Service Delivery for High School Students with High Incidence Disabilities: Issues and Challenges

Edward Schultz Ph.D.
Midwestern State University

Cynthia Simpson, Ph.D.
Houston Baptist University

Jane C. Owen, Ph.D.
Midwestern State University

Christina Janise McIntyre, Ph.D.
Midwestern State University

Abstract

High schools throughout this country are as heterogeneous as the students they serve in size, location, tax base, student make-up, and teacher quality. However, they must all follow the mandates of NCLB and IDEA. While these policies affect all schools, high schools continue to face many challenges implementing these laws effectively for students with disabilities for several reasons. This article examines three broad issues surrounding these mandates in the context of serving secondary students with disabilities, particularly those with high-incidence disabilities: an overview of challenges facing secondary schools, models of service delivery, and the contemporary roles of the special and general educator. In conclusion, the authors address recommendations specific to secondary campuses.

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The approaching reauthorizations of the No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) will no doubt force reform of the current school system in this country as it did nearly a decade ago when these laws were most recently re-authorized. While these policies affect all schools, high schools continue to face many challenges implementing these laws effectively for students with disabilities (Greer & Meyen, 2009; Nichols, Dowdy, and Nichols, 2010; Therein & Washburn-Moses, 2009) for several reasons. This article examines three broad issues surrounding these mandates in the context of serving secondary students with disabilities, particularly those with high-incidence disabilities: an overview of challenges facing secondary schools, models of service delivery, and the contemporary roles of the special and general educator. In conclusion, the authors address recommendations specific to secondary campuses.

Statement of Problems and Challenges

High schools throughout this country are as heterogeneous as the students they serve in size, location, tax base, student make-up, and teacher quality. However, the mission of these schools, inclusive of maximizing the final four years of the students' academic careers, preparing students for a life beyond high school, and affording opportunities for students to graduate with a diploma, is the same. While some outcome data suggests that students in specific disability categories are graduating more and dropping out less than before (Cortiella, 2011), by and large students with disabilities continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers in this area (Shiftner, 2011). Exacerbating the issue is the connection of high stakes state assessments to graduation and diploma options for students with disabilities (Burdette, 2007), and students with disabilities failing to meet the lofty accountability goals of NCLB (Harr-Robins et al., 2012). Other school reform initiatives such as response-to-intervention (RTI) and other multi-tiered models are often difficult to implement at the high school level when compared with elementary and junior high school (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2010).

Characteristics of students and environmental structures unique to high schools interfere with implementing many of the school reform efforts (e.g., RtI. NCLB, IDEA). There exists a much wider variation in the academic skill set of a high school student as compared to students in lower grades. For example, when compared to an elementary student where a 3rd grade student who has difficulty reading can only be behind three grade levels, a high school student who struggles to read may be up to six grade levels behind with only a few years left to graduate (Hawkins, Hale, Sheeley, & Lingis, 2011; King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011). Academic difficulties experienced for many years of school are often exacerbated with learned helplessness (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011) and low self-efficacy beliefs (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). In addition to the academic challenges and related consequences, 20% of high school students meet the DSM-IV criteria for a mental disorder (Centers for Disease Control, 2013).

Environmental structures inherent to high school, along with individual student characteristics must be considered when planning curriculum and assessments. High school students generally have more control over their environments due to their age and level of responsibilities (e.g., maintaining a job, driving). High school academics are in direct competition with the adolescents' extra-curricular activities whether it is school-sponsored or not. High schools also have scheduling variations (block, flexible), vocational programs, and graduation credit requirements. All of these factors must be considered when planning the most effective model of service delivery.

Models of Service Delivery

To meet the demands of Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) provision of NCLB and IDEA, high schools have had arguably the biggest challenge. Traditionally, content area general education teachers were certified in their respective content areas and special education teachers were certified by either a specific category of disability such as learning disabilities, emotionally disturbed or generally certified to be qualified to work with students with all disabilities (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Often, special educators would take the primary instructional role in teaching students with moderate and severe disabilities. Since NCLB requires that highly qualified teachers teach students, special educators must now be certified in a specific content area if they are the primary teacher in addition to being the special educator

(Quigney, 2009; Therein & Washburn-Moses, 2009). The inclusion of the majority of students with disabilities in statewide assessments, per NCLB, and the access to the general education provisions in IDEA, have resulted in more students with disabilities being taught in general education classrooms. The result has been many special education classrooms are being utilized primarily for students with more severe disabilities. This combination of accountability and access has posed significant challenges to the contemporary high school (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Therein & Washburn-Moses, 2009) and has resulted in a number of collaborative models of service delivery including co-teaching, collaboration, supportive resource classroom, inclusive supports and multi-tiered instruction.

Co-teaching

Co-teaching is broadly defined as a collaborative effort between a general education and special education teacher in which both teachers share the instructional responsibility for students in the classroom (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008). This approach has been advocated as a way to ensure students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum and also meet the HQT standard of NCLB (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamburger, 2010; Nichols, Dowdy, Nichols, 2010; Rice, Drame, Owens, & Frattura; 2007). Six major approaches to co-teaching are generally used in a co-teaching arrangement:

> 1. *One teach, one observe*, in which one teacher leads large-group instruction while the other gathers academic, behavioral, or social data on specific students or the class group.
> 2. *Station teaching*, in which instruction is divided into three nonsequential parts and students, likewise divided into three groups, rotate from station to station, being taught by the teachers at two stations and working independently at the third.
> 3. *Parallel teaching*, in which the two teachers, each with half the class group, present the same material for the primary purpose of fostering instructional differentiation and increasing student participation.
> 4. *Alternative teaching*, in which one teacher works with most students while the other works with a small group for remediation, enrichment, assessment, preteaching, or another purpose.
> 5. *Teaming*, in which both teachers lead large-group instruction by both lecturing, representing opposing views in a debate, illustrating two ways to solve a problem, and so on.
> 6. *One teach, one assist*, in which one teacher leads instruction while the other circulates among the students offering individual assistance (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamburger, 2010, p. 92).

Consultation

The consulting teacher model is a service delivery method that delivers services to students within the general education classroom both directly and indirectly. These teachers are sometimes referred to as “inclusion” teachers (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). In some situations the consultant works indirectly with selected students by directly working with the teacher (Idol, 2006). For example, the special educator may provide materials to the teacher for modified or accommodated instruction or assist with designing data collection systems (Ling, Barton-Arwood, & Jolivette, 2011). Special educators may also spend time in certain classes providing direct or supplemental instruction in a traditional co-teaching situation.

Supportive Resource Classrooms

Supportive Resource Classrooms are classrooms in which the general education curriculum is taught by specialists outside the general education classroom. In a truly supportive program, general and special educators collaborate to provide instruction to be learned in the special education classroom and then transferred to the general education classroom (Idol, 2006). Examples of these supportive resource classrooms are found in the professional literature concerning secondary schools. Scanlon and Baker (2012) describe a resource classroom where students with significant skill deficits learn specific academic skills and study strategies. Students with high incidence disabilities such as SLD need intensive, explicit instruction. Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, and Zigmond (2006) describe a high school where 23% of students with disabilities have additional supports beyond the general education classroom in the form of self-contained basic skills and content classes to support learning. This is often very difficult to deliver in the general education classroom due to the necessity to significantly reduce group size in addition to the specialized set of skills required by the teacher (McCleskey & Waldron, 2011).

Supportive resource classes are often called *content mastery*. In this type of classroom, students with disabilities receive their primary instruction in the general education classroom. Students then receive supplemental instruction in either a scheduled manner or on an "as needed" basis (Vannest, Hagen-Burke, Parker, & Soares, 2011). While many content mastery classrooms serve only students with disabilities, some schools have used this approach for non-identified or "at-risk" students (Jenkins, 2005).

Inclusion Supports

Providing inclusion supports by teachers is a variation of the consultation and co-teaching models (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). The primary difference is that "inclusion supports" are often provided by a paraprofessional or a special education teacher. Paraprofessionals (or teachers) in this arrangement accompany students with disabilities attending general education classes (Idol, 2006). The balance of "power" is heavily tilted to the general education teacher in this arrangement versus a traditional and truly co-teach situation. Inclusion supports can also be in the form of systematically arranged peer support as an alternative to adult support (Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Carter, Sicscom, Melekoglu, & Kurkowski, 2007)

Multi-tiered Instruction

Multi-tiered instructional service delivery models (e.g. RTI, PBS) have increased in their use in this country in order to meet the legislative requirements of IDEA and NCLB and to serve an ever-growing population of diverse learners (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). This model is characterized by matching the intensity of supports to the intensity of student needs. It has also been used to prevent and remediate learning difficulties as well as a method of SLD identification. While RTI has been studied extensively in the elementary setting, relatively little research has been done at the secondary level. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2010) attribute this void in the research due to scheduling problems and compliance issues related to working with adolescents. Interestingly, scheduling issues have been identified as a major consideration in the difference in how RTI is conceptualized and delivered at the secondary level (The National High School Center, 2010).

Challenges

Several broad themes regarding the challenges of providing effective instruction to students with high-incidence disabilities when using an approach or combination of approaches described above at the high school level have been identified in the literature. The models of service delivery described above are designed to be collaborative, meet the legal requirements of current educational policy, and address the needs of individual students. Each of these models contain many of the essential best practices of inclusive schools such as curriculum and instructional design to accommodate the diverse needs of students, collaboration, and providing supports (see Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenneier, 2009). As well intended as these instructional delivery models might be there is often disconnect between recommended and actual educational practice. For example, several problems with supportive resource classrooms have been identified by McCleskey and Waldron (2011) including:

> (1) Instruction in the resource classroom tends to supplant rather than supplement core instruction.
> (2) Instruction delivered in the resource was of lower quality and rarely connected to the general education classroom.
> (3) Accountability for student performance is also unclear when the teaching responsibility is dispersed across two or more professionals.

Accountability for student performance permeates all of the models and poses significant challenges to teachers and students alike. Often these models of instructional delivery are implemented with little research of effectiveness. For example, the effectiveness of common educational practices such as co-teaching is yet to be determined at the secondary level (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamburger, 2010;Kloo & Zigmond, 2008). Much of the literature on co-teaching is focused on logistics, delivery, and teacher perception of co-teaching. This incomplete and inconsistent knowledge base regarding co-teaching has practical implications. To illustrate, high levels of teacher satisfaction have been reported in the literature (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008) concerning co-teaching while other teachers who have an unfavorable experience with co-teaching and compare it to an “arranged marriage” (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). As traditional teaching roles are transformed into collaborative teaching roles, it is important to have clearly defined teaching roles and responsibilities.

Collaborative teaching models s assume equality between general education and special education; at the high school level this is not always the case. Simmons and Magiera (2007) studied co-teaching at the high school level and regarding teacher roles, reported general education teachers being the “lead” or primary teacher and special educators serving as monitors and reviewers. Special educators reported having a limited role in the classroom and felt as if they were instructional assistants doing menial tasks and only serving students with disabilities in the classroom (Keefe & Moore, 2004). Role confusion can be exacerbated by the complexities of the secondary content; in addition, special education teachers often have varying degrees of content knowledge (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamburger, 2010; Nichols, Dowdy& Nichols, 2007). Other typical classroom issues such as who is responsible for grading and managing students (Keff &Morre, 2004; Nichols, Dowdy, Nichols, 2010) can also lead to role confusion as well.

The use of multi-tiered instructional models has expanded the role of the contemporary special education teacher. In this type of arrangement, special education teachers support students throughout all tiers of instruction including in the general education classroom at Tier 1 (Hoover & Patton, 2008). A significant amount of teacher time is spent doing collaborative activities and providing direct and indirect student support. Mitchell and Deshler (2011) analyzed the roles of special education teachers through extensive observations in RTI systems and reported that special education teachers spend 27% of their time in collaborative activities such as assisting in the classroom, consulting with students and providers about their IEPs and behavior, and providing support to the general education teacher. It was also reported that teachers spent 27% of their time serving as an interventionist with the remaining time spent as a manager (33%) and diagnostician (13%).

A recurring theme found throughout the literature on collaborative instruction is teachers not having adequate time to plan and collaborate (Keff &Morre, 2004; Nichols, Dowdy, Nichols, 2010). Mitchell and Deshler (2011) identified the largest consumer of time of the special educator as when they function as a "manager" at 33% of total time with 53% of that time spent on paperwork and other "non-teaching duties." In addition to the time spent on instruction, meeting the assessment demands of NCLB has consumed a large part of the school day and consequently, a large portion of the year. Vannest, Hagan-Burke, Parker, and Soares (2011) examined four types of instructional arrangements (self-contained behavior classes, co-teaching, content mastery, and resource) and explored the issue of how teachers spend their time. Four distinct "time" profiles emerged for each arrangement. For example, teachers in "content mastery" spent more time completing paperwork and less time instructing than teachers in co-teaching arrangements. The authors also reported that both general and special educators are concerned about the time they spend on assessments (Vannest, Hagan-Burke, Parker, & Soares 2011) and not enough time on strategic instruction.

Strategic Instruction for Secondary Learners

Because a comprehensive best practices accommodation model is elusive at best (Scanlon and Baker, 2012), it would be difficult to attempt to compile an all-inclusive list. However, when discussing accommodations for high school students, most experts in teacher education and professional development would agree that effective instruction is universally designed. Teachers have noted that providing class-wide appropriate accommodations is a pragmatic approach that benefits all learners in the classroom, not just the students with special needs (p. 222). For that reason, a lesson designed to address varied learning styles and the range of abilities in any given classroom would naturally reach a majority of the learners in that class.

Many of the research-based best practices in education are highly effective with students with disabilities and can engage reluctant learners, appeal to a variety of learning styles, and increase student achievement across the board. In addition to these strategies being best-practices in instruction, they also serve to help students with disabilities develop life skills that will be beneficial inside and outside of the academic setting. Several instructional best practices worth mentioning in this context include cooperative learning, advance organizers, nonlinguistic representations, identifying similarities and differences, hypothesis testing, and setting learning goals and providing feedback (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2009). Below, several of these best practices are addressed in further detail.

Cooperative Learning An abundance of research supports cooperative learning's strengths as an instructional method. Effective cooperative elements include group processing, teamwork, and a reliance on interpersonal skills. The collaborative nature of this structure can lead to higher achievement, higher levels of reasoning, increased self-esteem, greater intrinsic motivation for learning, and improved peer relationships, especially for students with special needs (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, 1986). These features make cooperative learning not only an effective instructional strategy but also assist in helping students develop strong communication and collaboration skills which are essential to living and working in the 21st century.

Advance Organizers Advance organizers are tools that provide a structure into which new information can be integrated into prior knowledge about a subject. Effective advance organizers that are visual like flow charts and other graphic organizers assist in making abstract concepts more concrete, and they enhance learning and promote the transfer of knowledge to new situations especially when the material is difficult or unfamiliar (Luiten, Ames, & Ackerson, 1980) as well as help students learn new concepts and vocabulary (Stone, 1983). Students with special needs benefit greatly from activities that allow for the accessing of prior knowledge, are concrete in nature, and provide multiple opportunities for transfer of difficult or newly introduced concepts.

Nonlinguistic Representations Nonlinguistic representations help students acquire knowledge through auditory modes, movement activities such as dance and dramatizations and through the use of visual imagery like pictures, symbols, graphic organizers, and concept maps. When combined with traditional modes like note-taking, hearing a lecture, or reading, students are better able to process and recall what they have learned, in addition to, making connections between topics and concepts (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2005).

Identifying Similarities and Differences Identifying similarities and differences is a key cognitive process for conceptual understanding (Gentner & Markman, 1994). It allows students to recognize patterns, make sense of new information by developing connections with learned material, as well as classify and group. Teacher modeling of thinking about similarities and differences helps students develop metacognitive processes by having them actively recognize and use what they already know in order to understand something new Classic structures like t-charts and the Venn diagram are especially effective by employing both the classification activity itself while using a visual representation (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2005).

Systems

In addition to classroom-specific best practices, a Modified RTI framework has been proposed as an option for high schools to adopt for addressing the academic needs of special needs students (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010). Often, by the time a student reaches high school, sizeable academic deficits exist which require immediate, decisive, and intensive intervention. In contrast, elementary grade teachers using RTI are encouraged to move students through increasingly intensive levels of intervention. The modified RTI model moves to place students with severe deficits in the most intensive level immediately without first moving them through lower levels of the framework. The purpose then would be for secondary schools to assist students in decreasing academic deficits and subsequently "transitioning students down the RTI

pyramid in the direction of less intensive and more standard or normalized levels of the prevention system" (p. 26).

Other best practices that schools may adopt for the benefit of students with special needs are making certain students have access to as many general education classes as possible and that a wide range of elective courses that are tailored to the students' interests and future plans are available. Students are made aware of, have access to, and are encouraged to participate in the extracurricular activities of their choice. Students with disabilities are proportionally represented in all aspects of the school and there are no places or programs that isolate students with disabilities. Students with disabilities progress through grades and participate in graduation and other school functions the same as their peers without disabilities. Careful planning and career exploration that includes the student takes place so that the transition from high school into higher education or the workforce is successful. The school is proactive in making certain that the student plays an integral role in both their academic decision-making in addition to setting goals that are attainable but which ultimately lead to success after graduation (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2009).

Perhaps the most significant change any secondary school can make is a change in philosophy about students with disabilities. In adopting a perspective that encompasses putting the student and their needs first is evidenced in "people first" language (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2009) and the attitude that students with disabilities have a fundamental ownership in the school culture that contributes to the "esprit de corps." And lastly, but most importantly, schools focus on and celebrate what students can do instead of what they cannot.

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About the Authors

Edward Schultz Ph.D., is an associate professor at the West College of Education at Midwestern State University located in Wichita Falls, Texas. In addition to teaching undergraduate and graduate courses at MSU; he has been a special education teacher of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, special education department chair, and an educational diagnostician. He is a national board member of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC). His research interests include multi-tiered systems of support, specific learning disability identification, and issues effecting students with EBD.

Cynthia Simpson, Ph.D., is the Dean of the School of Education at Houston Baptist University in Houston, Texas. She has more than 18 years of experience in the public and private sector as a special education teacher, elementary teacher, educational diagnostician, and administrator. Dr. Simpson has published upwards of 80 journal articles, while also collaborating on over 12

different books. Due to her extensive research in various educational fields, she has been able to publish training manuals, scholarly technical papers, and contribute to numerous book chapters. Dr. Simpson has been recognized by multiple organizations for her contributions to the field of special education and is a featured speaker at the international, national, and state level. Her research interests include multi-tiered systems of support, gender differences within the bullying dynamic, and identification of specific learning disabilities.

Christina Janise McIntyre, Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the West College of Education at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. In addition to teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses at MSU, she is also program coordinator for the Curriculum and Instruction graduate program. She has 17 years of public school teaching experience and is a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certified Teacher.

Jane C. Owen, Ph.D. is an associate professor of educational leadership in the West College of Education at Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas. She has also served in the public schools in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas as a high school teacher and principal as well as a director of student support services and an assistant superintendent of planning and accountability. Her research interests include organizational change, educational politics, and the superintendency with a focus on institutional changes that lead to increased student performance.