

Designing Services to Improve Student Learning

Context Report

Strategic Priority: Plan and implement improved, comprehensive system grounded in best practices for delivering services to children with diverse learning needs.

Introduction

In January 2003, the Executive Team of GWAEA identified four strategic priorities that represented actions that would hold the greatest promise of achieving the agency wide goals identified as a result of a comprehensive needs assessment. It was determined that a white paper would be developed to provide guidance for the future direction of each priority. Jeananne Hagen, executive director, was assigned to assemble a representative group within the agency to develop the white paper focusing on the delivery of services to children with diverse learning needs.

Participants in the process were chosen based upon their knowledge of research methodology and their knowledge of current research within their discipline. A variety of educational background and experiences are represented in the group. Membership of the writing group for the white paper are: Linda Hansen, school psychologist and lead author; Heidi Doellinger, reading consultant; Sherry Sines, school psychologist; and Trace Pickering, planning and development consultant.

Prior to receiving this assignment, a group within the agency had already been formed to begin looking at our delivery of special education in light of agency goals for improving student achievement. It was determined that this group, because they had been looking at research in the field of special education, would serve as advisory to the white paper writing group. Membership in this group includes, in addition to the above listed names, both management and consultant representatives from the agency. They are: Leslee Sandberg, special projects coordinator; Kathleen Aller, facilitator; Marie Cashman, associate regional facilitator; Mark Cannon, special education consultant; Mary Somerville, regional facilitator; Carrie Norton, special education consultant; and Jack Rainey, school psychologist. The writing team met on four occasions: January 23, February 18, 21, and 26. They met with the advisory group on February 19 to receive input on the white paper's first draft. A final draft was distributed to the group on February 28th.

Research Findings

The implementation of early identification and intervention programs reduces the number of children who are identified as having a disability, especially when research based interventions are provided before a referral (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002).

- Early identification through universal screening of young children can recognize those most at-risk for later achievement and behavioral problems, including those most likely to be referred and placed in special education (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). Universal screening, such as through curriculum based measurements, when administered to all students can identify at-risk students for immediate preventative instructional planning decisions with individual students, or curriculum choices when large numbers of students are involved (Shinn, M. R.). Similarly, phonological awareness and phonetic knowledge assessments provide accurate early identification of children at risk for reading failures (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001).
- High incidence disabilities such as specific learning disabilities, speech & language impairments, emotional disturbance, mild mental retardation, and developmental delays account for 90% of students served under the IDEA. Moreover, of these, specific learning disabilities in reading account for 90% of high incidence disabilities (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002).
- Research suggests that early identification and prevention reading programs in kindergarten and 1st grade could reduce up to 70% the number of children served in special education or compensatory programs. (Lyon et al., 2001). According to Slavin, Karweit, and Wasik (1992), intensive prevention reading services for at-risk first grade students may only be needed for a relatively brief period, and of these, only a very small portion may need special education services. In addition, early intervention programs that address aggressive and oppositional behaviors can help children

learn to behave appropriately before conduct problems result in peer rejection, well-established negative reputations, school problems, and academic failure (Webster-Stratton, 1997).

An alternative service delivery model such as problem solving assists in the implementation of early identification and intervention programs, and helps prevent more serious difficulties and in many cases reduces referral and placement in special education (National Association of School Psychologist, 2003). Focus shifts to the development of data driven interventions and ensuring student outcomes rather than determining failure and deviance (Upah, K. R., Tilly III, W. D, 2002).

- The majority of children who are poor readers at 9 or older continue to have reading difficulties into adulthood (Lyon et al., 2001). Deferring reading intervention until 3rd or 4th grade is too late as the child is well behind his or her peers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). According to the Connecticut Longitudinal Study, 70% of learning disabled students and low achieving readers do not catch up to non-reading impaired students, even by the 12th grade (Lyon et al., 2001).
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- The number of older children identified as learning disabled is increasing without related improvements noted in their [reading] learning abilities. The increase is partially attributable to the limited effectiveness of [reading] remediation after age nine (Lyon et al., 2001) and over reliance on a measurable discrepancy that makes early identification difficult (Lyon et al.; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002).
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- More effort needs to be directed toward the education of secondary students with disabilities and the identification of instructional tools that remediate individual skill deficits (Davis & Grossen, 2001). A research report of nine high schools in four states found that only one school had a vision, policies, and standard procedures for educating students with disabilities in the general education curriculum and this was the only school using research-based methods and technology to teach students strategies to succeed (Schumaker et al., 2002).

Benchmarks:

The following are samples of research-based applications.

- Universal screening: Heartland AEA – 56 school districts are using DIBELS & CBM. According to Heartland, the data have been used to inform instruction with improvements noted in student performance in phonemic awareness and reading fluency.
- Early Intervention/Prevention: Success for All – emphasis on system-wide prevention and early intervention. In the early elementary years children are provided research based curriculum and instructional methods, reduced class sizes, and tutoring in reading from certified teachers. Research indicated substantial positive effects on reading performance in grades 1-3, and reduced retention and special education placements (Slavin et al., 1992).
- Special Education Remediation: Early Literacy Project (ELP) – a well-documented successful reading program for special education. Literacy instruction is embedded in meaningful and integrated activities that span areas of literacy curriculum. Growth per year in reading ranged from 1.3 years to 2 or 3 years (Englert & Tarrant, 1995).
- STEEP: Alternative Service Delivery: Screening to Enhance Equitable Placement – early identification and intervention with struggling learners, referral rates decrease 33% with valid referrals increasing. Steps include: (1) class wide CBM screening; (2) determination of skill/performance deficit and (3) data linked brief intervention (Witt).

Grant Wood Current State

Current trends:

- GWAEA CIP (4/1/02) Kindergarten Readiness Perception Survey, 2001-02: Almost 35% of kindergartners were deemed “unprepared” in communication skills by their instructors.

- *IDEA Count by Grade Area Wide: In schools served by GWAEA, 377 students in preschool are receiving special education services. This number drops to 123 students in kindergarten and then starts to steadily climb, peaking in grade 9 with 895 students receiving special education services. (See Appendix B.)*
- *NCLB - GWAEA Annual Progress Report (APR), 2003:*
 - Annual Improvement Math Goal was met by 81.3% of 32 reporting school districts. Six public school districts did not meet their math goal in the second consecutive year. Special Education 01-02 – 60% of 4th grade students and 76% of 8th grade students were not proficient in math.
 - Annual Improvement Reading Goal was met by 62.5% of 32 reporting school districts. Eleven public school districts did not meet their annual improvement reading goals for the 2nd consecutive year. Special Education 01-02 – 67% of 4th grade students and 76% of 8th grade students were not proficient in reading.
- *In the CRCSD, Seventy percent of all IEP's written for special education students include at least one goal in the area of reading.*
- *Universal Screening: GWAEA does not keep formal records on the screening measures that schools have implemented or how the data is used.*
 - Every school implements diagnostic reading assessments two times a year per Federal and State mandates.
 - CBM: Approximately 10-12 schools in the Cedar Rapids area are using CBM. Most of the schools are using CBM only in the area of reading fluency with a few schools using CBM in reading, math computation, and writing areas.
- *Early Reading and Behavior Intervention:*
 - Twenty-five school districts are implementing Reading Recovery with over 80 teachers participating (APR).
 - Ten school districts are implementing customized, professional development in reading at the elementary level (APR).
 - GWAEA support staff: approximately 1/3 of SLP provide phonemic awareness instruction such as whole classroom activities, small group instruction, and teacher consultation.
 - Behavior Intervention Support Program - Short term, intensive support is provided in the Iowa City schools to kindergarten and 1st grade children who exhibit disruptive school behavior. Data from 2000-01 and 2001-02 indicated 17 students served with a 75% rate of positive behavior change at the end of the 8-10 week intervention period with a regression to about 50% at the end of that school year. (See Appendix C.)
- *Alternative Delivery System: GWAEA Solutions Focused Process*
 - Current State - April, 2002. During 2001-02 a variety of awareness level training was provided to AEA and LEA staff on the Solutions Focused Process. There are reported inconsistencies in the application and implementation of special education decision-making. (See Appendix D.)

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