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Defining Your Beliefs

When we entered the field of special education administration, we soon realized the need to identify, in our own terms, our beliefs regarding services for children between the ages of 3 and 21 or 22 with special needs. We needed to articulate to the school community, including administrators, school committees, the surrounding community, parents, and special education staff, what was driving our work, and we recognized that our personal values as individuals, educators, and administrators were the foundation of our beliefs. Let's say we wanted our mission statement to encompass all our previous life and professional experiences that had driven our practice, in our various positions, throughout our careers. It is so crucial, looking back, that we were able to articulate these beliefs; they kept us from compromising as we moved through our work, in the many positions we held over many years.

We can say that borrowing from other sources framed the language of our thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Beyond ensuring a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for all identified students, we developed additional beliefs:

- All children *can* learn.
- All children have the right to be treated as typical (the right to be regular).

- All children must have access to learning in the least restrictive setting.
- All children can and should be held to high standards and expectations.
- School-based staff and parents must be listened to and supported.
- Special education laws have allowed our society to think inclusively.
- All individuals have different needs and abilities, and all of us can embrace diversity.
- All school-age children deserve respect and attention to their needs, and adults must do what is best for these children and provide for their needs.

We must make a unified commitment to ensure through our authority as administrators of special education (ASEs) that a FAPE is provided in the LRE to all students determined to require special education services. As educators and administrators, we have made a concerted effort to develop programs and services that allow students with special needs to develop to their full potential. Our primary focus has always been the student; if we focused on what a student required, we believed, we would never go wrong. Taking actions and making decisions in the best interest of students based on evaluation data, plus evidence-based practice, is a formula for eventual student success.

Laurence M. Lieberman, in his 2001 article “The Death of Special Education,” considered whether “disability equals failure” or “failure equals disability.” We, too, grappled with this question throughout our careers; what if a student simply chooses to fail should we suspect a disability? Lieberman believed that when a student fails, the system fails, and further felt that focusing on the student was counterproductive to seeking student change while neglecting system change. He shared several other strong beliefs—for example, that general education teachers and principals had a responsibility to accommodate for all students, that a strong prereferral process and intervention activities should be required before considering a student for referral to special education, and that the law has “very little to do with either individuals or disabilities”; rather, Lieberman suggested, “it has become the At-Risk for Failure in the Regular Classroom Act.”

At the secondary level we would, on occasion, have students who chose not to attend their special education services, and when this occurred,

the staff sought to “write them out” of special education services. When we became aware of this, we informed staff that missing class did not make the student’s disability go away. They first needed to contact the parents, and if that was not successful, they would need to reconvene the Team. In situations like this, it is important that you take a proactive lead; while staff may not be happy as it would be easier to discontinue the services, it is your responsibility to protect the district and the student’s right to an education. If services were stopped, the parent or student could come back to the district in the future claiming that a FAPE was not provided. Rather than take that chance, we advised staff that if after the Team meeting the student still failed to attend, then the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be sent to the state as a rejection. By doing this, we acknowledged that the student continued to be eligible for and require services, and we would look toward due process to resolve the matter. As we went about our work, we would always think of the worst-case scenario: Were we putting ourselves in a position that we might not be able to defend? We were also known to say “document, document, document” as we always wanted to make sure we had the required information to back up any action we might take. With all the requirements of special education, be it paperwork, timelines, or other notifications, we knew that documenting that the requirement had been met would potentially elevate concerns in the future.

We will address professional development and your responsibility to provide current and up-to-date information to all your staff in Chapter 10. Meanwhile, some simple reminders can have a lasting impact on staff as well. Many of you may be familiar with the song, written and performed by the late Harry Chapin, “Flowers Are Red.” We often shared it with staff and administrators as well as students we had the pleasure of teaching in our college courses as it sends a strong, emotional message about the impact of adults on the education of children. The song is about a little boy who goes to school seeing all the colors of the rainbow, and during art time, he draws flowers in a spectrum of colors. When the teacher asks him what he is doing, he tells her he’s “painting flowers,” but the teacher explains that flowers are red and leaves are green and that is how they have always been. Still, the little boy continues to paint flowers in all the colors of the rainbow, and soon the teacher has had enough and puts him in a corner, saying it is for his own good and he must not come out until he gets it right and responds as he should. Frightening stories do not take long to fill his head, and soon the boy approaches the teacher and agrees that “flowers are red and leaves are green.” Time goes by as it always does, and the little boy moves to another town where the teacher smiles and says that painting

should be fun; the little boy, however, paints flowers in neat rows of green and red, and when the teacher asks him why, he explains that flowers are red and leaves are green and that is the only way to see them! Sharing this story with teachers allowed them to keep in mind the impact they have on the lives of students. We shared the same message with school leaders, but to emphasize their impact on staff rather than on students. Embrace your staff, encourage your staff, and allow your staff to see all the colors of the rainbow, but do not cut off their ideas or their thoughts—remember, they are teaching the students, not you.

We also often shared Haim Ginott's saying about the teacher (see Appendix III) as his message, echoing Chapin's, is something you as a leader should remind your staff but more importantly yourself of as you set about supporting and responding to your staff. Throughout our writing, we have referred to students as having special needs, disabilities, and handicaps, and once we began asking ourselves which is the most appropriate designation, we realized that *special needs* came from Chapter 766, *disabled* came from PL 94-142, and *handicapped* came from the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. We think that all students have special needs, and we have also come to recognize that *disabled* sends a negative message about the student and *handicapped* points to something standing in the student's way. While we're not sure when or where *differently abled* originated, this term, to our thinking, sends a clearer picture of the students with whom we have had the great pleasure of working throughout our careers. All children have abilities; some just have different abilities than others, and we must recognize these differences as part of being a child regardless of age, height, weight, eye color, hair length, skin color, family background, socioeconomic status, zip code, or any other characteristics.

As the educational leaders for the provision of special education services to students with special needs, we must be aware of and appreciate the differences and similarities among our students. Yes, some students will have different abilities than their peers, but our experiences have given us the opportunity to see a student with hearing loss assist a typical classmate and a student with Down syndrome support a student in a wheelchair. Regardless of the identified disability, each student possesses an individual set of abilities, which may not match what "we" expect but are abilities just the same. The laws have had a significant impact on students, both in special education and in general education. One of our own children came home from school one day in the third grade, in tears, and when asked what was wrong, she lamented that a classmate was not allowed on stage to prepare for the Memorial Day presentation. Upon

further investigation, it was determined that this student had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair. He had his own assistant and a communication device that allowed him to communicate with the teacher and his classmates; to our child, however, he was just another student in the classroom and belonged on stage with the group. Turns out, she would go on to become a special education teacher, and this classmate may just have been the deciding factor. And so, having stated our beliefs based on our personal and professional values, we embark on this effort to provide a practical guide to becoming an effective ASE. You, too, will be responsible for providing a FAPE in the LRE, but access to an education is not enough. The quality of instruction must be held to the highest standard, and must be socially just, to ensure that students with special needs make effective progress toward meeting those high standards and expand on their abilities.

Have good intentions gone awry? Both Freedman (2017) and Moscovitch (1993) refer to this question. In Chapter 1, we referenced President Ford's concern prior to the implementation of PL 94-142 regarding the potential unintended burdens the law contained. The law was also intended to reimburse states for 40% of their annual special education expenditures, but that never materialized. In fact, the federal reimbursement has never even reached 20%. Those of us who have worked with the law(s) and witnessed their impact on the lives of students see good intentions achieved, and while difference and debate regarding costs, small student-to-teacher ratios, paperwork demands, and so on will continue, we have always focused on the needs of students, developing programs to allow students to remain in the LRE, and the provision of quality services and instruction. As we have said for all these years, focusing on the needs of the students will never steer you wrong or set your intentions off-track.

CHAPTER SUMMARY



Establishing a clearly stated belief system that is formulated from your own personal and professional values is essential to identifying your priorities both toward the position of ASE and toward students with special needs. To succeed over the long term, you must realize, as you

gain experiences, the need to review and update your belief system to correspond to new evidence-based practices, areas where you have not been successful, and how your continued experience has informed your thinking. This willingness to adjust, modify, and expand your thinking about your beliefs will demonstrate that you are a leader willing to make change for the benefit of students. Always remind yourself that your staff as well as your students' parents are looking to you for leadership. Your job is to ensure that identified students receive the services they require—not more, not less. How you share your beliefs and expectations will set the course for the culture of your department. Once again, it is important to remember that it takes time (three to five years) to change a culture, and holding steady to your beliefs and expectations will establish that culture accordingly.

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