Creating a Vision for Special Education Programs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on creating a vision statement that supports a service delivery model within the field of special education. The chapter discusses the importance of shaping the vision and the impact it may have on the student, school, families, and society as a whole. Components as well as examples of currently used vision statements are included in this chapter, along with a discussion about incorporating a school's vision statement into its professional development program. The chapter concludes with a reflection on ensuring that the needs of students are met while at the same time being cognizant of the fact that standards-based instruction dominates the individualized education plan and service delivery models help shape the vision for all students as more and more students with special needs are being placed into a full-inclusion type of educational environment.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of special education parallels the purpose of elementary and secondary education as a whole: to prepare children to lead productive lives as citizens and members of the community. – Maryland State Department of Education (2001)

Let's assume that you and a group of friends have decided to take a long weekend vacation to an agreed-upon destination. For weeks, you have been emailing, texting, and calling one another to organize your travel plans, hotel arrangements, and many other details that are involved with planning a trip. Based on this interaction, it can be reasonably assumed that all participants have the same vision for the trip. However, what happens is that once you arrive at your destination, everyone goes in a variety of directions and no one has a common goal.

According to Gabriel and Farmer (2009), this scenario could have been avoided if the following questions would have been asked prior to the start of the excursion:

- What is the reason for the journey?
- What are the group goals for the weekend?
- Has the group collectively discussed these goals?

This same scenario can be applied to any special education program that is thinking about developing a vision statement for its program. Each stakeholder must be involved in deciding the common goals for the group and then actively pursuing ways to accomplish them.

Before you know where you are going, you must understand where you have been. Special education may not be as old a practice as some programs in the field of education, but there is some history behind it. Special education leaders and their team, also known as stakeholders for the purposes of this chapter, must be aware of this history so that they can shape the vision of the special education program. Practices that were in place long ago are not as effective for present-day special needs students, and thus mandates have changed. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and No Child Left Behind Act (2002) are aligned, and students with special needs are required to attain adequate yearly progress just like their nondisabled peers. Not only does this cause special education leaders to reshape the vision of the program but also to redesign the practices. The special education director is charged with empowering the stakeholders to carry out the vision, structure, and culture of the program based on the vision.

Kauffman (1999) characterized current special education practices as being:

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