



Rethinking Education

Students with special needs in
regular classrooms—all day.

Gifted students learning from
special education teachers.

Students with attention deficit
disorder engaged in learning.

By Lori Bauer

It's not business as usual. It's teaching out of the box. And it can be a win-win for all students, from gifted to special needs. Arcadia faculty and students are challenging the norm—and finding they can raise the bar for everybody. Educators, now being measured on student outcomes, are finding that challenging long-held notions on classroom structure can have surprising results—both for individual students and for whole schools at a time.

A Welcome Sign

As the school year starts this fall, it will have been more than two years since federal and state governments redefined how they wanted schools to teach children with special needs—physical disabilities as well as learning disabilities. The message at every school: “All children are welcome.”

Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 to ensure special education and related services to children throughout the nation. In 2005, a Settlement Agreement in the Gaskin v. Pennsylvania class action case added another layer of complexity to how schools were expected to serve students with special needs.

What was new about IDEA and the Gaskin Settlement Agreement was the presumption that having students with disabilities in a regular education classroom with appropriate supports and services was the first choice for placement. The concept of “least restrictive environment” became the new norm. An educational system that had become compartmentalized—special-needs students being pulled out for reading specialists, life skills aids, math specialists, special education teachers—suddenly had to rethink itself to the core. The notion of students spending the bulk of their school day with specialists or in a special classroom was yesterday. Tomorrow was supposed to find as many students as possible in regular classrooms, and all of them thriving.

It Was Called “Inclusion”

The numbers are staggering. IDEA applies to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. The notion of sea change is daunting. It can be scary to the parents of a student with disabilities—not sure if their child will continue to get needed support or how he or she will feel in a general classroom. It can be disconcerting to the parents of other students—concerned that their children will be held back or given less of the teacher's attention. It can be challenging for teachers—suddenly asked to rethink daily lesson plans and activities they've been doing for years. And it can be sleep-depriving for principals and superintendents asked to figure out how to reallocate the use of existing resources.



Arcadia Leads the Way

Dr. Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Assistant Professor of Education and Coordinator of the Graduate Special Education program, is a driving force in inclusive educational practices in Pennsylvania. In collaboration with Dr. Ellen Skilton-Sylvester, Associate Professor of Education, Coordinator of English as a Second Language programs and Director of Global Connections, she founded Arcadia's Annual Inclusion Institute (AII) with funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

The second cohort is now participating in this year-long professional development institute, in which teams of educators, administrators, and parents of students with disabilities will learn how to make inclusion happen in their schools and school districts. Each school-based team in the institute creates a unique action plan that is implemented at their school.

One Plus One Equals Two Teachers

Arcadia Education faculty members Dr. Graciela Slesaransky-Poe and Dr. Ellen Skilton-Sylvester approached the problem of how to educate teachers for this new challenge as one of inclusion. Their specialties—special education and teaching English to speakers of other languages—would be front and center in this paradigm shift. And they had some ideas about how to make the new regulations a win-win for all students and teachers.

They applied for a state grant for the Arcadia Annual Inclusion Institute, and nearly 230 educators—teams from 30 schools—have come together to figure

out how to translate the grand federal and state vision to individual lives. The first school-based teams participated in 2006-07 and are now implementing what they learned in their schools, while a second group of teams started this past August.

The teachers met for several days at Arcadia's campus, and then the teams returned to their school in fall 2006 to attempt to rethink the notion of a traditional classroom with one teacher and several dozen children of similar ability. By the spring of 2007, they were finding some amazing things.

One of the most eye-opening discoveries was simple math. If you bring the special education teacher into the general classroom for part of the day, that makes two teachers for one classroom lesson. Group the classroom into small groups, and everyone can work at their own ability level and pace. The special education teacher might spend part of the time helping the most advanced students and part with a special needs group. And the general teacher will learn how to help students with special needs. "Not only does this make sense for all of the students in the class, it is often a great professional development experience for both special education and general education teachers as they learn from each other," says Slesaransky-Poe.

Debunking Myths

Jeff Markowski and Alexa Angelitis team-teach one of the new combined classrooms at Willow

Dale Elementary. Their fourth-grader special education students rarely get "pulled out" of their regular classroom. When they talked about this new concept to parents at Back to School Night in fall 2006, there were doubters among both "regular" and "special-needs" parents. But by spring 2007, Markowski reported, "One of our most adamant parents is now one of our strongest supporters."

Markowski and Angelitis and their fourth-graders didn't exactly run with the new concept right away. The teachers knew they wanted to teach math, for example, as a short lecture followed by small group work at stations and centers where students move at varying paces. At first, they bogged down. They fell

several chapters behind the other fourth grade classes at Willow Dale in Warminster, Pa. So they went to "two-a-days"—two lessons and skills per day. They caught up in no time, and the students soared.

Another myth debunked: "We found that high-end students absolutely benefit from inclusion," says Angelitis. "They were challenged and moved quickly through each skill to the next

step." The focused small group activities are a big part of this equation. It also helped that Principal Denise Wettstein, part of the Inclusion Institute team, fully supported the teachers in the new venture.

Implementing an inclusive model was a learning experience for the educators as well. One of those amazing moments came for Willow Dale Psychologist Kathleen Hunter, when she came to observe the inclusive classrooms, and found "all students focused on what was going on" and engaged in learning, including some diagnosed with attention deficit disorder.

Everybody benefits

Arcadia's Inclusion Institute has successfully brought together teams from more than 30 schools interested in better serving students with disabilities. "We help them find ways to teach out of the box in order to make inclusive communities a successful experience for all," says Slesaransky-Poe.

"We help teams create the vision for where they want to go."

The benefits of an inclusive learning community for students with disabilities include better socialization, measurable academic gains, and behavioral improvements. "And we cannot forget that kids without disabilities are benefiting as well from having resources in the classroom to support kids with disabilities that now are available to all—and most importantly for having opportunities to spend time with kids who may be different from them." ■

Watch informational videos about Inclusive Education at www.arcadia.edu/edudept.



Together in One Classroom

The Pennsylvania Department of Education's goal in the settlement was to ensure that schools consider placing special needs students in regular classrooms rather than "more restrictive placement." PDE called for more opportunities for students with disabilities to receive the supports and services they would need in order to be spend the school day with non-disabled peers in "regular" schools and classrooms. The IDEA called for special needs students to "be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum." Schools were directed to make both Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each student—with measurable annual goals in both academic and functional areas—and schoolwide plans for how they would comply.