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Cooke is a non-profit organization founded in 1987, by a group of NYC parents of children with Down syndrome. These parents explored public and private school options for their children, but were shut out of all but the most segregated classrooms in public schools, which offered little prospect of robust learning and socialization for their children. These parents were committed to insuring that *all* children – not just their own – would have the same education opportunities to reach their full potential, whether or not they could afford the tuition. Over the past 27 years, this grass roots organization has grown from one small class of seven children, to a K-age 21 special education school for 270 children.

Today, Cooke serves students with serious and complex learning challenges resulting from a range of developmental disabilities (e.g., Down syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Seizure Disorder, etc.). These disabilities gravely impact their acquisition of academic, social and daily living skills. A Cooke education addresses these deficits with intensive instruction and therapeutic interventions.

Cooke is also actively engaged in supporting efforts to improve the quality of public special education programs, through advocacy channels as well as by providing consulting and training services as an approved DOE provider.

Cooke has also remained true to its core mission to serve students who need our program irrespective of whether their families can afford our tuition – and in this respect we are unique among private special education schools. Eighty percent of Cooke students come from low-to-middle income families; fully one-half earn less than \$50,000 per year (and, of those, 17% receive SSDI). We are also proud that our families come from all five boroughs and truly represent the racial, cultural, religious and socio-economic diversity of this great city.

After spending 15 years with the Department of Education as both Teacher and Special Education Coordinator, and 8 years with the Cooke Center For Learning And Development, I have tangible experience in the field of special education. I have visited hundreds of programs servicing a variety of students with special needs. As a psychologist, I have had the unique opportunity to evaluate and focus on the academic and social emotional growth of many students with special needs.

Regarding the status of special education at this time, it is clear that there are methods and formats which have been proven effective. While many have yet to be implemented city wide, the community of special educators is in agreement on certain strategies that have been effectively implements in the Cooke Center Schools for all populations of students regardless of diagnosis.

Placement

All students with special needs require modification to the structure and approach of their education. This begins with placement. In some cases where students are placed in Integrated CoTeaching Classes, the essential modification is the additional teaching staff. However, to date most schools are not prepared for the abundance of needs on such a wide spectrum. Class sizes are

too large at this point to make the ICT program worthwhile. In many site visits I have seen the same strategies as I see in a 12:1 class. Having 24 students with 2 teachers adds a higher distraction level, a higher level of need within a group, and a reduction in self-advocacy and metacognitive skill use in a large group. Only small group instruction (3 to 4 students) on a consistent basis will produce the results needed.

Integration of Related Service

Services which provide “push in” or “pull out” sessions do not effectively target related service goals relating to counseling nor speech and language. The integrated model goes much further in targeting student goals. Having related service providers plan lessons and collaborate with teaching staff creates an environment that supports and enhances these goals. For example, visual cuing and executive functioning tasks must be operationalized by a related service provider for students in order for any lesson, worksheet, or direct instruction to be effective. In addition, the model of “pull out” does not easily allow for generalization of skill usage. Instead, many students are not using skills and strategies learned in a pull out session unless prompted. Thus collaboration between RSP and Teachers must form the foundation of curriculum development.

Learning For Living Curriculum

The Learning for Living Curriculum (L4L) was developed by the Cooke Center to address the academic, social/emotional, and adaptive skills of the student population. To date, this curriculum is used for all students, regardless of their level of need. The integration of these domains alleviates the need for generalization, provides the integrated related service, and addresses the individuals learning needs. It consists of practical daily living task blended with functional academics. For the L4L curriculum to be successful, the learning environment must maintain a natural and conducive environment. As of now most 6:1:1 students (those who would benefit most from L4L) within the NYC DOE are housed in converted small book closets. This does not lead to the physical/occupational or adaptive goals being met. It is impossible to provide direct instruction in an environment that does not replicate a naturalistic setting.

Small Group Instruction

Currently, research supports that a group of 3 students is ideal for direct instruction in terms of learning and achievement. Thus a 12:1 ratio cannot support this. Given that most of our students with special needs have great difficulty with attention, visual tracking, and language processing, it is not feasible to work with 12 of these students at a time. The addition of a paraprofessional allows for behavioral and organizational help, not instructional. Thus without the support of educators students cannot be broken into small groups. In many cases where teachers are working with small groups, the other students are left to work independently which is counter intuitive to best practices in special education. The guidance, modeling and support are essential for growth.

Data Driven Instruction

The removal of criterion referenced assessments is essential in tracking the true growth of our students. Students with special needs, follow differing trajectories in their advancement. Thus setting a bar for achievement results in failure after failure without recognizing their incremental growth. Careful assessment of basic skills should be monitored and reported as their true growth. Most general education students will make a year of growth in a given academic domain, Students with special needs do not. Their growth varies with an average of 6 months growth. If the domains are not measured accurately setting IEP Goals and standards does not correlate with reality of student achievement. Neither a leveling system nor alternative assessment in the DOE captures true achievement.

The Balance of Vocational Skills

Vocational skills can be an essential part of a student's path. However, the balance between academic and work-site time is critical. Students with special needs will continue to make academic gains in the classroom past the age of 18. This means that the classroom instruction is still an important part of their plan. Working on site for most of the week, trains (but does not teach) students for a specific activity they may never encounter after leaving. In addition, 1 site supervisor leaves the student on their own for most of the day. Most of these programs leave out the "soft skills" of employment such as appropriate language use, asking for help, office etiquette etc. and goes directly into the specifics of the activity. It is not reasonable that a student working 30 hours a week and going to class for 6 would make any gains academically, leading to long term growth, and better opportunities.

Francis Tabone, PhD – Head of School
Cooke Center For Learning And Development