

“The first step in tackling any adaptive challenge is to get on the balcony so you can see how your organizational system is responding to it” (Heifetz p 49). Although I admit that I initially struggled to find a challenge that interested me in my own organization, I found that as I ascended to the precipice above and looked down at my world, one challenge with my work became crystal clear. This year, my second in teaching at Troy Athens High School, has introduced me to teaching the course titled *Introductory Physics*. This class is where all of the low level, special needs, math-phobic (and in some cases lazy) sophomores are sent to learn physics. The class is specially designed and taught at a slower pace with limited mathematical work to make the subject material come alive for the students, and to reduce mathematical rigor. Students who take the class often arrive from a lower level biology class, and continue to a lower level chemistry class. While it has led me to a better understanding of how to teach lower level students, it has also shown me the lack of function between our special education department and the rest of the building. The issue that needs to be addressed within my organization is that many of our special education students are not making the academic gains that the district would like. When I speak of these students throughout this work, I am consistently referring to are those that are not in self-contained classrooms. Rather, I am considering those that are integrated into general education courses with extra accommodations and possible resource room use.

In order to fully understand what needs to be fixed, it is first imperative that one has knowledge about how special education works. Many of our special education students are given Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) or 504's. An IEP is a legally binding document that teachers are expected to follow because a student has a specifically identified and diagnosed disability. While IEPs *must* be followed, a 504 lists accommodations that are heavily recommended, and that a student can ask for, but not required by law. All students who have

special needs are given case-load manager within the special education department to help them, and often times take a “study skills” course to help them with their other classes. It is a comfortable and seemingly great system. Students go from class to class in the least restrictive environment; they get help from aids and their caseload teachers along the way. The entire purpose of the system, and those that are a part of it, is to get differentiated instruction in order to be successful at the classes in progress and in life. However, this system does not always work.

Some issues that have been persistently present have been aided through technical problem solving. For example, this school year there was an overhaul to the organizational system of the special education department. Instead of one department head leading a variety of teachers and consultants, all of the consultants were brought on full-time, and all members of the department have been asked to take on a single leadership task. This was done to facilitate the department’s many varied responsibilities that come with teaching special education. The change in organizational structure has greatly aided the department head already, and has made smaller leadership tasks more efficient and evenly distributed. This change has also allowed students to meet with their case-load teacher more often, as they are often times in the classroom (or at least at the school all day instead of moving from school to school). Another issue has been that the case-load teachers and aids have had no way of knowing when their students have exams or quizzes in the near future. This has resulting in the creation of a calendar for teachers to add their weekly testing schedule too. Many find the calendar slightly cumbersome to use, and consider it an extra addition to our already bloated work load, but are willing to concede if it helps the students be more prepared for our assessments.

Despite the changes, many issues still remain and are more difficult to solve. Many of our special needs students, regardless of interventions, accommodations, or extra time and help, still

do very poorly in many of their courses. In fact, the students that I give the most accommodations to are still those that are getting the lowest grades. While this is not true for everyone, it is a substantial enough problem for the administration to notice. Their poor performance is exacerbated by their IEPs which often call for outlandish accommodations. Some of these include “limit student’s multiple choice options to two for all tests” or “parents and students have discretion on which homework assignments and assessments will be done”. These impede our ability as teachers to successfully teach the material and assess their learning.

Another problem the organization faces is the huge lack of communication between all of the parties involved. Between most of the special education teachers and the general education teachers there is a rift of communication. This rift only begins to close after the student is already actively failing. Some of the special education teachers do send out weekly emails or surveys to fill in for their given students, but not all of them, and there is no unified method of communication that is imposed. Most of the general education faculty feels that it is not their job to fill in weekly surveys, because all teachers can view all of their students’ grades through our grading system. There is also a massive disconnect as many teachers feel the special education department members are not doing enough to help their students, and many of the special education teachers feel that we (as general education teachers) are not considering the vast quantities of students they accommodate. It has become normal for teachers to be unaware of their students’ accommodations until several weeks into the school year, and there is no prescribed formula for sharing this information. This results in dozens of individual emails, some with organized and detailed PDF files, and many with poorly focused screen captured images of the needed paperwork. There is even a lack of communication between the special education

teachers and the students. Quite often students are unaware of the services their IEPs entail and the accommodations are not used.

At the end of the day, the primary issue (between the poor diagnostics and the lack of communication) is the misconception that what we are doing is helpful for these students. In order to get these students to be successful, and solve this adaptive challenge, people need to be willing to open their eyes and ears, and admit that things need to change. Education is about guiding students and leading them to be successful in their classes. Even more importantly, we want our kids to become well rounded, critical thinking adults. When I emailed one of the case-load teachers in regards to one of my students, they told me in regards to his performance, “All he needs is a D minus and he gets a pass with credit. He gets a “G” which won’t hurt his GPA as long as he gets at least that D minus”. It is this type of acceptance of mediocrity and willingness to push these students through the educational machine that is massively destructive to their growth. The thought is that if they pass and graduate that they are successful, but it devalues the entire purpose of their education.

The question of how to better help and support our special needs students is one that is truly a multifaceted issue. It is surrounded by a lot of different individuals and groups. Administrators, special education faculty, general education faculty, students, and parents all come into play, and it is often difficult to launch any type of conversation because there are so many individuals involved. At the very top of the leadership structure are our principal and three assistant principals. It has been their job to facilitate the special education department but generally not to interfere too much. This is because none of them have degrees in special education, making them hesitant to make major decisions for them. This hands-off approach leaves problems to fester as staff members are typically unwilling to call out major flaws in the

system and each other. As one of my department members put it, “it’s sort of the white elephant in the room; nobody thinks the special education department supports us well enough, but we can’t say anything about it”. It should also be noted that, despite the importance of a principal to their building, these four individuals are in charge of every department, every student, and all things from safety to standardized testing, teaching evaluations to athletics. The system needs to be set up properly to run under low supervision, but at the same time needs to be checked more frequently to ensure that students are actually learning and improving. To continuously allow students to repeatedly do poorly in classes without any intervention is not good leadership.

Other individuals occupy a variety of leadership positions within the school as well. One of the most important is the special education department head, Christina, and below her, the remaining special education and general education teachers. Christina’s primary function as department head is to deal with the special legal constraints placed on the department, and to oversee all of the other individual teachers below her. She takes her job seriously and is a well-respected teacher. Similarly, each department has its own department heads and a variety of teacher leaders who take on various tasks. While these individuals have important tasks in their own departments, such as running department meetings, ordering supplies, and dealing with scheduling each year, they do not have the authority to conduct larger scale change. In order to better help this group of students be successful, interdepartmental unity will more than likely be needed.

By now it should be obvious that the status quo has been accepted for a long time. It is assumed that every year we will get the students’ information, we will try to do our best to accommodate, and students will go receive support (often times this seems to translate into “having answers given”). We as general education teachers cannot make changes to the overall

structure of the system in question. The continued void and blurred lines of responsibility make this problem one that has to be handled from above (by a principal) in order to see change. It is the assistant principals' job to deal with these issues, which has marginal success. Decisions in regards to the way things operate are never considered by any of the other departments, rather we are just told about any changes through email.

In order for change to occur, and be beneficial for all parties involved, there will have to be a change in the way all of the departments work together, and the responsibilities each performs. The work load may be front loaded, and would have to involve some changes in perspective. I pride myself in working for a school that is willing to share responsibility for our students, where leaders are honed, and where we are pushed to be reflective and continued learners. When change is suggested, we work as a team, and make our organization stronger. However, it is not ok that we continue to accept the status quo when it comes to educating these students, and continue to try the same old methods of remedy. It is clear that technical solutions will not solve this complex problem, and until new ideas and solutions are presented, the same cycle of disappointment will continue. This is not what we want for our students, and it is time for change.