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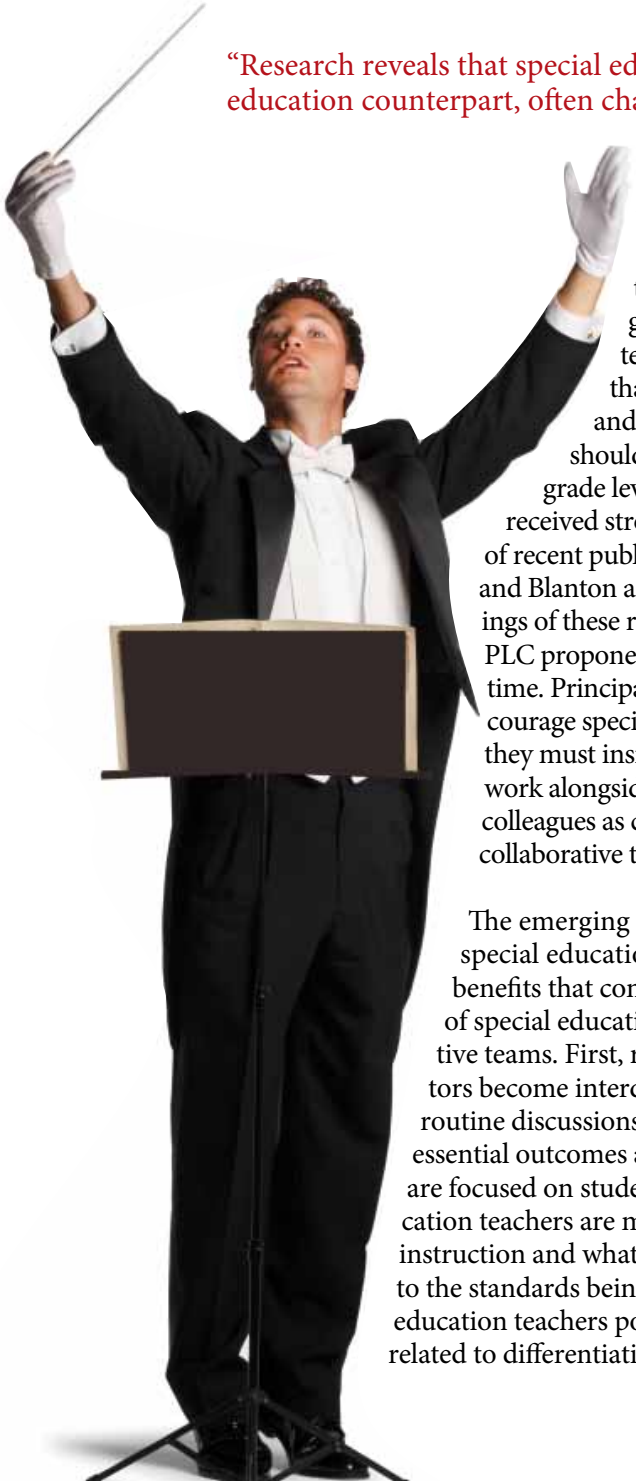
Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D. and Julie Schmidt

All Together Now: Special and Regular Educators Prosper in PLCs

"Research reveals that special education teachers' classroom practices, like those of their general education counterpart, often change in a positive direction as a result of their participation in PLCs."
-Blanton and Perez, 2011



While many principals encourage special education teachers to participate in grade level or departmental team meetings, the notion that both special education and regular education teachers should be members of the same grade level or departmental teams received strong support from a pair of recent publications by Shipley (2006) and Blanton and Perez (2011). The findings of these researchers align with what PLC proponents have believed for a long time. Principals must do more than encourage special educators to participate, they must insist that special educators work alongside their regular education colleagues as contributing members of collaborative teams.

The emerging literature on the role of special education in PLCs highlights two benefits that come from the participation of special education teachers on collaborative teams. First, regular and special educators become interdependently engaged in routine discussions about standards and essential outcomes and, since team meetings are focused on student learning, special education teachers are more attuned to the pace of instruction and what is most critically related to the standards being taught. Second, special education teachers possess extensive expertise related to differentiation and ways to meet the needs of struggling learners. As teachers build relationships with one another, regular education teachers are more likely to take advantage of the specialized knowledge and skills their special education colleagues possess.

"Special education teachers are making important linkages between the needs of students who have disabilities and the general education curriculum."
-Blanton and Perez, (2011)

There is a long-standing belief that special education students cannot be successful in the regular education curriculum. Thus, special educators often develop their own specialized curriculum materials and assessments. This practice is widely accepted, as Samuels found in a recent survey of 341 elementary and secondary special education teachers. What he reported was that more than half of those surveyed believed students with disabilities should have his or her own special curriculum, as opposed to the general education curriculum being the primary source of academic content (Samuels, 2011).

Like many districts, my fellow teachers in Kildeer Countryside CCSD 96 embraced this practice. At times, the curriculum materials we wrote mirrored the general education curriculum and other times they did not. For years when a student moved from regular to special education for math instruction, the student routinely stopped working with the general

education curriculum materials and switched to another, more traditional approach. The results of this strategy were profoundly disappointing.

When students receive instruction in special education settings, the rigor is not—or should not—be taken out of the curriculum. If done poorly, separate and specialized curricula developed in isolation by individual teachers can actually lower expectations and have a negative impact on student learning. This realization led our teachers to understand the importance of being clear on what *all* students must know and be able to do. We adopted the position that if a student was expected to eventually function independently then teachers should **not** modify the standards students were expected to learn. What we came to understand is that essential outcomes are for all, not just some.

We saw the same dynamic with assessment. When we examined our practice, we realized students regularly participated in common, formative assessment experiences while in regular education settings but had far fewer opportunities to demonstrate what they were learning when assigned to special education classes. Once again, we found creating parallel or separate experiences—with either curriculum or assessment— was exactly the wrong approach.

Only when regular and special educators began to collaborate on how best to help our students learn did we begin to see results. We learned that when regular and special educators work together, special education teachers no longer have to work in a chaotic curricular jungle where each teacher's priorities differ. Targets and pacing guides focus collaboration between special and general education programs, allows special educators to determine when to preview and spiral the curriculum, and promotes powerful collaboration around how to most effectively teach learning targets.

"The reason professional learning communities increase student learning is that they produce more good teaching by more teachers more of the time. Put simply, PLCs improve teaching, which improves student results, especially for the least advantaged students."
-Saphier, 2005

Another powerful benefit of adding special educators to collaborative teams was improved pedagogy. Blanton and Perez (2011) found that the classroom practices of *both* regular and special education teachers improved when working together in professional learning communities. Furthermore, their study showed that the inclusion of special educators on collaborative teams actually played a key role in the success of those teams.

It follows that as regular education teachers participated in professional development activities designed to improve instruction for students with disabilities, their practice would improve as well. Instructional strategies that help students with disabilities can also help students without disabilities.

Shipley reported similar outcomes for collaboration between regular and special education teachers. She argued that regular educators benefit from the inclusion of special educators on collaborative teams because, "Special educators have a toolbox of strategies that increase learning, aid in classroom organization, and reduce behavioral problems in the classroom." Shipley continued, "Teaming enables the special education teacher to not only help special education students, but also general education students who are struggling and might otherwise fall through the cracks." She concluded that working collaboratively with regular education teachers, "enables the special educator to bring instructional strategies into the classroom that the general educator might not be familiar with or think about using, but all students can benefit from its implementation."

"Special educators can no longer afford to isolate themselves in their 'special education world' and must work effectively and efficiently with the general educators who also teach their students."
- J. Shipley (2006)

When educators proclaim that "all kids can learn" one of the first questions Mike Mattos asks is, "Does *all* mean *all*?" To Mattos, ensuring all students learn is not "regular ed, nor special ed...it's just ed. Instead of grouping kids by labels, the proper question is 'What does the child need, and who on our staff is best trained and able to meet this need?'" Insisting that regular and special educators work together on collaborative teams is a great place to start answering that question. ■

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Resources

Blanton, L. P. & Perez, Y. (2011, March). "Exploring the relationship between special education teachers and professional learning communities: Implications of research for administrators." *Journal of Special Education Leadership*. v. 24. n1. pp. 6-16.

Shipley, J. B., "Professional Learning Communities: Where Does Special Education Fit in?" (2006). Senior Honors Theses. Paper 31. Available at http://tinyurl.com/a5kcemx.