

## The Four A's of Managing the Placement and Service of Students with Disabilities in the CTE Classroom

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### Abstract

*Newly hired secondary career and technical education (CTE) instructors are often surprised by the rate at which students with disabilities enroll in their classes. While many educators see CTE as a logical placement for students who are otherwise academically unsuccessful, the CTE teacher is too often unprepared for serving this population. Alternative routes of CTE teacher licensure often leave these teachers feeling unsure and ineffective. This article discusses concerns about this issue and includes an easy, four-step model CTE teachers serving students with disabilities can use to be more effective overall:*

- 1) Orient staff who refer students to CTE programs and assist them in placement decisions;
- 2) Obtain assistance in implementing Individual Education Plan (IEP) accommodations;
- 3) Assess the appropriateness of the accommodations, record and make recommendations to the IEP team; and
- 4) Act as an advocate for the student in counseling and IEP development procedures.

### Enrollment Disparities

In examining the enrollment trends of students with disabilities in career and technical education (CTE), Levesque (2003) reported that in 1998, students with disabilities represented 2.8% of all high school graduates and 4.2% of those completing occupational programs. Furthermore, Levesque reported that 37.5% of students with disabilities were entered into CTE programs, compared to 24.6% of non-disabled students; the students with disabilities earned an average of 5.9 CTE credits, substantially higher than the 3.9 CTE credits earned by their non-disabled peers.

In a study of attitudes of principals and special education teachers related to inclusion activities, Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999) reported that special education teachers often perceived the administrators' motivation to implement inclusion activities as cost-cutting, while regular education teachers saw it as the "dumping" of students into classes. Although the *National Assessment of Vocational Education, Final Reports to Congress Volume I (2004)* draws the clear conclusion that, "the notion of vocational education in general as a 'dumping ground' for these students is not warranted" (p. 42), the report does concede that, "students with disabilities are over-represented in some of the more traditional vocational program areas—e.g., agriculture, construction, mechanics and repair, and materials production" (NAVE 2004, p. 42).

### CTE's Value for Students with Disabilities

Few people would argue the potential educational value of CTE as an option for students with disabilities (Grey & Herr, 1995; Harvey, 2003; Kraska, 1996, 1997). The writers of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) assert that, "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, in special classes, or separate schooling" [20 U.S.C. Section 1412 (a)(5)(A)]. Considering the enrollment disparities that exist in the United States, it is clear that CTE is a favored area of inclusion (Haber, 2005; Harvey, 2001).

The real value of CTE for students with disabilities, however, goes beyond the placement decision. The outcomes for students with disabilities are shown to be better for employment, earnings, and overall economic success if their secondary education includes CTE (Harvey, 2001; Wonacott, 2001). Couple the workforce preparation with the more general "life skill" related activities and preparation, and CTE holds a great deal of value for students with disabilities.

### CTE Teacher Preparation and Students with Disabilities

One of the issues facing CTE teachers with high percentages of students with disabilities is their program of teacher preparation. Wolfe, Boone, Folbert, and Atanasoff (2000) found that only 35% of the colleges re-

sponding to their survey had their special education and regular education program within the same academic department or division. Furthermore, the topic of transition, a key component of student placement in CTE, was included in the coursework in only 36 of the 52 universities (69%) represented in the study. Wolfe et al. (2000) further reported that only 33% of the states reporting that they offer coursework actually require transition course work for licensure requirements.

Over the last few decades, "alternative or industry option" CTE licensure programs have become a common and accepted method of CTE teacher preparation. In many of these alternative programs, CTE teachers enter the classroom with little to no actual teaching experience and little education-related preparation. Many states have "crash courses" that introduce educational theory and methods that last one to four weeks aimed at making the teachers at least minimally proficient in the mechanics of teaching. During the first years of teaching, many of these teachers can be overwhelmed not only with the traditional requirements of teaching and completing the required licensure coursework, but also by teaching a population documented to have a substantially higher enrollment rate for students with disabilities.

Harvey's (2000) study of 236 CTE educators in Pennsylvania found that CTE teachers, in general, felt less confident and less effective in teaching students with disabilities than their administrators perceived them to be. Several follow-up studies evaluating special education students in inclusive settings (Fourqurean & LaCourt, 1990; Kottering & Braziel, 1999; Lovitt, Flavins, & Cushing, 1999), found that many students re-

ported a generally negative attitude toward them and lack of support from their school teachers and administrators.

To summarize this issue, our literature review shows that new CTE instructors are having trouble dealing with the disparate percentage of students with special educational needs, partly because teacher preparation programs are not addressing these issues with the necessary depth of content required for quality teaching. This lack of self efficacy may be the cause of students feeling that there is a generally negative attitude towards them.

So, given that CTE teachers are in a curricular area with a greater percentage of students with disabilities, and that they are likely to be less prepared than other teaching professionals for educating this student population, the model offered in this article is meant to guide them in assisting their student populations with the enrollment process, during their attendance, and in advocating for their needs.

### ***Step 1: Assist in the Placement Decision***

The best way to ensure that a CTE program is enrolling qualified students is to insist that the CTE teacher or a program representative is involved in some way during the placement decision process. The most qualified person to inform the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team about the program is the course instructor, and if possible school administrators should plan for release time to accommodate this. Only a well-informed representative of the program can provide a comprehensive picture of the rigor level of the course, as well as other requirements which may present challenges that the IEP team should consider in its planning. This representative is invaluable in the development of academic

goals, curricular modification, and instructional accommodations. Adequate career counseling and assessment through active participation (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2001, p. 551) will help ensure that students are placed in programs that are compatible with the students' interests and preferences, academic and physical capabilities, and career transition goals.

One key factor to quality IEP development and placement decisions is ensuring that the IEP has continuity. Continuity is evident when those writing an IEP clearly connect the sections within the IEP. For instance, the instructional modifications for a student should address the student's academic difficulties. The academic goals should be directly related to the student's transition goals. Most importantly, the placement must be the logical placement given the stated vision statement and transition plan. By being proactive in assisting the IEP team with the placement decisions, the CTE teacher can help ensure continuity and an overall successful IEP.

There are several methods by which a CTE teacher can assist IEP teams in effective planning and placement. First, the teacher must establish positive relationships rooted in student advocacy. To establish these relationships, the teacher must be proactive in nurturing partnerships with the IEP team members. Making overtures in the form of phone calls and invitations for tours are the best places to start, followed by inviting counselors and administrators to tour the classroom and the laboratory, sending portfolios of work samples and written exams, and making sure the IEP team is aware of academic prerequisites BEFORE everyone is under springtime IEP writing pressures. The mes-

sage that should be received through these efforts is that the program is open to all interested, motivated, and academically prepared students. The development of these relationships will hopefully render a positive working relationship between the CTE programs and the IEP teams, resulting in more consultation, invitations to IEP meetings, and an overall rise in awareness of everyone's role in the process.

In reality, it is difficult for the CTE teacher to get out of class to attend IEP meetings, so CTE schools often send representatives to participate in these meetings. These representatives are typically career and technical counselors, evaluators or other administrators. It is imperative when sending a representative that she has familiarity with the individual programs and is able to determine whether or not the program is appropriate for the individual student. This representative should also be prepared to make recommendations regarding instructional and curricular modifications.

In summary, by creating clear, communicative, and cooperative relationships with IEP placement teams, the CTE teacher will likely increase the percentage of qualified students enrolling in the CTE classroom, not by excluding students, but by ensuring that the students enrolling are motivated, interested, and aware of the course and work requirements necessary for success. This will result in enrollment of more cognitively and affectively prepared students focused on success.

### ***Step 2: Accommodate According to the IEP***

Accommodations are the changes made in instruction that enable the student with disabilities to attain the same education as everyone else. The IEP

team prescribes the instructional and assessment accommodations the student will require based on the student's disabilities (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Bielinski, House, Moody, & Haigh, 2001).

Sometimes, accommodations are difficult to find on the IEP. They are occasionally in the needs section of the evaluation report, sometimes listed with the academic objectives, sometimes listed under instructional modification, or sometimes they have their own category, called accommodations or adaptations. Regardless of what they are called, they have been designated as a result of the IEP team's assessment and planning, and it is unlawful to refuse to grant them.

Making accommodations for students with disabilities is really where the IEP works. It is imperative that the CTE teacher is given access to the IEP and implements changes in instruction or applies instructional strategies according to the IEP. Sometimes, because of restrictive school district policies, teachers are told that they may not see the IEP because it is confidential. The CTE teacher needs to have immediate and unrestricted access to the IEP. The IEP is a document of educational alteration, customized for the student. It is very difficult to make changes to curriculum and instruction if the person in charge of implementing these changes is not allowed to see the changes required. Career and technical educators need background information on the student's disabilities in order to provide the appropriate accommodations and curricular modifications (Wonacott, 2001).

While some school districts do have pretty restrictive policies, the information still can be accessed by the teacher. If a teacher has difficulty accessing

the IEP of a student, the teacher simply needs to summarize the specific information needed to implement instruction and request that someone with the necessary clearance retrieve it. Teachers need the following information from the IEP:

- (1) Disability
- (2) Curricular modifications
- (3) Annual goals & objectives
- (4) Instructional modifications or accommodations
- (5) Strengths and needs
- (6) Academic performance (standardized tests, grade equivalency scores)
- (7) Student's career goal and transition goal

### ***Step 3: Assess the IEP's Quality and Appropriateness***

Sometimes the accommodations written for a student that look effective on an IEP fall short in the classroom. So, what is the CTE teacher to do with a student who has ineffective accommodations required of their education program? First, the teacher needs to make attempts to implement the accommodations, and develop a method for keeping track of the attempts. Each attempt should be noted, along with the student's response (refusal or acceptance). The accommodation's effectiveness (effective or ineffective) is noted as well. The teacher should make sure that the notes are complete and up-to-date.

If the accommodations are still rendering no real progress, the teacher should consider asking for help from three sources. First, members of the IEP team who decided the accommodation was needed and in the student's best interest should be consulted. They should be asked why the accommodation was chosen, and what the team expected the student to accomplish as a result. Next, other teachers who have had similar experiences should be con-

sulted. More senior teachers might have hints and suggestions to successfully implement the accommodation or more general suggestions for assisting students with this type of disability. Lastly, the student's previous year's teachers could potentially provide insight on how to successfully work with the student. Seeking advice from these three sources should render a much clearer picture of the accommodation, the reason it was prescribed, and how to make it more effective.

At the end of an evaluation term (mid-quarter or marking period), the teacher should summarize the success of the accommodation. An overall summary should accompany the standard progress evaluation report to the school's career and technical education special needs coordinator. It is essential that the teacher makes this process as accurate as possible.

#### **Step 4: Become a Student Advocate**

The IEP development process is an emotional process for all involved. It is a process filled with evaluation, reality checks, disagreements, and sometimes hostility. It is important to approach the process with the understanding that everyone on the IEP team should be working toward the best educational fit for the "individual" (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Helping parents understand that the team is working toward the best interest of the student can reduce stress levels and create an environment in which parents can increase their knowledge about how the accommodation and transition services can or cannot be met through the CTE program. Parents, professionals, and the student are tasked with "working toward an agreement of the child's abilities, skills and common expectations. Each

needs to know that the other is trying to create the best possible plan" (Lytle & Bordin, 2001, p. 43).

Too often, however, as a result of frustration, lack of training, or lack of adequate support, the teacher can lose sight of his own role in the educational process of a student with a disability. The role becomes almost adversarial, and the teacher is viewed as someone unwilling to deal with the student. When the teacher concludes that a change in placement or accommodation must be made, the teacher must ensure that his actions are viewed as student-focused advocacy. If the teacher feels that the student placement, accommodations, or academic goals are flawed, the teacher must communicate concern that the student is being disserved by the existing IEP and that changes should be made. Development of this advocacy role must begin long before any problems with placement become apparent. The following steps are useful in developing this advocacy role. Career and technical education teachers should:

- 1) make contact with parents early in the year;
- 2) through these contacts, attempt to be viewed as a caring, reasonable teacher before the student has a chance to come home with stories to the contrary;
- 3) ensure that parents are contacted regularly and report good news and areas of concern;
- 4) try to develop a cooperative partnership with the parents to make sure that there is consistency between the classroom and home related to the importance of study, attendance, behavior, and academic performance; and
- 5) place any concerns or suggestions in the context of what is best for the student.

The student is placed in CTE programs by the IEP team for what is considered the most appropriate educational experience; the role of the educational system is to provide this educational experience. It is the duty of the CTE teacher to make all attempts to make the placement work. If, throughout the school year, the CTE teacher concludes that the accommodations or the overall program is truly inappropriate for the student, it is the obligation of the teacher to question it, refine it, and advocate for its change.

## **Conclusion**

While CTE often provides students with disabilities an environment with great educational potential, newly hired CTE teachers must be ready and capable to provide such an experience. Using the four-step model presented in this article, all CTE teachers can more effectively educate students with disabilities. By assisting in the decision of which courses or program a student is placed in, by employing appropriate and required accommodations, assessing the effectiveness of the student's IEP and accommodations, and by advocating for students, CTE teachers can take a necessarily active role in helping students with disabilities reach their fullest potential.

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