

Funding for Special Education Assistants in Inclusion Classrooms:

A presentation by Sharon L. Barbee, parent of a special education student, Parkland PTA Liaison and Chair of the MCCPTA Legislation Committee,

Telephone number 301-231-5905, e-mail slbarbee@verizon.net.

My son, a Special Education inclusion student, stretched his reading ability last year and prepared a quality book report. In front of the class, his English teacher told him he couldn't have read the book and the book report was not his work. She gave him detention and required he read a different book and do another book report. He was devastated. Thinking it a misunderstanding, I assured the teacher he had read the book aloud to me. Responding, "He did not read the book", she stopped just short of calling me a liar. I was devastated and angry my son had been robbed of his success.

I am asking for an increase in the funding to cover salaries for additional Special Education Assistants and funding for Special Education sensitivity training for teachers in our inclusive classrooms. The minimum increase to be considered should cover having a Special Education Assistant in every inclusive English and Mathematics classroom at a minimum.

The case has been made and proven for the **benefits of inclusive classroom**. Under the right circumstances, the least restrictive environment can motivate the special education student to achieve beyond the level he or she would in a more restrictive environment. However, many learning disabilities interfere with the processing time of the special education student. This student is still processing the first instruction while the class is hearing the second and third instruction. By the time the special education student has processed the first instruction the class has moved on and the special education student is lost.

Meeting the needs of the special education student is frequently viewed as being at odds with meeting the needs of the regular student. We need to implement policies and place funds in appropriate places to debunk this myth. There are strategies that can address special education needs without slowing the pace of the whole class. In fact, implementation of these strategies will benefit all students. For example, if every student received a written daily outline of the lesson plan for the day clearly stating the reference material and page numbers, the goals and the vocabulary for the lesson and that night's homework any student missing any part or all of a class would have the tool needed to catch-up with the class and all students would have a tool to study for quizzes and tests. The teacher would have a prepared tool to post to Edline systems and to give to guidance counselors for absent students. The teacher must write a lesson plan anyway. So why not give the information to the class in a written format that promotes concentration on the classroom presentation and allows students to catch-up when necessary?

A significant portion of our special education students will **"act out" when they are lost** instead of asking for a repeat of the instructions. This is **distracting** to the other students and ultimately interferes with the teacher's instruction. The special education student is then punished for disrupting the class. The **punishments can include sitting separate from the rest of the class in the classroom, which is the equivalent of wearing the dunce cap, being sent into the hall or being sent to the office, thereby falling further behind.** This becomes a cycle for the special needs student of escaping the humiliation of not being able to process information as fast as the students without learning disabilities.

Ultimately, the student falls too far behind to follow what is being taught in the classroom and may generally be viewed as a **behavioral problem not worth the teacher's time or effort**. A **downward spiral of failure** has been established with only more **humiliation and self-doubt to follow**. Teachers begin to let slip inappropriate comments to the student in front of the class. Even if this special needs student manages to successfully comprehend a section of material and submit quality work, they may be **accused of cheating because it is incongruous with the teacher's expectations**. This is a **cycle of humiliating failure even in the face of some hard won success**. If not addressed, a **whole year of teaching in this class will be wasted** for the special education student, the flow of the class will be frequently **disrupted for other students** and the special education **student bears the brunt of his teacher's and classmate's disdain**.

There are several strategies that can stop this cycle. But first, the **cycle must be recognized for what it is, a learning disability not addressed**. The best tool for addressing this debilitating cycle is a teacher who can **recognize it** and appropriately **implement accommodations** to address the problem while **avoiding the punishment cycle** signaling failure. Since we are in a position where all of our teachers are not certified in special education, **we need to have certified special education assistants in the inclusion classroom** and give **sensitivity training to the teachers**.

Funding for training and salaries of satisfactory numbers of these assistants must be put in the budget for our English and Mathematics inclusive classrooms at a minimum. Students needing this type of support must be identified and hand placed in classrooms with Special Education assistants. Special Needs **sensitivity training must start being funded and required for all inclusion teachers**.

The WETA Fat City production of Richard Levoie's "**How Difficult Can This Be?**" see the **classroom through the eyes of a child with learning disabilities** is an existing tool that could be used for sensitivity training. It only **costs about \$50 per copy** and enables the viewer to experience what it is like to be a special needs student in a mainstream classroom. **The effectiveness of Special Education Assistants can be promoted if paired with teachers who are at least sensitive to the situation of special needs students**.

Ultimately, all inclusion teachers should be trained in special education because it should come as no surprise that the strategies that work for special needs students also promote successful learning of all students and with appropriate preparation need not take additional classroom time. Resource classes are not a replacement for Special Education assistants, sensitivity training or teachers trained in special education. Resource classes are a very effective tool but with a different purpose. Resource classes will never take the place of trained special educators in the classroom.

If we are ever to meet our Maryland State Assessment targets, give all students the opportunity to earn diploma, truly not leave a child behind and at the same time give the average student an opportunity to excel, we must address the needs of the inclusion classroom.

Please place additional funds in the Special Education budget earmarked for Special Education Assistants and for sensitivity training of teachers in the inclusive classroom. We need to stop viewing increasing the special education budget as throwing money at "The Special Education Problem". **These supports benefit all students, their teachers and our future.**