

An Opportunity, Not a Burden

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Severely handicapped students integrated into a regular high school in Eugene, Oregon, have the support and acceptance of school staff, students, and community.





“[Nonhandicapped students] gain praise—not ridicule—from other students when they attend afterschool activities with their handicapped friends.”

In March 1979, a group of staff members representing the new Oregon High School project proposed that I, as principal, participate in their project, a movement I knew little about—a program for which I myself had to be trained. After weeks of discussions with staff members, and after careful planning with the teacher of the proposed basic skills class for severely handicapped students, I was convinced, and the “1300/13 theory” was conceived: the 1300 regular students and staff members in the school could learn and benefit from the 13 handicapped students as much as they could learn from us. These students would be considered an opportunity, not a burden.

The High School Setting

Our model requires an “open” school—not a physically open plant without walls, but a community of

people who are willing to listen, test, and help cultivate change. The North Eugene building is perhaps as traditional a structure as one will find anywhere in the country; it was built in the late 1950s to satisfy taxpayers who had reacted negatively to a previous high school that many considered too lavish. Even so, we discovered that with minor modifications the special students managed very well.

We strongly believe that handicapped students should be visible to everyone. Their classroom should be close to the social hub of the building as well as to lockers, cafeteria, and regular bus loading areas to reduce their mobility problems and maximize their interactions with regular students and staff members. A central location also makes it more convenient for handicapped students to participate in activities that regular stu-

dents and staff members take for granted, such as going to the lunchroom, using lockers, and attending assemblies. The handicapped students’ break and lunch schedules should be the same as for other students, maximizing their visibility and availability to the total school population.

Support Activities

Extracurricular activities are an important part of high school life. At North Eugene, severely handicapped students participate in these activities through a club called the “Highlander Advocates.” Membership includes students from many social classes within the school—student leaders, athletes, punkers, honor society members, and so on. The club helps sponsor dances, buys buttons and banners to show school support, and serves as a focal

support group for the severely handicapped by all students. The handicapped students also carry student identification cards and have their pictures in the yearbook—not as a special, handicapped class, but as individual students.

Without doubt, the most important aspect of our success has been the training, development, and utilization of peer tutors. Regular and handi-

capped students work alongside one another on computers and in home economics or industrial education labs; they rollerskate, bowl, and play softball together. Tutors accompany their severely handicapped peers to banks, fast-food restaurants, and grocery stores; and they gain praise—not ridicule—from other students when they attend afterschool activities with their handicapped friends.

Life Skills

Learning skills in a realistic setting is especially important for handicapped students. The school can provide work training opportunities (cafeteria clean-up, litter patrol, recycling projects). The small salaries students earn from these jobs provide them with the chance to learn how to cash checks, deposit savings, and make purchases.

The growing business/school partnership programs around the country present possibilities for additional training in real-life skills. Local business leaders must be convinced that severely handicapped students can be a productive, successful work force; and programs such as ours can help the community to better understand these students, their needs, and their often-underestimated abilities.

During the past six years, seven of the students in our program have graduated and been awarded certificates of completion. Three of these students are presently employed in the community, and the other four are seeking jobs.

Those Who Care

As educators, those who should care the most about children and their futures, we must convince others of the need to help all students—including the severely handicapped—become successful members of society. The staff members and students at North Eugene High School have demonstrated that this is possible.

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References

Wilcox, Barbara, and Bellamy, G. Thomas. *Design of High School Programs for Severely Handicapped Students*. Baltimore, Md.: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 1982.

Wilcox, Barbara, and Bellamy, G. Thomas. *Final Report—The Oregon High School Project for Severely Handicapped Students: Implementing State-Wide Change*. Eugene, Oreg.: University of Oregon Press, 1984.

The Oregon High School Model for Severely Handicapped Students

Program components were designed from previous research and various techniques used in educating severely handicapped students. The model is based on the assumption that severely handicapped students can perform a variety of tasks once presumed beyond their capabilities, and has seven basic features:

1. The *integration* of severely handicapped students involves placement of a special class in a regular high school building where there is an opportunity to share resources and nonacademic experiences with nonhandicapped peers. Integration is defined as availability to the regular education environment rather than mainstreaming handicapped students into classes with regular students.

2. The program should be *age appropriate*, and instruction should incorporate materials and tasks that highlight similarities within the high school peer group. This includes the commitment to provide extracurricular and nonacademic experiences normally associated with regular high school students.

3. The program is *community referenced* with emphasis on functional skills and criteria that relate to the community's demands and expectations.

4. A *future orientation* is a natural and necessary complement to community referencing. Future environments should include increased accessibility, community living alternatives, more opportunities for nontrivial work and wages, and a decreased need for adult day-care programs.

5. The *comprehensive* high school program should be judged not against what teachers can program, but against what their students need. Strategies are developed for fitting into the local economy and for teaching skills that are not normally practical in the classroom.

6. *Parent involvement* encompasses a wide variety of roles. Having parents extensively involved in the development of individualized educational programs, homebound instruction, community training, data collection, and program design leads to the potential for a higher success rate once students leave school.

7. The *effectiveness* of secondary instruction should be measured in terms of daily performance in residential, vocational, leisure, and community environments rather than by accumulated knowledge or classroom behavior. Program assessment must be sensitive to increased independence in daily routines, improved access to community services, development of personal options, employment, and productivity.

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