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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the University of Massachusetts (Boston) developed partnership programs to improve achievement of students with significant disabilities just beginning to participate in a standards-based general curriculum. Fundamental to the effort was development of a 12-credit graduate certificate program focused on adapting the state's curriculum frameworks for all learners. Six 2-credit modules comprise the course: (1) education reform; (2) special education reform; (3) curriculum frameworks; (4) adaptations for students with disabilities; (5) assessment; and (6) philosophical steps to implementation. The professional development certificate incorporated the following design elements: cohort based, on-site offerings; targeted audience; relevant reading material; direct application; practitioner instructors; and building expertise and capacity. The paper then describes use of the curriculum with the first cohort of staff of the Perkins School for the Blind (Massachusetts), including participants, arrangements, instructional style, and treatment of topics. Outcomes are reported in terms of curriculum, assessment, and increased expertise. Longer term outcomes have been seen at the school concerning development of an instructional cycle linking curriculum and assessment, Perkins community interactions, teacher retention, professional development design, grant funded professional development, and outreach. In addition, more than 100 persons in five cohorts in public and private schools and on campus have participated in the certificate program. (DB)

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# Staff Development Designed to Improve the Achievement of Students with Disabilities

By  
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2002

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**Staff Development Designed to  
Improve the Achievement of Students with Disabilities**

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**Abstract**

Blending standards based curricula and specially designed instruction for students with disabilities challenges all schools. This presentation describes a successful staff development model that used a cohort-based university-sponsored graduate certificate to engage educators adapting statewide standards based curriculum for students with substantial disabilities. Successful implementation in the first cohort stimulated a collaboration of administrators and teachers that redesigned curriculum and assessment strategies. Outcomes included the growth of in-house expertise, a change in attitudes toward state standards and student capabilities, and a redesign of the in-house professional development model.

Paper presented at National Staff Development Council 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Boston, MA, December 7-11, 2002.

This presentation describes how one university met the challenges of education reform by developing partnership programs that improved achievement of students with disabilities who were just beginning to participate in standards-based general curriculum.

The first author is the lead designer of this University of Massachusetts Boston graduate certificate and a former special education administrator. The second author is Assistant Supervisor of the Deafblind Program at Perkins School for the Blind, which sponsored the first cohort to participate in the Certificate.

### **Changing Expectations for Students with Disabilities--and Their Teachers**

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (MERA) mandated that all students participate in a new, standards based general curriculum. To date, 48 other states have enacted their own standards based initiatives.

MERA also requires that all students pass a rigorous test based on state Curriculum Frameworks to receive a high school diploma. Many states have adopted similar accountability measures, some of which have similar high stakes for students. Other states hold schools and districts (rather than students) accountable.

This move to ensure that all students participate in the general curriculum and any large scale testing programs was reinforced by IDEA 97, the federal special education law, and now by No Child Left Behind.

Standards based curricula and high stakes testing signaled a significant change for all educators, but affected some children with disabilities, and their teachers in a unique fashion. In Massachusetts, as in other states, students with substantial disabilities were previously exempted from large scale assessment programs, regardless of their ability and knowledge. Because their performance did not get counted, their teachers often designed

programs around individual goals and objectives rather than content knowledge (McDonnell, McLaughlin & Morison, 1997).

Massachusetts created one set of curriculum expectations for all children. And all really does mean all. There are no separate standards or frameworks for students with disabilities. There are no off-level tests. There are no exemptions. All children with disabilities are now held to the same curriculum standards and expectations as their typical peers.

In order for students with disabilities to participate effectively in these new standards based curriculum and assessment systems, their teachers needed an opportunity to learn the new Curriculum Frameworks and redesign their educational practice.

To accomplish this change of focus, professional development needed to communicate the curriculum and help teachers align their instructional programs. Before the children could have an opportunity to learn, their teachers needed to have that chance.

### **An Opportunity to Meet the Challenge**

The University of Massachusetts Boston is the only public higher education institution in Boston. Its Graduate College of Education is dedicated to developing teachers for students in school systems facing urban issues.

The University also embraces a number of centers and institutes which pursue unique research agendas. The Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) is a research and training institute dedicated to promoting quality education and social development for students at risk for academic and social failure.

In an attempt to reach new audiences, the University's Provost issued a call for proposals for uniquely designed professional development certificates. CSDE, under the

leadership of its Executive Director, Gary Siperstein, responded by convening a group of special education administrators to brainstorm unmet needs and ways to best meet them.

Key in our minds was the need to connect special education teachers with the new state Curriculum Frameworks. We wanted to create a cohesive set of courses that would be a valuable professional development option for teachers in great need of changing their practice so students could have meaningful access to the general curriculum.

### **Adapting the Frameworks for All Learners: The Modules**

The successful result of our brainstorming was a 12 credit graduate certificate, entitled Charting the Course: Adapting the Curriculum Frameworks for All Learners. Six 2-credit modules focus on the following topics:

- **Module 1: Education Reform:** an overview of the state and federal legislation which led to the changes we were facing. The law, itself, was part of the assigned reading material.
- **Module 2: Special Education Reform:** a review of changes in special education, ranging from institutionalization to school opportunity to inclusion in body to inclusion in expectations. A key text was McDonnell, McLaughlin & Morison (1997).
- **Modules 3 and 4: Curriculum Frameworks and Adaptations for Students with Disabilities:** connecting current curricula with the new Curriculum Frameworks. Teachers discovered links between their current educational curricula and state Curriculum Frameworks in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Following the model of Heidi Hayes

Jacobs (1997), teachers began from existing knowledge, mapping their active curricula onto the Frameworks – and often discovering surprising connections.

- **Module 5: Assessment:** understanding the elements of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and the diverse ways for students to participate. Teachers gained skill in determining how students could participate, identifying appropriate accommodations, and designing portfolios if their students would participate through our alternate assessment option (which uses the same general curriculum standards). Essential tools here were the assessment model of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1999) and the work of Thurlow, Elliot and Yssledyke (1998) regarding participation of students with disabilities.
- **Module 6: Philosophical Steps to Implementation** – putting all the elements in context to formulate a personal and professional view of educating students with disabilities in a changing educational environment.

#### **Adapting the Frameworks for All Learners: Design Elements**

The Certificate incorporated the following design elements:

- **Cohort based:** We thought professionals working together from the same school or program would be best able to sustain and maximize the impact of the content material.
- **On-site offerings:** Recognizing that teachers did not need to use valuable time and energy traveling, the Certificate was designed to be delivered in schools.
- **Targeted audience:** Just as students with disabilities were new to this endeavor, we wanted to target this Certificate to the needs of a population of teachers not previously included in curriculum based professional development. To that end,

our primary audience was administrators and teachers of students in substantially separate programs for students with disabilities. This also involved teachers in publicly supported programs serving only students with disabilities.

- **Relevant reading material:** To begin with existing knowledge, and maximize generalization and application, the readings and course materials were designed to include each program's current curriculum.
- **Direct application:** To ensure that the Certificate helped teachers move forward, the end project for each module was targeted to be something that could be put to direct, immediate use in realigning instruction to address the Curriculum Frameworks.
- **Practitioner instructors:** All Certificate instructors were practitioners. Many were special education administrators who also had connections with the University of Massachusetts Boston and CSDE.
- **Building expertise and capacity:** Our goal was that cohorts would use the Certificate to build in-house knowledge and expertise and, hopefully, use their experience to deliver the Certificate to colleagues in other cohorts.

#### **First Cohort: Perkins School for the Blind**

Several of us connected with the Certificate had worked with the Perkins School for the Blind, located in Watertown, MA. Our linkages came from sharing students and also serving on statewide policy initiatives on assessment and program development. We were delighted when Perkins responded to our initial outreach.

While many may recognize Perkins as Helen Keller's school, few may know that Perkins is the oldest private school for the blind. In operation for almost 175 years,

Perkins is committed to helping children and adults who are blind, visually handicapped, deafblind, and multihandicapped reach their greatest possible independence. The Perkins mission includes service to students, ages birth through 22, both nationally and internationally. Staff participate in outreach within Massachusetts and throughout the US, host international groups, and are invited to travel abroad to deliver professional development seminars focusing on best practice.

### **Motivation for Becoming a Certificate Cohort**

Because its goal is to offer the best education possible for each learner, Perkins prides itself in the quality of its programs and the professional integrity of its faculty. With these values in mind, Perkins routinely seeks to participate in pilot projects that define statewide practice.

Prior to beginning the Certificate, Perkins had been a pilot site for development of a new IEP format and had participated in a policy setting assessment advisory committee. Teachers and administrators also wanted to be a pilot site for the MCAS-Alternate Assessment portfolio, and were looking for a vehicle to help them do so.

Perkins faculty and administration liked the idea of being the first Certificate cohort and becoming active in a cohesive professional development program to move themselves and their students to the next level of Education Reform.

### **The First Cohort: The First Year**

#### *Participants*

Twenty-six members of the Perkins community enrolled in the Certificate. They came from the full range of Perkins programs: Deafblind (serving students ages 3-22),

Lower School (ages 5-14), Secondary Services (ages 14-22) and Outreach (to individuals of all ages who are served within the community).

Prior to the Certificate, professional development primarily occurred with individual program groups, designed by administrators in conjunction with their individual faculty. This was the first time that administrators and faculty across all programs worked together on one shared project.

### *Arrangements*

The six modules of the Certificate were offered during one full school year. The on-site cohort model permitted the timing of modules to match the preferences of the Perkins community.

What worked best for Perkins was to begin each module with a full day Saturday session, followed by a series of after-school sessions. This schedule provided everyone a concentrated introduction to each topic.

Food and liquid refreshments were, of course, a critical element of each session. Well-nourished participants always focus more clearly. Snack and lunch breaks also provided an opportunity for participants to become better acquainted with each other personally and professionally.

### *Instructional Style*

The Certificate was designed to be highly interactive. Because we all believed that the special education teachers were already doing good work, the focus was on explicitly describing current practice and actively deliberating the best way to match student need with state curriculum. Group work was essential. Certificate faculty were

coaches as much as conveyers of knowledge. Cohort members taught much to each other and Certificate faculty.

### *Treatment of Topics*

The modules followed a consistent pattern. Each began with an opportunity for participants to identify their level of knowledge about the topic, list the questions that most perplexed them, and vent their frustration and concerns about the changes they and their students faced. Each module concluded with an application project in which teachers transformed their current practices to match the content and focus of Education Reform.

In Modules 1 and 2, this introduction was followed by an examination of the critical foundation elements: MERA, IDEA-97, the history of recent changes in special education and an exploration of the impact of these elements on education. Modules 3 and 4 shifted the order, beginning with an examination of the current curriculum offered by each Perkins program and then a consideration of how each mapped onto the state's Curriculum Frameworks.

Module 5 linked the state's assessment program to its new IEP format and the data gathering systems already in existence at Perkins. Module 6 provided an overall philosophical context through which participants would shape their own roles as active participants in education reform.

### **Outcomes**

The theory to practice focus of the Certificate modules led to far reaching outcomes that affected the Perkins community gradually, but are best viewed in summary.

### *Curriculum*

Teachers and administrators found time to talk about curriculum and instruction. The Certificate provided focused, structured, extended time to explore, and become familiar with, the elements of the new state Curriculum Frameworks. Participants expressed their reservations and move onward to forge connections between their current work and that which Education Reform demanded.

The focused nature of the modules stimulated teams to address curriculum projects they had always wanted to tackle. Module research projects included the following:

- Poetry adaptations for students who are hearing impaired with low language
- Adaptation of standard curriculum for Braille readers
- Entirely new history units based on themes of the Curriculum Frameworks
- Creation of a data base to help teachers locate specific content in the Curriculum Frameworks
- Curriculum Framework outlines, accompanied by a checklist for ease of access
- Development of data systems tracking the match between instructional practices and the Curriculum Frameworks

### *Assessment*

Just as participants began to make connections between the general curriculum and their students, they also began to see how their students could participate in an assessment system based on that curriculum. Most critically, participants embraced the curriculum focus of the new IEP and assessment as complimentary facets of the educational process.

Their increased knowledge of the general curriculum helped participants move beyond apprehension to analyze the way participation in the standard MCAS was affected by a student's disability. They identified test items that might require visual experiences students could not access. They devised ways in which items could be adapted or interpreted to remove the barrier of the disability without changing the rigor and intent of the test. This knowledge informed the work of state assessment professionals.

Participants gained familiarity and facility with MCAS-Alt, the state alternate assessment model for students who cannot show what they know and can do through standard administration, even with accommodations. Once participants realized that the portfolio alternate assessment could make use of data routinely gathered for progress reports, they felt more in control of the teaching-assessment process and more confident that they--and their students--could participate meaningfully.

Below are examples of the research projects that resulted from work in this area:

- Design of forms to record commonly used data into a log book that could be used in MCAS-Alt
- Design and implementation of rubrics for evaluating student work
- Design and implementation of rubrics for students to evaluate their own work

#### *Increased Expertise*

As hoped, once teachers felt confident of their abilities to master the elements of Education Reform, they felt more comfortable sharing what they knew. This increased expertise affected Perkins and other programs as well.

A number of the Certificate participants became internal experts on the Curriculum Frameworks and assessment and could provide assistance and support to faculty who had not attended the Certificate and to colleagues at other schools. At least two of the Certificate participants went on to become Certificate faculty, using their experience and expertise to teach subsequent cohorts of educators.

The efforts and accomplishments of the Perkins community were acknowledged by the state Department of Education in commendations for the match between their instructional program and the Curriculum Frameworks.

### **Years 2 and 3: Unanticipated Outcomes**

Although the Certificate officially lasted one year, it has had unanticipated outcomes that have lasted far longer and transformed the Perkins community.

#### *Curriculum and Assessment*

Initially, seen as distinct elements, the Perkins community now connects curriculum and assessment into an instructional cycle. We now view our programs as having a continuous theme of assessing student learning.

The student is at the center of this cycle, since our goal is always to help students access grade level curriculum at their individual instructional level. The Curriculum Frameworks, the IEP and the school curriculum provide important input information that guides the shape of each individual's program. The information gathered through MCAS and classroom assessment documents student progress and refines the focus and direction of the program .

What began as a cumbersome process has become second nature. Teachers now use a unit-based curriculum, linking elements of various Curriculum Frameworks together to maximize student exposure and learning.

Goals and objectives are cross-referenced with Curriculum Frameworks competencies, using a one-page summary sheet that guides teachers and parents to the curriculum link.

The data systems initially designed for finding information in the Frameworks-- and finding ways to access the curriculum that match student need--remain a part of daily instruction at Perkins.

#### *Perkins Community Interactions*

The links formed during the Certificate significantly impacted the Perkins community. Before the Certificate, individual programs were strong, but separate from each other. Now, not only do faculty feel more closely connected with the issues of Education Reform, but they also feel more closely connected with each other. They have made new friends in other programs. And the programs, themselves, are better connected. Teachers and administrators more easily turn to each other as resources to help solve problems and consider changes.

#### *Teacher Retention*

The sense of community that was strengthened through the Certificate has had benefits for staff retention, a critical issue in special education. Because of the staff networking within the school, teachers feel more supported and are staying at Perkins longer than they did before.

*Professional Development Design*

Perkins has always worked toward best practice in education for children who are blind or deafblind, but the Certificate changed the way we plan and implement professional development activities. We used to focus development on teaching strategies, Braille, and sign language within a separate unit based curriculum for separate programs. Faculty from different programs rarely interacted. There was very little discussion of the general curriculum.

After the Certificate, we realized how much we benefited from our shared expertise and collaboration. We decided to continue campus wide development rather than working individually.

To do so, we formed an Umbrella Committee to share expertise in areas related to education reform and identify topics for cross-program professional development. The Umbrella Committee meets twice each month and is led by several Certificate graduates from each program. Our professional development work now occurs from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. Teachers are acknowledged for their comprehensive view of our educational work.

The Umbrella Group stimulated consistent and comprehensive training across campus using faculty from each program. In addition, supervisors are more planful and interactive about identifying faculty across programs to participate in statewide training. After these seminars, staff disseminate the new information and develop responses within the school.

### *Grant Funded Professional Development*

The Umbrella Group initiated Summer Focus Groups to continue sustained interaction on curriculum, assessment and instruction. Certificate graduates serve as in-house experts, leading much of the professional development. Many of these opportunities were made possible by the Umbrella Group's successful grant writing.

Examples of the grant funded offerings include the following:

- Faculty-led IEP training to enhance the curriculum-instruction-assessment link.
- Faculty led exploration of MCAS and MCAS-Alt, to analyze student performance and redesign school-wide procedures
- Creation of an "Assessment Cookbook," a simplified reference linking the state Curriculum Frameworks, MCAS and specially designed instruction
- Enhanced understanding of both English/language arts and math frameworks; to help teachers broaden and deepen their use of the Frameworks and to help teachers who have not had in depth experience.

### *Outreach*

Perkins faculty have been acknowledged by their peer schools as experts in the application of the elements of Education Reform to students with significant disabilities through the following mechanisms:

- Requests to assist other Massachusetts private schools working to align with the Curriculum Frameworks
- Requests to assist comparable schools in Connecticut, Maryland and Virginia, all working to the same goal of curriculum access

- Invited presentations at statewide conferences for special education programs
- Productive positive opportunities to work with faculty from sending public school districts

Perkins has always been part of international professional groups committed to teaching children who are blind or deafblind. The Certificate's model has been applied successfully to schools in countries with one national curriculum, including Russia, Argentina, Brazil, England and India. The approach of becoming familiar with the general curriculum and then building connections based on the strength of existing practice has translated well.

### **Final Words**

#### *The Best Outcome: University of Massachusetts Boston*

What began with a brainstorming session and took life with a vibrant first Cohort has continued to develop. The Certificate has been experienced by over 100 participants in five cohorts in public and private schools and also on campus. A variety of designs has been implemented. Some of the modules are offered online.

Most important to us, the Certificate became meaningful professional development, rather than a set of large group, one-shot seminars unconnected to daily practice. The modules remain interactive and have been enriched by the perspectives of the teachers. The Certificate is a dynamic project that changes the horizons of teachers and their students.

*The Best Outcome: Perkins*

The Certificate has raised us from a multi-program private school with very good curriculum to a cohesive set of programs competitive with strong comprehensive school districts.

Through the Certificate, we gained important connections, within Perkins and across institutions. The Certificate was a strong match between the expertise of higher education professionals and special educators with very specific training and interests.

The bonds we forged with each other at Perkins and with UMass Boston continue. We are richer for these connections and continue to work with each other in our ongoing refinement of best practice for all students at Perkins

*The Best Outcome: Together*

Best of all, from our joint perspective, special education teachers and administrators discovered productive relationships between standards based curriculum and specially designed instruction for students with substantial disabilities. Teachers and students gained access to the general curriculum. Both had an opportunity to learn the general curriculum and can now demonstrate what they know and can do.

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