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**The Child Who Gets Left Behind**

As an Educational Coordinator for a program which integrates children with special needs into a typical classroom environment in a number of private Jewish day schools, my primary role is to advocate. Most of the time I am advocating for the student within the school by modifying curriculum, working with the child’s instructional aide and classroom teachers to make sure that the student is getting a tailored curriculum to meet his/her needs within the general classroom curriculum, and of course, encouraging social appropriateness among peers.

This role of advocacy is extremely unique in many ways. I do not work for the schools, and I am not of personal relation to the child. More specifically, I am the middle man. I am there to make sure that this child is getting the best possible inclusive education. Often, this position becomes uncomfortable and I find myself trying to advocate for more than just the child.

I must advocate for the instructional aide who is in those teachers’ classrooms daily, and being that they too are not working for the school, this can sometimes cause discomfort for both parties. Of course as a teacher, I understand that it can be frustrating to have another adult in the room watching your every move, and on the other hand, a classroom aide wants to feel that they are making good judgment calls without someone constantly looking over their shoulder.

There are times when I find myself trying to advocate for the school as well, in how I pose school- related problems to the parents. After all, the school is allowing that child to learn there and their views on specific cases and situations are of primary importance. It does not bode well when the parents do not work with the school as a team.

There are, of course, also times when I am advocating for those parents. They chose their specific school and this inclusion program so that their child can get the quality religious education that they feel so strongly about, as well as the general curriculum that their child is entitled to. They deserve to feel that their child is in a successful learning environment that is also being catered to meet their child’s needs; and if in fact the environment turns out to be one in which the child cannot be properly serviced, I have to address those issues as well.

As described above, there are many pieces to this puzzle. Many people need to be on board so that one specific child can succeed. (I did not even mention the school psychologists, social workers, numerous therapists, and outside service providers who also contribute to many different aspects of the child’s success in and out of the classroom - all of whom are people which I am in contact with on a regular basis as well). Very often I see myself as the conductor to this very intricate orchestra, and when one player is off tune, the effect can be enormous.

For argument sake, let us imagine that all the pieces and parts are working perfectly, (this often seems impossible), and the symphony is melodious. Here we have this precious child who has the right to learn and flourish….to be given the same opportunities as his typical peers, and to grow into an adult who can contribute to our society and be properly accepted by it. Sounds wonderful – right?

However now we have the constraints of the law. The educational laws and standards that are established to tell us how to teach our students….this student, with special needs, in a regular classroom, who needs to find his place within that “curriculum”. No Child can be Left Behind. Children at specific grade levels should retain specific knowledge. The only thing is exactly that – this is a specific child…with (often) very specific needs. His/Her ability to perform on tests can waiver based on millions of different factors. Did he/she take his meds that day? Does he/she have test anxiety? His/Her peer relationships are overwhelming and therefore he/she has a hard time focusing, etc……the list can go on and on. How is it fair to expect this child to perform as well as his/her typical peers, hold him/her and the teachers accountable for that knowledge, especially when it takes that many people to ensure the child’s educational success on a daily basis? The answer is….It isn’t fair. And it certainly doesn’t express the true amount of knowledge, success, and milestones the child has accomplished.

An example to illustrate this point is as follows: Since our students have a dual curriculum (the standard curriculum, plus the Judaic curriculum), they often have a main teacher for Hebrew Studies, and a main classroom teacher for general studies. And, since they are enrolled in our program, they have an instructional aide for their Hebrew studies, and a separate aide for their general studies. In essence, this is two teams of people who should be working towards the same overall goals, and I am the one making sure everyone is in constant contact and working together as much as possible.

Recently I had a student whose working diagnosis was still unclear as many interesting behaviors were starting to evolve and beginning to deeply affect the child’s ability to perform in the classroom. Due to these behaviors, our goals for this student became less academic, and more behavioral. In addition, the behaviors were becoming more noticeable and problematic in the morning during the Judaic curriculum, and less problematic during the general studies curriculum. This was due to many factors.

First, the child is very bright and loves to read. She soaks up information like a sponge, and prefers reading English texts, history, and any factual information she can get her hands on. Not only is this more of the content in the afternoon curriculum, but also the barrier of the second language of Hebrew during the morning subjects makes the content less interesting to the student, and that is when her mind begins to wander and her behaviors start to come out.

Another factor which exists, that I believe to be the strongest – is that she quickly became very comfortable with her morning instructional aide, (whose experience made her over-qualified for the job), and really enabled the student to convey her fears, anxiety, likes, dislikes, etc… She was comfortable showing her true colors, but sometimes the things she would say or do would be so alarming that it totally shifted our focus to what our priorities needed to be when working with this child. She did not convey those same feelings to the afternoon aide.

In addition, the afternoon classroom teacher struggled with her place in this child’s education. She was not very comfortable having the aide in the classroom, and didn’t know how to approach specific issues that would come up. She viewed the child as being the aide’s responsibility and did not view her as her own student. This made my job that much harder. I was constantly trying to advocate for the child by explaining and re-explaining how this teacher should be addressing this student’s needs. I even offered to create some reinforcement materials that would help the teacher be able to reach the child with the curriculum, but I was often shot down as the teacher could not “be bothered”. I don’t think it was that the teacher didn’t care, it was more that she was very set in her ways and got overwhelmed with the needs of the student.

Meeting after meeting, I was up against this brick wall. Therefore, when the student was in the classroom, she would be “allowed” to read the things that interested her, even when it was not what the rest of the class was doing. She wasn’t acting out, and technically she was learning…so why rock the boat? Don’t forget – the student is extremely bright and is even above grade level in reading. The teacher based her grades on whatever she did, and I worked with the aide to do more pull-out time to reinforce additional concepts. This is an example of a child slipping through the cracks…making it through the year however possible.

The biggest uproar came when it was time for report cards. The general studies teacher was producing quite good grades for the student, but the Hebrew team felt that they could not even give the student grades because of the fact that her extreme behavior kind of took over during the morning. Obviously this looks like a huge discrepancy, one which the school was extremely concerned about in terms of how it would look to the parents who were already extremely difficult to deal with.

To throw one more wrench into this mess….during the second half of the year the general studies teacher has to cover a certain amount of material that is going to be on the upcoming standardized test - right at a time when the child’s behaviors were starting to escalate. You can imagine the stress level that I had trying to focus on doing what was best for the child, and frankly – preparing for a standardized test was simply not one of them.

So now the question arises - How am I supposed to advocate for this child, in this unique learning environment, juggling all those people and parts, and have to prepare the child for standardized tests, and expect her to pass with such flying colors? I can’t. It’s as simple as that. In fact, it’s an almost impossible task, and at the end of the day, (regardless of what the AYP scores mean for the teachers, schools, etc…), not only do I feel as if my hands are tied from doing what’s best for the child, but the child is the one who suffers. She is the one left behind.

Annotative Bibliography:

* **Harriman, H. (2005). Perceptions of Students and Educators on the Impact of No Child Left Behind: Some Will and Some Won't. Rural Special Education Quarterly, 24(1), 64-69**

A study done on a suburban school district in Maine where they interviewed groups of both students and teachers/educational service providers on how they perceive the effects of the No Child Left Behind act. Both groups showed big concerns in regards to the fairness to subgroups, especially to students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. The students also showed apprehension about the possibility of changing schools, while the teachers and administrators additionally felt the desirable effects of accountability (negatively affecting their teaching.)

“Most respondents recommended that the law be amended to achieve the original intent.” For me, this quote hits the nail on the head. This law has left too many children behind.

* **Weingarten, R. (2008). Accountability That Works. Education Week, 27(37), 32-32.**

This educator points out the heavy issues around accountability in schools and focuses on the fact that the trouble with today’s system is that “accountability efforts are how narrowly success is defined and measured….”due to the pressure to meet the mandates in the No Child Left Behind act. She refers to accountability as a “gotcha game” designed to blame and punish rather than to build capacity for improvement.

* **Apple, M. (2006). Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, G-d, and Inequality. Routlege, New York, 87 – 123**

In Chapter 4 of his book “Who No Child Left Behind Leaves Behind”, Apple clearly defines the NLCB act through his list of 10 major provisions. Specifically, 2, 3, and 5 support my paper as they outline the specifics of the standardized tests and how they may affect children with disabilities.

In other aspects of his book, Apple talks often about the sub groups which include students with disabilities, who are affected the most by government policies like NCLB.

* **RAVITCH, D. (2010). Did We Bridge Our Differences? Education Week, 30(11), 10-10.**

This article came from a blog and in only 5 short paragraphs, the writer managed to make such brilliantly strong points about the negative effects of these issues. She refers to NCLB as creating national fraud as “the more we rely on testing, and the more we emphasize accountability, the less interest there is in anything that we would recognize as good education.” I conclude….who has time to educate when there are standardized tests to prepare for?

* **(2006). Half full or half empty? Scrutinizing the effects of NCLB. American School Board Journal, 193(5), 4-6.**

The title for this article is brilliant. Is NCLB focusing on educational growth, or is it holding us back? This article surveyed more than 300 school districts – most of whom have cut back on a minimum of one subject to make more time for math and reading, the subjects tested under NCLB. Some people actually feel that this helps low-achieving students in those subjects by giving them opportunities to catch up, however most people feel that teaching to standardized tests means that we are shortchanging our students by “squelching creativity in teaching and learning.” Clearly this has an even greater effect on adverse learners.

* **Browder, D. (2007). The implications of no child left behind for students with developmental disabilities. Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews, 13(2), 143-150.**

This article reviewed current research as it relates to NCLB and mainly focused on two specific issues: 1. How students with developmental disabilities have shown adequate progress, and 2. The relationship between NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004).

While this article was somewhat overwhelming, there was one main point that struck me most in preparing for this paper: “While the intent of the highly qualified mandate is to provide all students with better qualified teacher and instruction, there is the possibility that the mandates can further exacerbate the already serious special education teacher shortage.” In other words – there are already not enough special ed teachers, which means more students with IEPS are placed within the general curriculum and do not have teachers that are trained to meet their needs.

* **Mahadevan, L. (2009). Educator and Administrator Perceptions of the Impact of No Child Left Behind on Special Populations. Remedial and Special Education, 30(3), 148-159.**

This article assessed the impact of the NCLB law as it specifically affects students with special needs by surveying educators, administrators, and service providers who work with this population on how they perceive this law to affect those students both positively and negatively. They all commented in the negative effects of accountability, the fact that there is no parent choice, and although there were strong positive perceptions for the standards themselves, there was a strong negative connotation for the consequences associated with failure to meet standards.

* **Meyer, R. (2010). Supplemental Education Services Under No Child Left Behind: Who Signs Up, and What Do They Gain? Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 32(2), 273-298.**

This article looked at schools that have not made adequate yearly progress in increasing student academic achievement and are therefore required, under No Child Left Behind, to offer children (mainly from low-income families) the opportunity to receive supplemental educational services (SES). The problem is that there are barely any observed effects of this law, and the authors of this study are trying to figure out why.