

Boosting Success for Exceptional Needs Students

White Paper

By

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“Through education, we can help people with disabilities build a strong foundation of knowledge and marketable skills with expectations for employment and the ability to give back to others in their communities.”

---U.S Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in a statement issued on October 6, 2009 in recognition of President Obama’s proclamation of October as National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

There is certainly no ambiguity in the message coming from our nation’s highest offices today. Americans with disabilities are a front and center priority. And with upwards of \$22 billion now allotted to education via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), there is an unprecedented opportunity for schools across the country to focus attention and resources on students with a range of special needs.

Response to Intervention

With “Response to Intervention (RtI),” a term introduced in IDEA 2004, the traditional Special Education practice of testing and labeling a struggling child with specific disability before intervening with support underwent a significant shift. The RtI approach differs in that it entails collecting data on students over time and adjusting instruction as needed to help each learner reach success. It avoids the resource-consuming testing process and the stigma of labeling students with disabilities – often inaccurately. Additionally, the RtI method of customized or “differentiated” instruction offers the broader benefit of serving students both with and without disabilities. As psychologist, Special Education teacher and author James B. Hale says in “Response to Intervention: Guidelines for Parents and Practitioners,” “RtI is what good teachers have always done to help struggling students learn.”

Relevance for All Educators

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 55 million school-age students headed back to class in the fall of 2009. Of these, the Center for Exceptional Children and other sources approximate that 10 to 13 percent have one or more disabilities, which means up to three or four students in a class of 25 could be struggling learners. Educators at all grade levels and across all disciplines will likely encounter students with special needs in some setting and can benefit from a knowledge of the tools and techniques of intervention. As the Florida Center for Reading Research notes, “Even media specialists, art teachers, and assistant principals have been known to provide effective interventions when they are enthusiastic, and their instruction is guided by a well structured and systematic intervention program.”

And as the approach to meeting special needs has evolved, so have the associated terms. Students once labeled “handicapped” are now referred to in the more positive term “exceptional.” It is these students who are the primary focus of the interventions detailed in this paper.

Anthony D. Fredericks, Professor of Education at York College in Pennsylvania, and author of more than 50 teacher resource books, breaks down exceptionalities into six categories in this excerpt from *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Success as a Teacher*:

- **Intellectual.** This includes students who have superior intelligence as well as those who are slow to learn.
- **Communicative.** These students have special learning disabilities or speech or language impairments.
- **Sensory.** Sensory-grouped students have auditory or visual disabilities.
- **Behavioral.** These students are emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted.
- **Physical.** This includes students with orthopedic or mobility disabilities.

- **Multiple.** These students have a combination of conditions, such as orthopedically challenged and visually impaired.

Five Primary Interventions

In this paper, we focus on practical classroom interventions for students with exceptionalities across the spectrum. We've grouped the interventions under five key headings to include a variety of target interventions that have achieved professional consensus from a broad selection of publications by professional associations, and experts in the fields of Teaching Standards, Psychology, Special Education and Exceptionalities.

1. Communication

"Students will better understand directions when those directions are delivered in a clear manner, expressed in language the student understands, given at a pace that does not overwhelm the student, and posted for later review."

---Jim Wright, New York- based school psychologist and administrator in "School-wide Strategies for Managing: Off-Task/Inattention"

Clear communication is central to all good instruction, but when it comes to children with exceptionalities, it is more crucial than ever. For Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autistic, hearing impaired, English Language Development (ELD) and other students with challenges, the inability to focus on classroom activities can prove a major barrier to achievement.

Behaviors and Expectations

In any form of communication – verbal, visual, written – clarity remains the first rule of thumb. In "Eighteen Simple School Strategies for ADHD Children," psychotherapist and ADHD specialist Keath Low identifies "clear and concise" classroom rules and expectations as key in her very first tip. She notes rules should be gone over regularly with students, and the child should "repeat back" these rules to establish there is common understanding from both sides.

A graphic of a tip box with a scroll-like border and a small circle at the top right corner. The text inside is a tip for teachers.

Tip:

Using the VariQuest® Poster Maker, teachers can create posters with easy-to-understand classroom rules, or further reinforce student understanding of rules by having students work independently or in groups to create their own posters of classroom rules. These posters can be displayed on the classroom walls, or given to students to take home to discuss with parents or to post on their bedroom or study room wall.

Expectations that include assignment and test assessment guidelines and outside-the-classroom procedures should also be discussed and represented visually on classroom walls. Evaluation rubrics and behavior guides for fire drills, school assemblies, the bus stop, schoolyard and cafeteria can also be created and posted for all to see.

Directions

Wright, who is also the creator of the Intervention Central Web site, offers the following in "School-wide Strategies for Managing: Off-Task/Inattention: " When giving directions to the whole class, capture students' attention first, using group alerting cues, such as 'Eyes and ears on me!'" After giving directions to the entire class, privately re-state directions to those who appear to need assistance. Additionally, in "'Classic' Ideas That Teachers Can Use to

Diversify Classroom Instruction,” he suggests breaking “...multi-step directions into smaller subsets” to help children digest the information in more manageable chunks.

Tip:

Teachers can create and post step-by-step directions for different assignments each day by using the VariQuest Poster Maker. Directions for what to include on common, recurring activities, such as a review quizzes, can be part of the ongoing classroom display to help students internalize directions.

Additional practical tips which can apply to learners with a range of exceptionalities are offered in “Strategies for Teaching Students with Hearing Impairments” on the West Virginia Department of Education’s Web site. Tips for boosting focus and understanding include seating students in low traffic areas of the classroom to reduce distractions, and providing outlines of activities in advance of introducing them to the class as a whole. Additionally, confusion can be minimized by keeping the chalkboard free of “visual pollution,” and by the teacher presenting only one source of visual information at a time.

Tip:

Activity outlines can become a daily centering focus for each elementary classroom or secondary-level course period. Teachers can use the VariQuest Poster Maker to create outlines in large print to use as visuals in anticipatory sets or as maps for the day’s activities.

2. Motivation/Engagement

“Structure a variety of learning activities in which the social climate of the classroom is both promoted and enhanced. It is important that everyone feels like he or she is contributing.”

---Anthony D. Fredericks

Stimulating Activities

A stimulating learning environment that integrates systematic techniques for involving students and engaging them in learning is the basis for top-quality instruction in any setting. Many students not challenged with disabilities are able to function and achieve success even when the learning environment is not particularly engaging. However, students with disabilities are at a risk of almost certain failure in such a setting.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) mandates that teachers of students with exceptional needs “draw on a rich repertoire of strategies and approaches” in the pursuit of tailoring instruction to each student’s “distinct abilities and disabilities.” The exceptional needs classroom should also “capitalize on student diversity to enrich the pursuit of academic, social and civic goals...” Among suggested lessons are having students from “immigrant groups or the Deaf Culture share their experiences and customs.”

Tip:

With the VariQuest Cutout Maker, students can turn frequently used words from their cultures into manipulatives that can be used in games or posted on a word wall. They can also create other visuals that display landmarks, maps or historical events. Hearing impaired students might use the Cutout Maker or the Poster Maker to show the American Manual Alphabet that augments the vocabulary of American Sign Language.

In addition to the NBPTS, a range of experts including Wright and others emphasize the importance of keeping instruction interesting by varying activities and approaches. Presenting students with choices of a few different activities allow them to benefit by choosing one that best matches a particular interest or preferred learning style. And activities that integrate regular responses from students can also keep the atmosphere lively and engaging. Wright suggests calling randomly on students to maximize the attention of all class members. Other choices, such as where to sit or whether to work alone or in a small group, also contribute to a positive, engaging classroom environment.

The Power of Visuals

A middle school math study published in the *Journal of Special Education* reminds us of the power of visual and tactile materials for reaching kids with special needs. That research found that Enhanced Anchored Instruction, which relies on multimedia and hands-on formats to present problems, shrinks achievement differences between disabled and non-disabled student populations. It showed that "...although students with LD scored lower on pretests, their learning trajectories matched those of students without LD."

Visuals can assist exceptional students' comprehension in many other curricular areas as well. The NBPTS provides the example of having students "draw upon data in photographs and other visual images" to assist them in understanding historical information.

Tip:

The VariQuest Design Center allows students to import their own photographs to use as visual aids in a presentation or project. For a unit on Genealogy, for instance, students might create a large visual from a photo of a grandparent, or import a photo of a family home and print that on a large poster to serve as a centerpiece for discussion with classmates.

Introducing New Concepts

For the hearing impaired, the West Virginia Web site suggests maximizing the use of visual media and demonstrations in presenting material, and beginning explanations with concrete examples before moving into more abstract concepts. And Wright suggests keeping new material in lessons to one quarter or less, and using a "think aloud" approach for introducing new concepts. In this approach, the teacher talks through the steps of procedures or problem-solving with the class before they begin an activity.

Tip:

The VariQuest Cutout Maker can facilitate the graphic communication of concepts that clarify instruction not just for the hearing impaired but for English Language Development (ELD) students and also those with strong visual learning aptitudes. For instance, when introducing the concept of fractions to elementary-grade students, incorporating colorful fraction wheels, fraction squares and fraction fringes into instruction allows children to both see and manipulate elements that represent sometimes difficult-to-grasp concepts.

For exceptional students, a visual accompaniment to the “think aloud,” can show step-by-step procedures that help reinforce the new concept they are about to explore.

Higher Order Thinking

Fredericks notes that of all classroom instructional approaches, lectures have the lowest level of student involvement while the practice of reflective inquiry has the highest. NBPTS says exceptional students need to be introduced to such higher order skills as investigations that include “predicting, observing, gathering and analyzing data, and inferring and generalizing toward their own hypotheses.”

Tip:

The VariQuest Poster Maker helps teachers tap into the higher levels of engagement and critical thinking through the use of inquiry charts. Teachers or collaborative student groups can create and post these charts to address topics in all areas of the curriculum. For instance, a high school Science class might display group-developed hypotheses to discuss in whole-class activities. Or in a middle school History class, students might develop a list of “What If?” scenarios around major events.

3. Social Development

“Before you can help an ADHD kid, you must first believe that ADHD is a genuine brain disorder that results in unintended behaviors and consequences.”

---Cathi Cohen, director of the California-based In Step Mental Health, and author of several books on social skills.

Behavior Problems

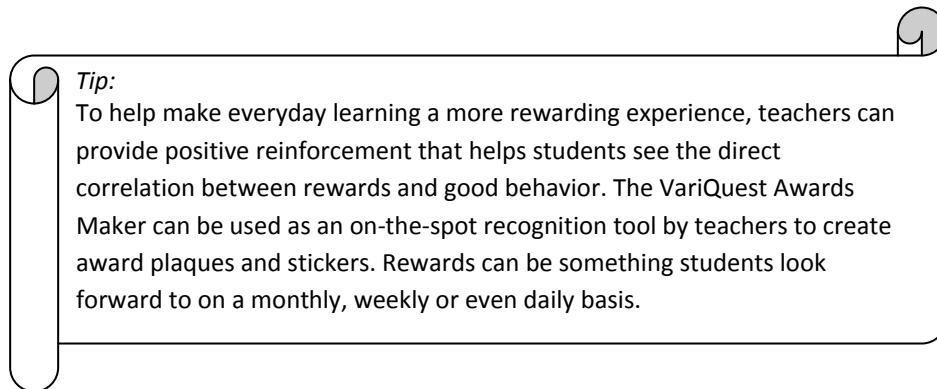
A 2006 study, “School Behavior and Disciplinary Experiences of Youth with Disabilities,” from the Institute for Education Sciences, affirms the tight link between disabled students’ disciplinary problems and their academic failure and dropout rates. Statistics bear this out. The sample, which represents a total of 1,838,848 youth with

disabilities, indicated that of disabled students, “Almost three-quarters (73 percent) have been suspended or expelled during their school careers.”

In her book, *Outnumbered; Not Outsmarted! An A to Z Guide for Working with Kids and Teens in Groups*, Cohen offers several tips for educators working with ADHD students. Keep things positive, she says. Shape behavior through praise and encouragement rather than criticism, and “catch the child exhibiting positive behavior.” Tell them what you want them to do, rather than what you *don’t* want them to do, and stay in close proximity to the child when you want his or her attention.

Wright suggests frequent “attention breaks,” which allow students to become refreshed by engaging in a preferred activity, such as reading a comic book for a couple of minutes, are also effective in helping students maintain focus and behavior control. Additionally, Wright, Cohen and Low all suggest allowing students a measure of mobility. Chewing gum, standing up for a stretch, running errands or completing routine physical tasks all offer them opportunities to move around.

Teachers of exceptional children need to understand that “ADHD is not a reflection of character, intelligence or upbringing,” Cohen emphasizes. And that “It takes a mature, patient, calm adult leader to manage an ADHD child in a group setting.”



Tip:
To help make everyday learning a more rewarding experience, teachers can provide positive reinforcement that helps students see the direct correlation between rewards and good behavior. The VariQuest Awards Maker can be used as an on-the-spot recognition tool by teachers to create award plaques and stickers. Rewards can be something students look forward to on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis.

Working in Groups

The NBPTS identifies the ability to participate in group settings, as a “high priority” for exceptional needs students. And because these children find themselves in many and ongoing group situations – in the classroom, in sports and other areas –, it’s important that all supervisory adults understand how to address behaviors properly to keep activities from deteriorating into negative experiences.

In “Tips for Teaching ADHD Children,” Low notes a range of causes for problem behavior in ADHD students –which might also apply to Autistic learners and those with similar exceptionalities. These students are generally two or three years behind peers in emotional maturity – which can result in bossy interactions that typically create anger and annoyance in others. These children also have difficulty reading “social cues such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice.” Autism can manifest in similar ways with hyperactivity, peculiar mannerisms, and obsessions with details and facts, making it difficult for these kids to fit in.

Like all children, Cohen tells us, ADHD kids want to do well and make friends, but can face a host of difficulties in doing so. The teacher is a key factor in helping them overcome these difficulties.

Because exceptional needs students are calmed and reassured by predictability, Low and others suggest “switching gears slowly” when shifting to a new activity and giving advance information on the day’s activities so kids know what to expect next.

Tip:

In addition to creating a chart or poster that maps the day's schedule, and activities suggested in the Communication section of this paper, group assignments named by the NBPTS such as whole-class journals, newspapers or data sheets that reinforce language, can be brought to life and shared with the class via the VariQuest Poster Maker.

4. Study Skills

"Research has shown that students with behavioral difficulties and academic deficits can show improvements in both behavior and learning when taught strategies to study and absorb information more efficiently."

--Jim Wright

Following a schedule, keeping track of assignments and managing time both in the classroom and at home during homework periods are widely agreed-upon skills central to success for exceptional needs students. Says The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, "Teachers of exceptional students find ways to demonstrate that managing one's time and tasks is an essential ingredient for success not only in school, but in other settings as well."

In his "Study Skills Package," Jim Wright outlines three essential ingredients to an intervention that will help exceptional students manage their own learning:

Notebook/Organization Folder

Managing and transporting the "substantial paper flow" of handouts, graded quizzes, review materials and writing drafts can be overwhelming for students with challenges. Wright suggests students keep a school folder and a home folder. The school folder's left and right pockets are labeled "Schoolwork" and "Paper," while the home folder's are labeled "To Be Left at Home" and "To Be Returned to School."

Low suggests the use of color coding to help students stay organized. Various colors in notebooks, and even colored pens, can assist students in differentiating and organizing their paper work.

Assignment Calendar

Wright also recommends an assignment calendar as an effective time-management tool to help students meet deadlines and complete long-term projects. Students can use a weekly or monthly calendar to record assignments and follow the multi-step procedures required for projects, such as research papers, Wright says. A series of smaller tasks, such as outlines, note card research, and drafts can effectively step students toward a well-organized final product without them feeling overwhelmed.

Tip:

Teachers can reinforce a student's individual assignment calendar by posting an accompanying large calendar on the wall reflecting the same assignments. For instance, a long-term assignment calendar might remind students of due dates for thesis statements, research, first draft, in-class group editing, second draft, second round of editing and final paper. Color coding and the use of icons to represent common activities, such as quizzes, can also help students stay alert and organized. A variety of large calendars and graphic organizers can be created and printed using the VariQuest Poster Maker.

Wright also suggests reinforcing assignment and due dates by pairing up students to be "calendar buddies" to fact-check each others' calendars. Parents might also initial homework assignments on their student's calendar as they are completed to help keep them on target.

Writing Guidelines

Training students to format papers so they are organized and polished-looking goes a long way toward helping them to work independently. A "guide sheet" can be a great assist. Wright suggests walking students through the sheet as a class, clearly demonstrating its use, and explaining the reasons are for each formatting requirement. Teachers can then follow up with individual students to compare their written work to the guide sheet.

Tip:

In addition to each student having his or her own guide sheet – perhaps taped inside a folder – teachers can create and post a large-view guide sheet using the VariQuest Poster Maker. Teachers can also give large guide sheets to students to take home for posting in their own study areas. Students can create hands-on study tools, such as window boards, study wheels and flip charts to help reinforce key concepts.

5. Success/Self Confidence

"The key to working successfully with the ADHD kid is to focus on strengths and provide opportunities for learning."

---Keath Low

Make Success Within Reach

Exceptional students need to know that success is attainable. The NBPTS emphasizes how important it is that teachers of exceptional students "set realistic goals" for kids, and in "Accommodating All Students: 'Classic' Ideas That Teachers Can Use to Diversify Classroom Instruction," Jim Wright says matching a student's level of

instruction to their ability level to “guarantee an 80 percent or greater rate of success” is what’s required to help challenged students know they can succeed.

Celebrate Individuality

In the same vein that the NBPTS stresses that teachers of exceptional students focus on diversity and tolerance in their curriculum, so Fredericks cautions against making assumptions about students with exceptionalities. More specifically, he says not to assume that “a student who is confined to a wheelchair is an unhappy child,” or “that a learning disabled student is not gifted in the visual arts.”

Educators can encourage students’ strengths and creativity in many areas, including visual literacy, artistic design, storytelling, mathematics and more, with the right tools and approaches.

A callout box with a rounded rectangular shape and a scroll-like top edge. It contains a 'Tip' section. The box is white with a thin black border and a small grey circle at the top right corner.

Tip:

The VariQuest Poster Maker and Cutout Maker provide unique opportunities for students to design and create a range of colorful, tangible expressions of their knowledge in all areas. Using the VariQuest Awards Maker, teachers can call attention to the importance of hard work, positive behavior and achievement. Being recognized in front of others can be motivating and inspiring for students, and instill feelings of self-respect and accomplishment.

Helping Exceptional Students Shape Their Futures

Effectively reaching students whose exceptionalities run the gamut of intellectual, communicative, sensory, behavioral and physical is a continuous challenge faced by educators. And as schools continue to move toward the ideal of an Individual Education Plan for each and every student, experts agree that differentiated instruction which integrates the regular use of visual aids and manipulatives is making learning meaningful and engaging for more kids than ever before.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s statement about providing individuals with exceptionalities a “strong foundation” and empowering them with the ability to “give back to others in their communities” captures a core element of feelings of value and self-worth. Preparing exceptional students to not just survive but to help shape their world is a responsibility we all share.

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