.

Books

Accessing the General Curriculum: Including Students with Disabilities in Standards-Based Reform

Victor Nolet and Margaret J. McLaughlin. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005. 130 pages. Providing updated frameworks and strategies, this resource provides K–12 educators with the support necessary to determine students' present level of performance, improve student learning and retention, and to positively influence assessment results. The book includes examples and flowcharts for fitting special education into the frameworks created by national standards and assessments. Call #23972.

Aiming High: High Schools for the 21st Century: Standards-Based Education Planning Guide

Lynn Vaughan and Eileen Warren. Rohnert Park, CA: California Institute on Human Services, 2002. 155 pages. This document is built on the legacy of Second to None, California's visionary guideline for high school reform. *Aiming High* is a how-to document for implementing a standards-based educational system. The book places standards-based education in the context of California's accountability system, which includes both state standards and local outcomes, with the focus on guiding schools in "doing the right things" and on "doing things right." Call #23653 and 23654.

The Leader's Guide to Standards: A Blueprint for Educational Equity and Excellence

Douglas Reeves. San Francisco, CA:

Jossey-Bass, 2002. 358 pages. This guide shows school administrators and teachers how to build a comprehensive accountability system for standards-based reform that focuses on leadership skills. Reeves shows how to assess and nurture teacher performance, set up balanced assessment and accountability policies, and make the case for standards to the public. In addition, the book addresses the vital role that policymakers—from those serving on local school boards to individuals working at state and national levels—play in the successful implementation of educational standards. Call #23918 or 23919.

Making Standards Work: How to Implement Standards-Based Assessments in the Classroom, School, and District

Douglas Reeves. Englewood, CO: Advanced Learning Press, 2003. 298 pages. This step-by-step guide shows how to design and implement standards-based performance assessments and improve teaching and learning in the classroom. It offers real-world scenarios; clear, consistent scoring guides; "Power Standards"; and a rationale for

standards-based performance assessments. Call #23897 and 23898.

Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students

California Department of Education. Sacramento, CA: CDE, 2001. 272 pages. This handbook provides guidance for California school personnel about what to know and do to make standards-based education a success in the middle grades. It examines such issues as school culture, classroom organization, differentiated instruction, accelerated learning, school environment, and the knowledge and skills needed by teachers and principals. Call # 22969 and 22970.

DVD

Differentiation Live!

Indiana University Institute on Disability and Community. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2008. 70-minute video. In this DVD, educators from elementary and middle school classrooms demonstrate and describe ways they plan for instruction to ensure all children are engaged in meaningful, standards-based work. Call #24103.

Unique Enough to Be Awarded?

CalSTAT, a special project of the California Department of Education, Special Education Division, is announcing two awards for 2010–2011:

Leadership Site Award

The Leadership Site Award program seeks to identify California schools that have created innovative and successful programs in general and special education collaboration, transition, reading, positive behavior supports, and family involvement.



Regional Institute Hosts

This site application and award competition is for Regional Institute Hosts. The goal is to identify regional hosts for high-quality, professional development and training in their geographic areas. Support in the form of technical assistance and financing are part of the award.

If you are interested in applying for either award, contact Marin Brown at marin.brown@calsat.org. And mark your calendars: all application materials for both programs will be available at www.calstat.org by January 1, 2010.

2010 Calendar

February 19–21 Reaching At-Promise Students National Conference

The Reaching At-Promise Students Association (RAPSA) is sponsoring a three-day conference for all educators, administrators, and friends of education. RAPSA believes students are “at-promise,” not “at-risk.” Their event focuses on education, leadership, and community involvement and features workshops on writing, math, science, response to intervention, social sciences, mediated learning, leadership, motivation, special needs, community building, and more—all designed to address the needs of the at-promise population. San Diego, CA. For additional information, call 800-871-7482 or go to www.atpromiseconference.org.

February 18–20 Strike It Rich With CARS+

This twenty-eighth annual CARS+ (the Organization for Special Educators) convention is designed to bring together special educators and others in the field for professional development and renewal. The conference features research-based teaching strategies, workshops presented by nationally known experts, and information on children with different disabilities and the best strategies to support them. The event also offers a strand of sessions identified especially for new teachers. Professional Development Continuing Education Credit is available. San Diego, CA. To register or to learn more, phone 916-725-2277, or go to www.carsplus.org.

February 23–25 SEECAP 2009 Symposium

The Special Education Early Childhood Administrator’s Project is sponsoring this symposium to address the unique professional development needs of early childhood school administrators and early childhood special education programs. Newport Beach, CA. For more information, phone 760-761-5526 or visit www.sdcoe.net/seecap.

March 2 and 3 SEECAP Special Events: Legislation and LRE For Early Childhood Education/Special Education Administrators and School Leaders

On March 2, SEECAP hosts Sharon Walsh, who will address “Legislative Policies, Perspectives, and Practices Impacting Young Children and Their Families.” On March 3, SEECAP offers an all-day workshop on providing services for young children in inclusive settings. Sacramento, CA. For more information, phone 760-761-5526 or visit www.sdcoe.net/seecap.

February 28–March 2 Educating for Careers: Collaborating for a Seamless Transition

The California Career Pathway Consortia and the California Partnership Academies are hosting this Educating for Careers Conference. The event offers professional development opportunities for teachers through more than 125 breakout session. Garden Grove, CA. For more information, call 916-319-0478 or ksbores@cde.ca.gov; or go to <http://2010.ccpcc-conference.net>.

March 19 California at a Crossroads: Crisis and Opportunity

EdSource is hosting this one-day forum to address the global economic and state fiscal crises and their impact on public education. Santa Clara, CA. For more information or to register, go to www.edsource.org/event_forum10.html.

April 21–24 Program Improvement Starts at Home . . . It Takes A Parent

The California Title I Parent Annual Conference is designed for parents and anyone working in or with Title I programs. The conference will feature provides dozens of sessions presented by experts and new voices in education theory, practice, and reform, focusing on student achievement school leadership, educational policy, parent involvement, positive relationships, best practices, and family-friendly schools. San Diego, CA. For more information, e-mail info@cacee.conference.com or go to www.californiaTitle1ParentConference.com.

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Math Teacher Goes Virtually Cosmic



George Cheung describes his classroom at South Hills High School as “a little different.”

And he’s more than a little right. The walls are painted landscape green and covered with posters, the lights are low, and music—classical or jazz or heavy metal—plays softly. (“I adjust the music to the students,” he says.) The ambience might seem more suited to a coffee shop than a high school, but what’s not different about this classroom is that studying and learning are occurring there every day. Cheung teaches special education math—algebra and a prep class for the California High School Exit Exam (the CAHSEE)—and what he seeks to create for his students is “a sense of belonging and optimism.”

Like the other special education teachers at South Hills High, Cheung is a content specialist. He teaches most of the special education math classes. Cyndi Reeves and Melody Lippert handle English language arts. And others teach science and history. So even students with disabilities who are not mainstreamed have typical high school schedules and move among a variety of classes and teachers during their school day. That is one of the unique features of South Hills’ special education department, which, like other successful programs, has a focus on content standards and customized placements.

Despite its sizable student population, this school’s special education department is an impressively customized place. Some students with disabilities are placed in general education classes, others participate in pull-out programs, and many others work within a combination of the two. But Julie Star-

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Napa County Office of Education
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rett, who heads the department, works diligently to ensure that no hard-and-fast rule takes precedence over individual student need. And she takes very seriously her primary job as Support Services Specialist: to make sure that every student in special education learns and succeeds.

Her voice assumes a slight tone of bemusement when she recalls “the fractured environment” that she saw at South Hills before the current system was in place. “It used to be that if students couldn’t cut it, they’d go into RSP [Resource Specialist Program], where everyone was working on something different.” As a former teacher herself, Starrett knew that this approach was not conducive to learning. And while acknowledging that “some students will undoubtedly do better in smaller groups, where they can get extra personalized attention and where the curriculum is delivered slowly, this is not the case for every class.” So she helped changed things. “Every student is now placed in the class that best suits his or her abilities and motivation.” According to Starrett, this

notion of “abilities” also has to be carefully parsed. As she explains it, “Some students get high test scores, but they are disorganized or not motivated. They would not do well in general education classes. So everything depends on what appears to be the best environment for the student and on what the teachers and parents recommend.”

George Cheung’s classroom may be the most unique environment in a unique department. His classes are a mixture of students who have disabilities, students who have been designated “at-risk” or who have behavior problems, and others who simply have low grades in math. In the three years he has offered the CAHSEE prep course, students who take his class raise their scores on average from 20 to 60 points.

Given his success, general education teachers frequently ask him to share his teaching tricks. Well, George Cheung has a great many. First, he knows that students, especially those with disabilities, don’t usually think of themselves as scholars or academic stars; they need a

South Hills, continued on page 12