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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a method for meeting the vocational needs of students with mild disabilities and the instructional demands placed on both teacher and student, without sacrificing time devoted to content areas. By manipulating the existing curriculum and environment, educators can cultivate the skills necessary for success in the working world. Studies have shown that common reasons for employee terminations are tardiness, inability to follow directions, not taking work seriously, poor attitude toward the public, and absenteeism. These abilities, expectations, and standards are areas in which students may need coaching and training. Through mainstreaming into a regular classroom, the student will learn many of the necessary skills to be successful in the marketplace. Important personality and employability traits include organization, decision-making, proper use of time, ability to work in a group, dependability, sense of fairness, and pride in work. Specific lessons are presented which are designed to maintain the essence of a content area lesson, yet help to build necessary personality traits and work ethics; these lessons focus on reading, social studies, and letter writing. (JDD)

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# Adapting Learning Contexts to Develop Desirable Personal and Vocational Traits

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CEC Conference  
April, 1989

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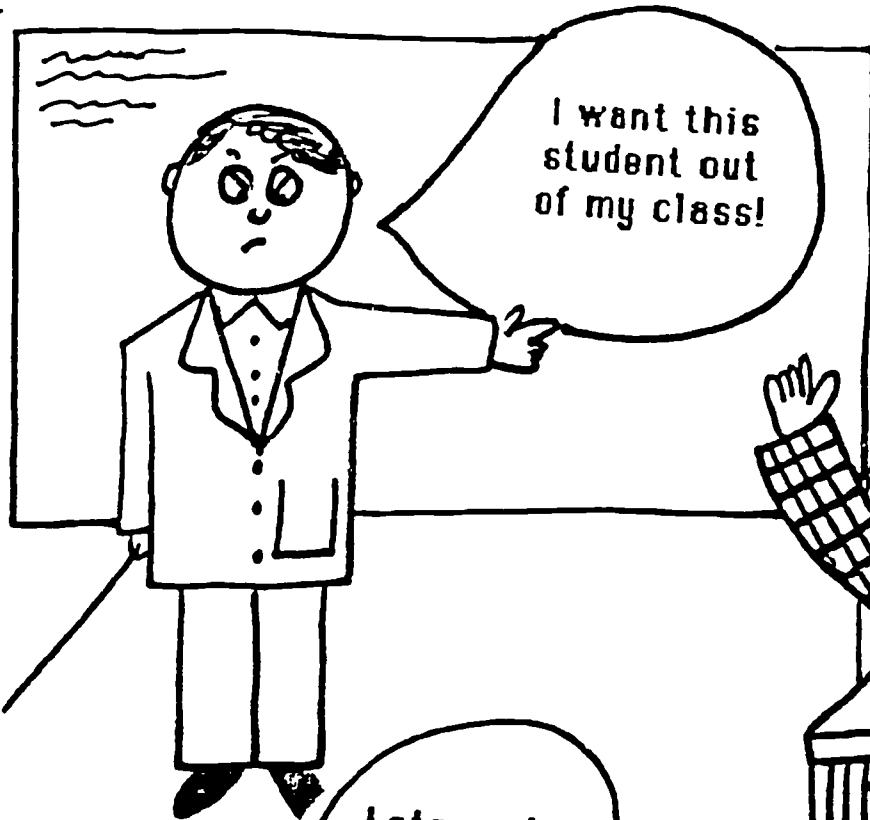
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# Adapting Learning Contexts to Develop Desirable Personal and Vocational Traits



## Student

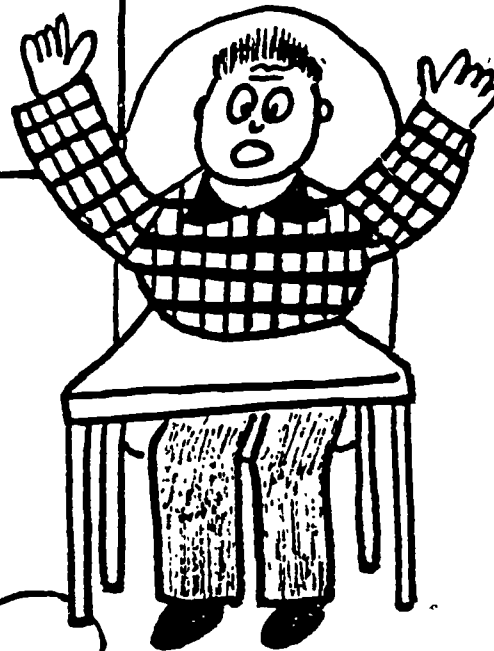
doesn't do homework

disrespectful

tardy

irresponsible

disruptive



## Employee

late

irresponsible

wastes time

can't get along with co-workers

As special education continues to deliver services to increasing numbers of students in the lower grades, and as these students enter secondary schools, the future of mildly handicapped students once they graduate or leave school programs is an increasing cause of concern for parents, educators, administrators and the students themselves. The concern may be well founded in that there are 250,000 to 300,000 students with handicaps who are leaving publicly supported education programs each year (Will, 1984). Many young people leave school environments hoping to find employment and are often frustrated by their inability to do so. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1983), reported that unemployment rates among handicapped individuals are much higher than among non-handicapped individuals and that approximately 50%-75% of adult handicapped workers are unemployed. The implications are that the handicapped students leaving the school system are even less competent than their non-handicapped peers. According to the 1979 predictions made by the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, of the 2,500,000 handicapped students leaving school between 1979 and 1983, only 21% would obtain full employment or be enrolled in institutions of higher learning (Barrett, 1983). With the increasing number of students in special education, and the lack of attention given to the transition between secondary school and the work force, the problem may become more profound, if steps to intervene are not forthcoming.

The recent reform movement and the push for excellence have brought about curriculum and competency changes. Many secondary schools are emphasizing the core curriculum and limiting "soft" classes while requiring all students to meet acceptable achievement levels prior to graduation.

Omitted from the effective schools approach and many current secondary education programs is the allocation of time devoted to social skills, career education, and the development of personal traits employability skills. To compound the problems many states require students to pass minimum competency examinations in order to receive a diploma equivalent to their peers. Teachers feel the strain and responsibility to teach students the necessary content areas to afford students an opportunity to pass these exams. According to Barrett (1983), teachers feel there is little correlation between the regular written high school proficiency examination and real life situations faced by special education students upon graduation. Unfortunately far too much classroom time is spent preparing students for these tests, rather than preparing them for successful employment. Vocational education is not available in all districts, and vocational skill does not necessarily equate with successful employment.

While examining the needs of secondary students and their transition into adulthood, it is important to distinguish between the demands placed on special educators and the needs of secondary students. The silver lining in this cloud is that it is possible to address both of these problems with an instructionally effective method for meeting the vocational needs of students and instructional demands placed on both teacher and student, without sacrificing time devoted to content areas. Which is indeed the purpose of this paper.

Special educators need to carefully analyze teaching strategies, philosophies, and the newly placed expectations demanded of teachers in the form of minimum competency testing, minimal vocational training, and both tougher curriculum standards and graduation requirements. Many teachers feel the need to teach content areas for two reasons. First, in order for

students to fulfill graduation requirements students must receive coursework in the areas mandated by the state or local school district. This variety of course work can be extremely taxing on already over extended special education programs. Special education teachers may find themselves teaching, grammar, english literature, american literature, composition, U.S. history, world history, drivers education, earth science, life science, etc. The list is exhaustive, but nonetheless required for graduation.

To further complicate the issue, many special education teachers are struggling to give mildly handicapped students an opportunity to earn a diploma rather than a differential diploma or certificate of completion. Special educators report frustration from having to teach and reteach pure academic proficiencies which the learning handicapped students are unable to master. Teachers report that the dropout rate for their students is high, and attendance records low, because a fragmented curriculum is necessary in order to remediate missed components of high school proficiency examinations (Barrett, 1983). The result of this attention may result in special education personnel teaching to the test. Although many students may learn basic skills, by teaching to the test educators may not be attending to social skills training, vocational training, and the individual needs of our students. Furthermore, the time required to emphasize basic skills, provide a curriculum sufficient to meet graduation requirements, and maintain IEP's, is already overextended without having to add career education, voc. ed., and elective classes.

The problems secondary special education students face may be frightening and often times overwhelming to them. With higher academic standards being advocated, and fewer vocational education opportunities

available, as a result of the excellence movement of the early 1980's; it is no wonder that the number of dropouts in the special education population are rising. Education Daily (1986), reported that the dropout rate among handicapped students exceeded the dropout rate of non-handicapped students for the 1985-86 school year by at least 10%. Among handicapped students over age 16, 26.3% dropped out of school compared to OSEP reported 14-18% for non-handicapped peers. Mildly handicapped students already suffer from poor employability, and without a diploma their futures are indeed in question.

Special educators need to realize that the effort exerted and the education provided for students in secondary special education programs must be extended and generalized into the students adult life. This does not mean extending the number of years services are provided, but rather through instruction, instilling the qualities and traits necessary to survive in the adult work force. In the late seventies and early eighties, career education was advocated as a solution to teaching handicapped students how to live, as well as, how to earn a living. Although at first glance career education seems like a viable solution to the problem, given the context in which special education services are currently delivered and the overextension of secondary special education teachers, the plan may simply be too time consuming and lacking in administrative support.

Although differential graduation standards have been proposed for learning handicapped students, state and school policies have not always embraced this notion. Differential standards committees such as Project Workability, have proposed that minimum levels of proficiency in career education, vocational education, work experience, and independent living skills be accepted as the basic curriculum framework for the graduation of

learning handicapped students for whom an IEP team determined regular proficiency standards are inappropriate. It is proposed that handicapped students who develop a level of proficiency in these areas will be able to enter the labor market with the salable skills needed to attain economic usefulness and/or achieve their maximum level of independent living (Barrett, 1983). Adopting differential standards, may send a clear message that academics and content area are impossible and nonsensical to teach mildly handicapped students. There are those mildly handicapped students for whom a well rounded education is appropriate and to abandon content areas and curriculum frameworks may indeed be a disservice.

The concept of career education has merit, but as described in the literature, it may simply be just another subject teachers are required to teach, with little reinforcement or noticeable results. The solution then becomes one of borrowing the concept of career education and infusing it into today's learning contexts and delivering it simultaneously within the necessary content areas. Rather than making time concessions it is possible to incorporate career thinking and ideology into subject areas. Since special education students have difficulty generalizing knowledge, this approach would teach basic skills all the while generalizing the skills and traits necessary to succeed in the adult work force.

If you recognize the problems mentioned above as deterrents to the teaching process and the delivery of an appropriate education for mildly handicapped students, then practical solutions to these problems are available. If you are still not convinced, let me further persuade you. Smith and Jenkins (1986) suggest that the fundamental purpose of schooling is to prepare the learning disabled to lead independent, productive adult lives. Furthermore, the fundamental goal of professionals in learning disabilities,



and in special education in general is to facilitate the development of well adjusted, successful adults (Palloway, Smith, Patton, 1984) If educators believe current practices meet these fundamental goals then by all means they should continue with their teaching programs and spread the word, but if on the other hand, educators feel current practices overlook these fundamental goals, then the time has come to address this issue with practical solutions.

### THE PROGRAM

Are we really preparing special education students for the future, or are we simply providing information and hoping they can generalize the knowledge to their lives the same way regular education students do? Educators of secondary special education students can simulate an employment experience within schools and classrooms. The last thing educators need today is a new program for developing social skills, life skills, work ethics and marketable traits that requires limiting time in one content area to make time for a new program. It may not be necessary to add another stress to the already overstuffed curriculum. Social skills, life skills, work ethics and personal traits can be taught to students by manipulating environments, discipline, and academic content. Simply by changing the classroom routine and assignment structure a teacher can incorporate training in the skills necessary for successful transition into adult life.

The goal of this program is to explain how educators can implement the skills necessary for success in the working world, by manipulating the pre-existing or IEP developed curriculum and environment. It is important to note that these skills can be taught without a special curriculum that

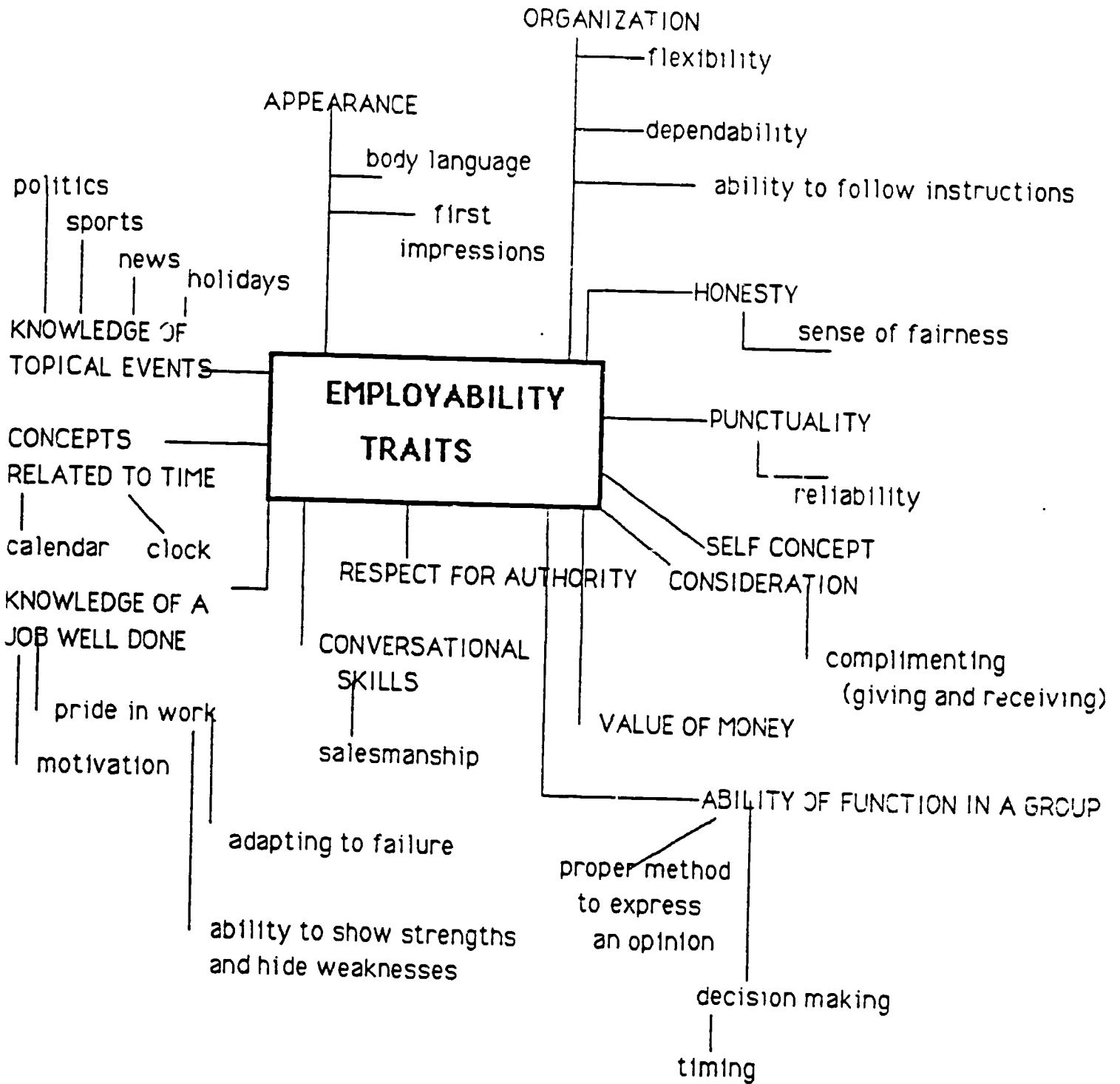
requires time out from the basic teaching schedule Barrett, (1983) reported that in a survey of 600 businessmen describing reasons why employees were terminated the results are as follows tardiness, 23.8%, inability to follow directions 29.3%, doesn't take work seriously 24.5%, poor attitude toward the public 18.6%, absenteeism 10.8%, production accuracy 6.7% and production speed 6.7%. Note that work performance inadequacies ranked last. Figure 1 is a cluster of the abilities, expectations, and standards in which our students may need coaching and training. With these skills in their repertoire, the world becomes more inviting for our students, and filled with countless opportunities and continued successes for the mildly handicapped population.

### Teacher's Role

The first phase to rethinking the delivery of educational services to secondary special education teachers is to rethink the teachers role. Students model the behaviors and characteristics teachers show them. If teachers always give them a pencil when they are unprepared, excuse them for tardiness or late homework, and rescue them from troubles with their peers, they will forever be dependent. The dependent, overly cautious, tentative and fearful young adult is not the type of person educators should strive to graduate from special education programs.

The first dilemma a teacher should solve , is to decide on her/his goals. It is essential to have a clear vision on what characteristics or traits students should have by the completion of the program. This should include personality traits and employability skills, as well as academic skills. A strong somewhat authoritarian teacher sets high goals and the students seem to reach the expectations. A teacher who provides too safe

FIGURE 1.



an environment does not give students a challenge to meet. If teachers do not have high goals and expectations of mildly handicapped students, these students will need a safe environment forever. After students leave school teachers can no longer guarantee that safe haven.

### Practice arena

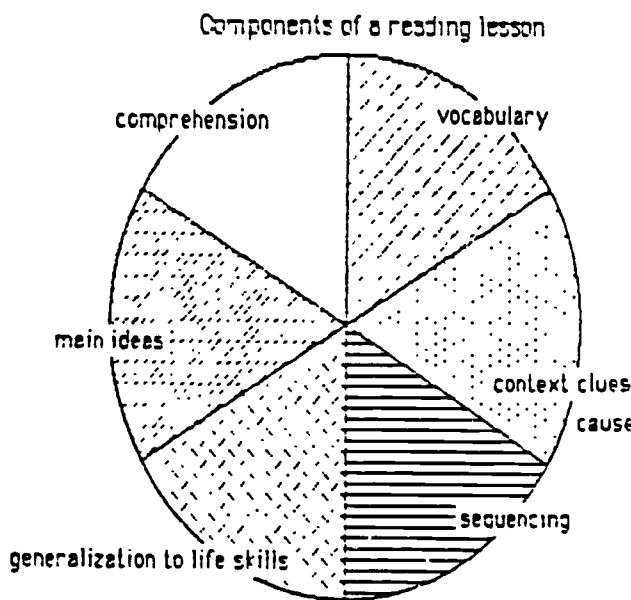
Before beginning these teaching strategies the special education teacher should observe the regular classroom environment and the mechanisms that make the class run. There may indeed be a strong correlation between the regular classroom teachers expectations of students and employers expectations of employees. The regular classroom is the perfect practice arena. By teaching a student the traits to be successful in the mainstream they will have many of the necessary skills to be successful in the market place. A student will not be successfully mainstreamed if he can never find his homework, asks questions inappropriately, loses necessary items or cannot get along with his peers. The regular classroom teacher may serve as a pseudo employer.

The premise is that an employer will be willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the employee who is always punctual, ready to help, dedicated, and responsible. An employer would be likely to dismiss the employee who can't get along with his co-workers or who doesn't exhibit honesty, although this employee may never make technical or skill errors.

### Lesson Planning

As with teaching in general the planning phase of a program of this type is essential to your teaching success. Two things must occur in this phase, first, the teacher must be completely at ease with the content being

taught and be open to a new perspective. Secondly the content must be carefully analyzed in order to raise pertinent points that will promote personal traits and work ethics. This requires planning. Typically curriculum is viewed as a hierarchy of skills. The critical point is that for learning to take place, students do not always have to master all the information in the first level of the hierarchy before moving on to the next level. For example, reading is often outlined as a hierarchy of skills (see example). However, reading can be meaningful if students have only limited skills in all of the areas. Perhaps teachers should think about a content area (reading) as a pie graph. With every subject area we can divide it into its components and strategies, create new strategies and tilt the graph to emphasize the preferred delivery mode. To make this more comprehensible note the example.



### Balanced Reading Program

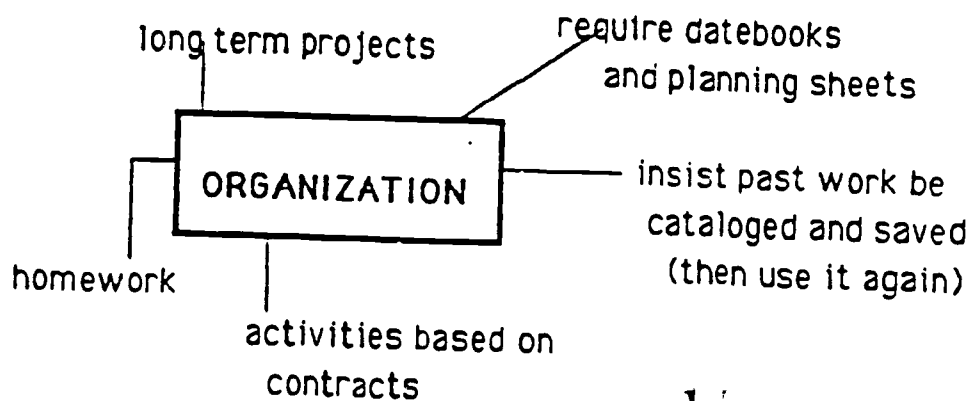
- 1) Word Attack
  - a) phonics
  - b) structure analysis
  - c) sight words
  - d) context clues
  - e) dictionary
- 2) Comprehension
  - a) literal
  - b) interpretative
  - c) critical
- 3) Levels
  - a) word analysis
  - b) facts, details
  - c) main ideas
  - d) sequencing

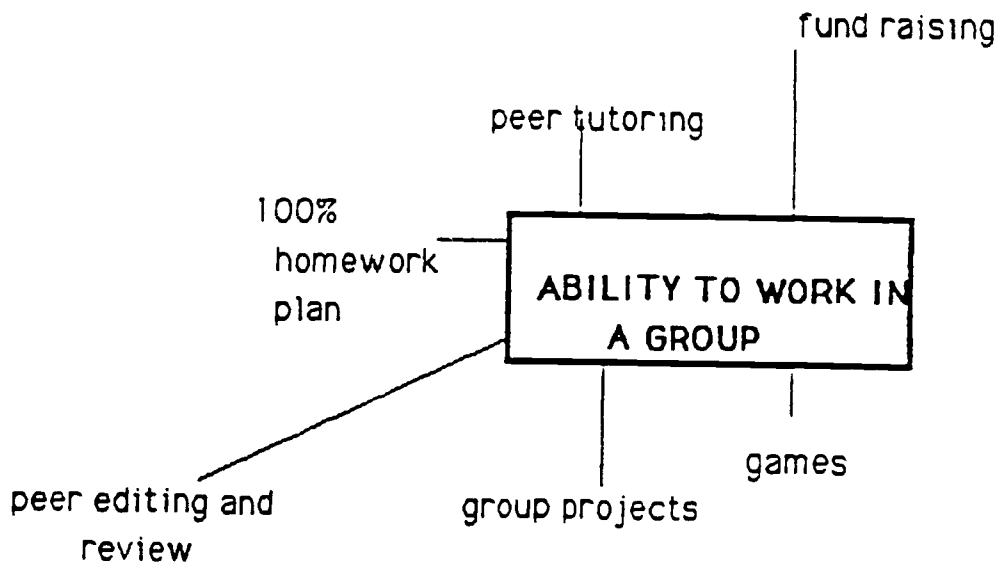
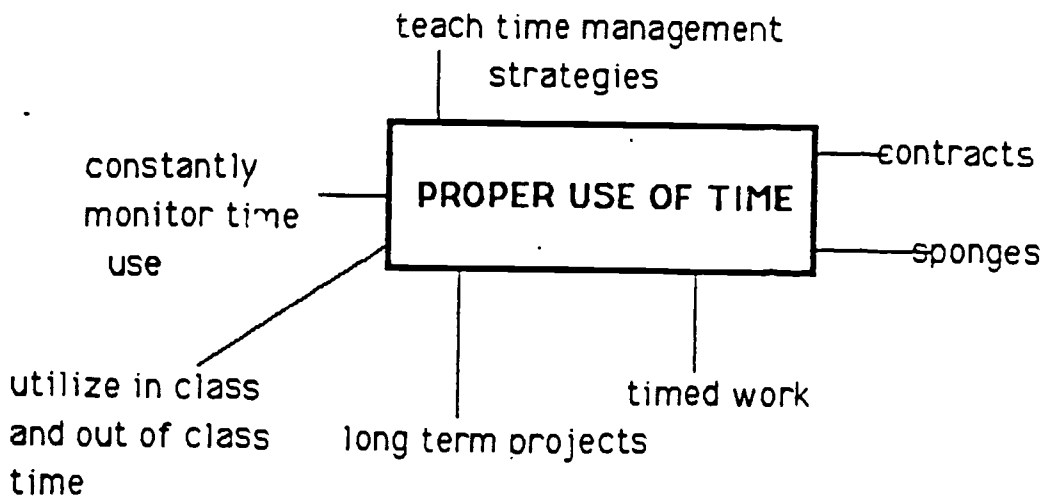
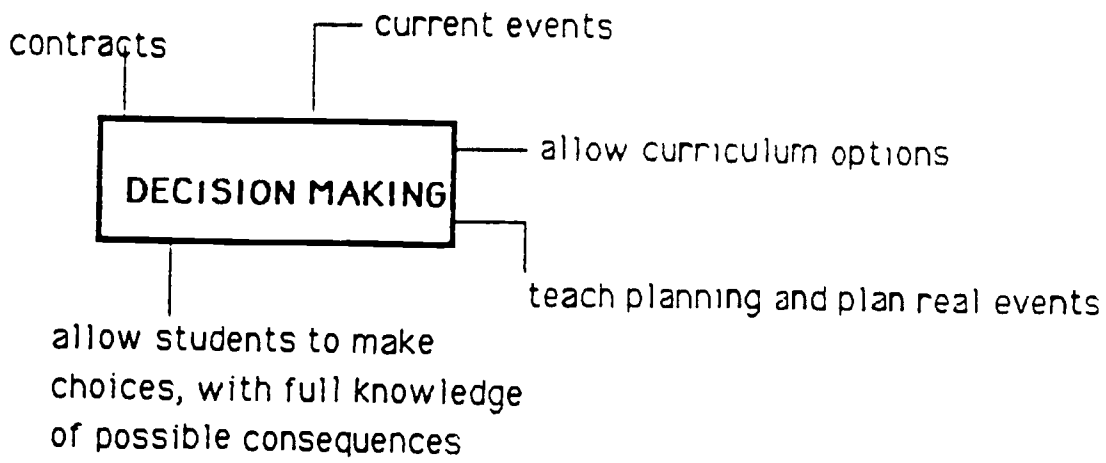
Meaningful reading activities and reading improvement can occur if students have enough skills in each of the areas to gather meaning and thus

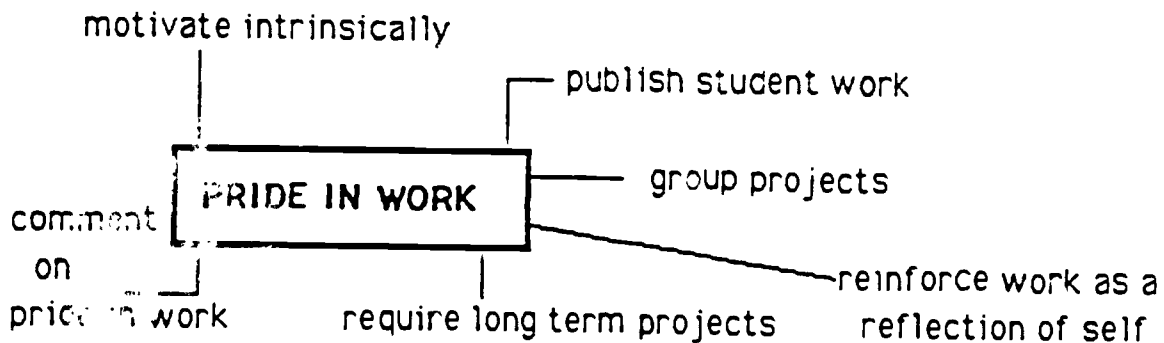
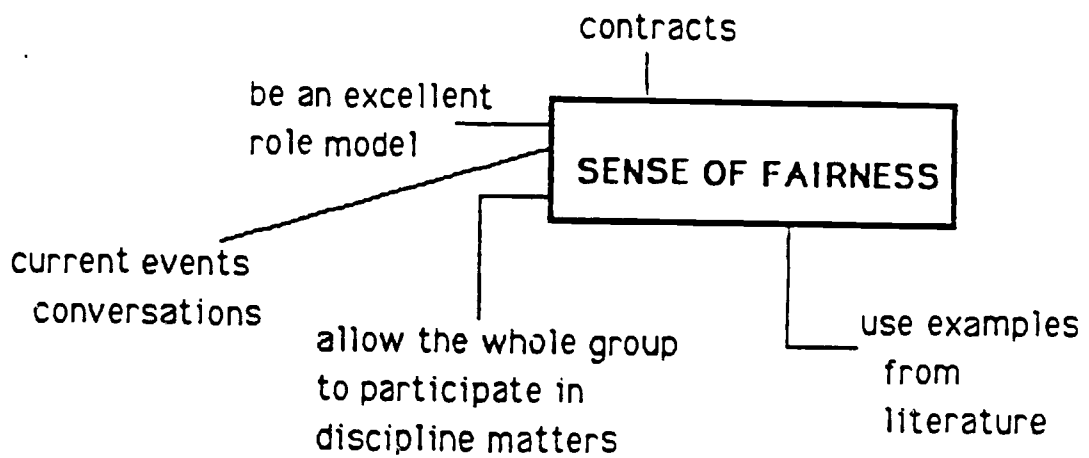
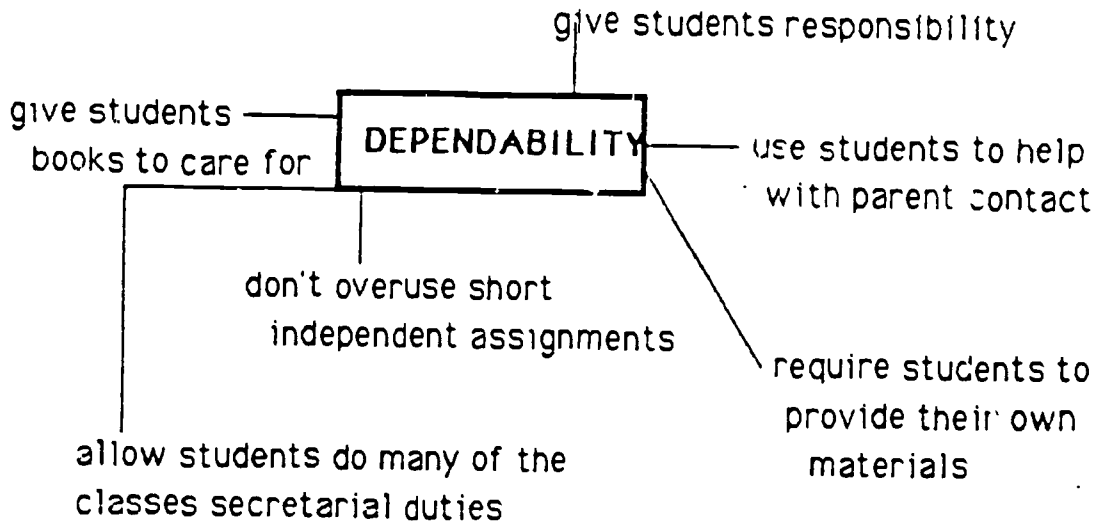
make generalizations to their lives. If this occurs students will be much more willing and able to open books and read. Based on the needs of the student's rotate the curriculum pie such that both the teacher and student goals are given attention. Rather than concentrating efforts at a level in the hierarchy until students demonstrate mastery, efforts can be rotated and whole concepts taught and not simply routine tasks. Rotating emphasis on specific skill areas and incorporating them into meaningful activities, will give students motivation and thus improve their reading levels. The hope is that the goals will be met and teachers can move away from the rote and mundane activities usually associated with teaching students with poor reading skills.

### Examples

The following clusters are examples of important personality and employability traits that educators can help instill in their students and usually with very little effort. These simple examples are a few brief ideas, but should give teachers a sense for the task at hand. The final three examples are specific lessons designed to maintain the essence of a content area lesson, yet help to build the personality traits and work ethics necessary for successful employment.









## Reading

Reading is the one subject area where personal and employability traits can be stressed everyday. Select books and stories that involve decision making and stress skills related to everyday living. Choose literature that involves a variety of characters. As an example, we can apply this technique to Treasure Island. Whether the book is read aloud, with a large group, small group or individually, this teaching strategy will be effective for promoting employability skills. Rather than routine book reports, or vocabulary lessons, reinforce and review the story using this activity.

Step 1. Have students do personality clusters of the main characters. These may be started at the beginning of the story and updated as the story unfolds (Example 1).

Step 2. As a group or individually, have students sort the personality traits into positive, negative, and neutral.

Step 3. Based solely on personality traits, have students brain storm and predict the future of these characters. Always include future occupations and all of the possibilities. Be sure students understand the connection between the personality trait and the traits necessary to be successful at a particular job.

Step 4. Try deleting negative traits and then hypothesizing about the occupational opportunities afforded each character as their personalities and values change. It seems so simple, and it really is. A classical piece of literature was used to provide students with a series of activities that emphasized important character traits and their associations with future goals. Remember, teachers are not maximizing the content or their efforts if they only require students to pronounce the words correctly and remember the sequence of events.

## Letter Writing

The writing component of most competency examinations usually contain a letter writing phase. In order to blend letter writing and attention to personality and employability traits the following idea may meet the demand. An excellent group writing activity involves students commenting on visitors to their classroom or someone whose performance impacts on their lives. This activity allows a student to assume the role of the employer and evaluate another person's performance. After students have been introduced to the components of a business letter and/or friendly letter, this activity can reinforce those skills and emphasize employability traits as well. In this case students wrote a letter to a supervising professor about the student teacher placed in their classroom. The activity needs guidance in order to provide students with the topics that need attention (Example 2).

- 1) Have students write a quick paragraph about their student teacher. The paragraph does not have to be perfect. The point is to just jot down some basic ideas.
- 2) As a group have students cluster the qualities that students feel make a good teacher.
- 3) Next have students cluster the personality traits and abilities of their student teacher. Be sure students include all ideas from their personal paragraphs.
- 4) Using colored pencils match the qualities of a good teacher in Cluster 1 and the qualities of the student teacher in Cluster 2.
- 5) Use an overhead projector and overheads with ruled lines to write the letter. Have students volunteer to write the headings.

6) To write the body of the letter select the matching characteristics from both clusters to develop the topic sentences. It is also important to note the qualities of a good teacher that their student teacher may not have exemplified. These points also need to be included in the letter, but diplomatically and with tact.

The letter need never be mailed, but is an opportunity to write for an audience. All opportunities to write for an audience other than the teacher should be encouraged. This activity is an excellent opportunity for students to evaluate another person's performance and compare their own strengths and weaknesses. Students may write letters or evaluations about a guest speaker, a university student observer, the school nurse, or principal. The possibilities are limitless.

### Social Studies

When teaching social studies teachers should incorporate biographical data as much as possible. Events have much more meaning if we emphasize the people who took part in the events. It is therefore possible to identify with people who actually lived the event. Be sure to emphasize the traits that made people successful, but don't make them so grandiose that no one can identify with the famous person. Similar to letter writing activity, students can evaluate a historical figure. After students have been introduced to a historical figure, and perhaps done research on their own this activity is useful in emphasizing employability and personality traits.

- 1) After students feel they know a historical figure, have them do a two two ring of cluster. The inside ring is for personality traits. The outside ring is accomplishments or reasons for fame or events that led to fame (Example 3).
- 2) After clustering, have students match or color code the qualities that helped the person accomplish so many things.
- 3) From this point students can create an evaluation of a famous persons performance in specific situations. Encourage students to look for weaknesses.
- 4) Another fun activity to do with students is to have them match their peers qualities to those of the historical figures. Have each student match their class mates to the qualities of (Ben Franklin).
- 5) Afterwards do a class match up with everyone participating together. It's satisfying to hear students argue whether John is more forgiving than Jason. Of course, they could both be matched to the quality. It is essential that students become aware of their strengths. This activity would also be effective with characters in a story.



## Example 2.

Dilworth Middle School  
May 20, 1986

Dr. Ed Mertz  
University of California  
Department of Education  
Santa Barbara, California 93106

Dear Dr. Ed,

As students who have just spent 16 weeks with a student teacher in our class we feel like experts and we would like to offer some suggestions to your future student teachers. We feel that these suggestions will help everyone feel more comfortable and confident.

A student teacher should have a positive attitude, because it will make the kids have a more positive attitude. Things are going to be tough sometimes and without a positive attitude the student teacher will never succeed.

A student teacher should wear casual but cheerful clothes. She should always look professional but she does not always need to wear dresses and suits. We like to work on the floor sometimes for special projects and we like the teacher to be on the floor with us, so sometimes the teacher needs to wear grubby clothes.

We think a student teacher should learn to give better instructions and directions. If the student teacher does not give good directions, the lesson is worthless. When we don't understand what we're doing, we panic, and some of us freak out. We hate school when we don't understand what's going on. So before you begin student teaching, practice giving instructions before you come in the classroom. We don't always understand things the first time so you need to say the same thing, but a different way.

Discipline is also important. Follow through on your threats. If you don't follow through, the kids will think they can get away with it and will act worse. Find tricks to keep and hold the kids attention. We want to be treated with respect because we are young adults. If you want to be respected, please respect us.

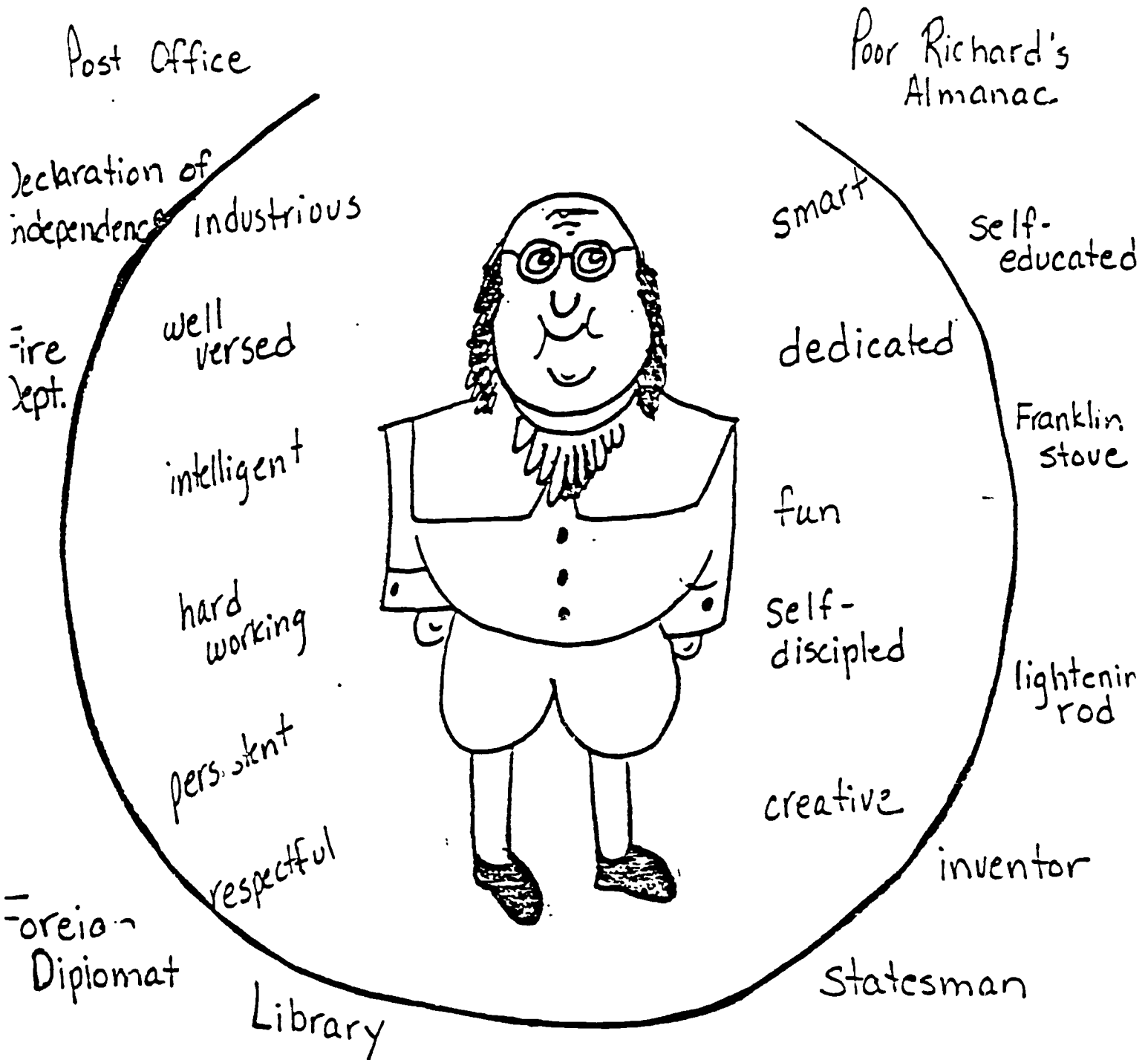
Before a student teacher starts teaching she should know about math, english, spelling, reading and social studies. In english they should have good grammar skills and fun writing projects. She needs to learn to grade fairly. In math she needs to know math facts, concepts and how to explain things to the kids. We like lots of hands on activities in math. In spelling she should know lots of different activities so we don't have to do the same unit, because it gets boring.

We hope this will help future student teachers. Thank you for sending us Miss Lafferty. She was very fun and we think she will be a rad teacher.

Sincerely,

Petere Yee  
Merrie Geraghty  
Charity Wagner  
Jay Yinson  
Louis Galbreath  
Billy Lantz  
Salvador Hernandez  
Yickie Corrova

# Ben Franklin



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