



## **Create culture of high expectations of students with disabilities**

Fostering a culture of high expectations better prepares students with disabilities for college and career, experts say. What's more, a recent study found that establishing a culture of high expectations was a best practice accomplished by high-performing charter schools at virtually no cost.

Conversely, perpetually low expectations for students with disabilities often results in poor postsecondary planning practices, according to a recent report from the Government Accountability Office.

In some cases, according to the GAO report, students with disabilities are directed to apply for social security benefits rather than receive job training. In other cases, students with serious disabilities may be steered toward adult training programs and sheltered workshops instead of competitive employment.

To help your students with disabilities succeed in college and career, consider the following four strategies for promoting high expectations in your district:

**1. Provide inclusive, rigorous academic instruction.** Sturgis Charter Public School appears in the 2012 *U.S. News & World Report* best high schools rankings as the No. 1 high school in Massachusetts, the No. 3 charter school in the country, and the No. 15 high school in the nation. It sets "very high expectations" not only for its students, but also for its faculty, administration, and staff, said Susan Lacombe, special education coordinator at Sturgis' east campus.

Sturgis enrolls both regular and special education students in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, not only to prepare them for college, Lacombe said, but to create global thinkers.

"There's really nothing different we do [with special education students] in regard to expectations," Lacombe said. "The students have the same expectations; they have the same rigor."

"By raising that bar, I think we see students [with disabilities] wanting to achieve and work harder," she said. "They no longer feel different; they're just alongside all the other kids," she said. "I think they probably for the first time in a very long time feel part of something and not individualized."

The key is ensuring that teachers are intimately familiar with the students' IEPs and that they provide the necessary supports, Lacombe said. It's also crucial that they expect the same level of achievement from students with disabilities as from students without disabilities. "We don't even talk disability," she said.

**2. Reinforce parents as much as students.** If parents have low expectations for their child, their attitude will be a self-fulfilling prophecy for the student, said Beverly Johns, a behavior consultant and adjunct instructor at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Ill.

When you see parents verbalizing low expectations to a student, say to them, "You know, this is what I really see that your son does well," Johns said.

"I've found you have to reinforce the parents as much as you have to reinforce the children, particularly when the parents have gotten into that negative cycle," she said.

Be careful not to make statements that can be construed as negative and that feed into that negative outlook, Johns said.

For example, some teachers have their students take journals back and forth between school and home. If the teachers' comments are not carefully worded, she said, communication can break down.

Rather than commenting on all of the things students didn't do that day, comment on what they did do, Johns said. "So that when the child gets home, then the parent can talk about what the child did as opposed to saying, 'What did you do at school today? I see that you didn't do so well.'"

Stay away from subjective comments and be more objective in what you say to families, Johns said.

For example, "Jamar had a terrible morning; he couldn't stay on task at all," would be a subjective comment to avoid, Johns said. A preferable statement would be "Jamar was able to give two correct responses out of a possible eight opportunities to respond. His attention to task was two minutes, while the activity was 10 minutes."

"What you don't want is the communication system between the school and the family to break down," she said, "because then everybody suffers, including the child."

Consider offering this guide to parents that outlines why they should have high expectations for their child with disabilities. It was adapted for the Connecticut State Department of Developmental Services.

**3. Promote self-advocacy, student strengths.** It is exciting to see so many students with disabilities going to college, Johns said, but she laments the fact that far too many students refuse to disclose their disability.

"There's a lot of almost denial or lack of understanding of what a disability means and that it's nothing to be ashamed of," she said, asserting that students need to know their strengths *and* weaknesses in order to be successful.

When teaching students to be self-advocates, focus on their strengths and on the tools they're going to need to capitalize on those strengths, Johns said.

To capitalize on their strengths, students will need to know how to study independently, how to manage time, how to break down tasks in order to meet deadlines, and how to ask for what they need in an appropriate way, Johns said. Teach them those tools, she said.

Teachers at Sturgis do just that, Lacombe said, so that when students are seniors, "we're putting the ownership on them like in a college setting where they would then have to seek people out to ask questions or for help," she said. "We spend some time in their senior year teaching them about the ADA law and how to advocate for themselves outside of a school setting so that they're ready for that."

**4. Wean students off supports.** Students with IEPs have sometimes been guided too much because so many people are trying to help them succeed, Lacombe said.

Johns concurred. "Sometimes not meaning to do so, we don't always foster as much independence as we should with our students," Johns said. "Then when they get into the postsecondary world and there isn't somebody there with them a large part of the time . . . they have to [be able to] advocate for themselves."

"We put a lot of responsibility on them, a lot of expectations," Lacombe said. "There's something about . . . raising that bar and kids wanting to meet and exceed the expectation."

Give students a lot of support in the beginning, Lacombe said, but over time wean them off of supports. That way, when students with disabilities leave for college, they are able to be independently successful, she said. "That's the goal."

*See also:*

- Focus on self-advocacy, 21st century skills to improve college, career readiness (Nov. 19)
- 5 ways to improve postsecondary outcomes for your students (Oct. 29)
- SmartStart: FAPE -- Transition Services

*For more stories and guidance on this topic, see the Postsecondary Transition Roundup.*

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