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Part 1 – Identification of Problem of Practice

Definition of Problem of Practice:

My school is a branch campus of a private, Christian school. Due to various circumstances, our enrollment is currently dropping and this causes us to accept all students that come to our school. This is a great opportunity to allow all students to enter our school regardless of their academic level; however our resources are extremely limited. There are several issues which have arisen in the past few years due to the lack of resources.

First, we have students in kindergarten through 3rd grade who have major academic issues which have not been identified and diagnosed. These students need direct attention to their issues in order to serve them better. These needs are rarely presented to the parents as serious problems and often are presented in a much lighter tone than warranted. While this appeases and controls parent concerns, it does not help the students to improve which should be our end goal.

Second, the primary classroom teachers are frustrated and at a breaking point with the effort which is required to teach these students. The teachers feel abandoned and alone in deciphering how best to serve these students. Our branch campus employs one resource teacher; however she only works four days a week and also serves as the librarian and assistant principal. Unfortunately for us, resource help is one of the first things that is left out when her schedule is busy.

Why is this Problem of Practice Important?

First, I feel particularly burdened by this problem because often I will see issues begin to develop in my class, but I do not have resources to test and diagnose the problem. Being the first

teacher that interacts with the students, I am often the first to see signs of various cognitive, emotional, or behavioral disorders. I want to be able to help these students at this young, critical age so that it is not a problem that follows them through their school career. I need help and support in the assessment and diagnosis of these problems.

Second, this issue is important because I want all students to succeed in my class. I feel as though I do not have the resources to be able to help these students succeed at their highest potential. It is disheartening and frustrating to see students struggle to read in my class, when I know that they could be reading if they had additional resources and/or support.

How Does This Problem Affect The School Environment?

Subject Matter Aspects:

The students in our primary grades are missing vital information and knowledge which they will need as they progress in their school career. The issues and gaps in education are being covered up to get the students through each grade. While this works on a year to year basis in the lower grades, it is likely to catch up with them and potentially cause monumental problems in later years.

Instructional Aspects:

Instructionally, this causes a nightmare for the primary teachers. The range of abilities in our classes is immense and more than one teacher could possibly handle with no help. Therefore, the teacher must attempt to teach the middle of the class. The students on the upper end of the academic spectrum lose enrichment opportunities and students on the lower end become more lost. While the teachers try desperately to provide appropriate instruction to all students, it is just not possible without extra help. This can also cause behavior problems as students become either bored or lost with the lack of appropriate instruction.

Past/Current/Anticipated Setting of the Occurrence:

This situation is mostly occurring in the kindergarten through third grade classrooms. It has been occurring since this campus opened six years ago and will most likely continue to be a problem. The outlook for our campus is that we will continue with about the same student-teacher ratio and therefore this will be a continuing problem.

People Involved:

People involved directly in this situation are the kindergarten through third grade teachers as well as the resource teacher. However, it does not seem to be a major concern of the resource teacher. Our principal is also indirectly involved as she is the one ultimately in charge of making sure the school is successfully educating our students.

Classroom Supports and/or Barriers:

There are some classroom supports and barriers which help address this situation. We have a very involved parent group at our school and most teachers are able to find parent volunteers to help individual students. This can help tremendously in giving students extra support. However, these parents are obviously not trained in education and therefore the work to plan for volunteers falls on the teachers. This can be an extra burden of work as well as at times, the teachers do not know how to help certain students.

School Level Supports and/or Barriers:

There are very few school supports that help this situation however there are several barriers. The lack of adequate time for the resource teacher to help struggling students is the first barrier. Since our resource teacher has two other job titles at the same time, her attention is divided. Second, our lack of financial support is a barrier as we are not able to obtain resources or professional development to appropriately support the teachers.

Part 2 – Analysis of Problem of Practice

What Led to the Problem?

The most obvious cause for the problem of practice is a lack of finances, which led to the inability to provide adequate resource support. A resource teacher was not able to be hired for an appropriate amount of time taking into consideration the needs of the school. Therefore, the resource teacher must prioritize student needs and often the older students get a higher priority and the problem is continual. However, there are some other circumstances which have led to the severity of the current situation.

First, there is a lack of administrative knowledge regarding individual students and their needs. The administration is not aware of how much extra support is required to teach some students, therefore providing appropriate resources for students is not considered in the admissions process. Second, there is a breakdown of communication between the administration and the teachers regarding student and school issues which are not positive. The teachers do not feel supported in a communication sense and feel uncomfortable bringing up these problems with the administration. Third, parents seem to believe that the teachers can teach all students appropriately regardless of individual needs because of class sizes. While it is true that more can be done individually in a small class, it is a misnomer that in small classes all individual needs can be met without extra support.

What impact does this Problem of Practice have upon the school environment?

This problem of practice is a pivotal problem in the school environment. From a teaching standpoint, teachers feel incredible pressure to meet individual needs while also completing all required curriculum goals. Having students with special needs often requires the teacher to slow down teaching so that extra remediation can be done with certain students, which can lead to behavior problems. On the other side, if the teacher decides to move on to stay on the curricular schedule, the students left behind become lost and also cause behavior problems.

Along with the behavior issues, there are major learning issues for students caused by this problem of practice. First, students who understand the material quickly miss out on more advanced opportunities to learn. There is very little enrichment that can be done when the teachers are focused so intently on remediation for a few students. Second, for the students who need more time or resources to learn the required material, there is not always the time allotted or materials that they need.

From a collaborative standpoint with teachers, these needs create a sense of unity. Teachers will spend time informally in the lunchroom and after school sharing ideas which might help students. However, the informal collaboration tends to happen primarily only between general education teachers and the resource teacher is rarely involved. So while the collaboration is positive, the lack of training and resources will at times lead to confused and inadequate ideas between classroom teachers.

Goal #1: IEP Plans will be made for each student not achieving at expected levels so that all participants in the educational process are connected.

Even though a private school is not required to complete IEP's and special education guidelines of public districts, the school should still be complying with state laws. "IDEA (P.L. 94-142) requires that an individualized education program (IEP) be developed for each student with special educational needs. The purpose of an IEP is to provide an appropriate education" (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007, p. 9). The purpose and goal of an IEP is so that students do not get left behind and individual needs are not ignored. Creating IEP's is the first step to solving this problem of practice so that students' needs are identified and teams are created to help.

Goal #2: Teachers will be involved in formal, collaborative teams including general education teachers and special education teachers.

Current educational trends are leading to the creation of teams as a way to help students. Teachers should not be left alone to figure out how to meet student needs. Cross grade-level teams will be helpful to support teachers and provide successful collaboration. As well, the special education teacher should be involved in these teams so that teachers are more supported. “The success of students with LD within the general education curriculum requires a multifaceted approach by a team of well-trained and coordinated professionals” (Vaughn et al., 2007, p. 432). If this problem of practice is going to be resolved, it is essential that teachers begin to communicate and work together so that appropriate accommodations can be discovered and used.

Goal #3: Teachers in the primary grades will participate in training to provide ideas for identifying and teaching special needs students in the general education classrooms.

One of the biggest underlying causes of this problem of practice is that problems with student learning are not being identified until the middle grades when they have become a serious problem. “Research on programs for students at risk has indicated that the most fruitful time to provide remediation is during the preprimary and early primary grades” (Vaughn et al., 2007, p. 303). We need to be helping students early in their education so that they can build their confidence and skills as they enter the secondary grades. In order to do this, primary teachers must have training in identifying and accommodating special needs students in their classrooms.

Part 3 – How Do We Fix It?

Action Plan for Problem of Practice:

Goal #1:

The first step in achieving the goal of creating effective IEP’s for struggling students is training the teachers in the formation and use of an IEP. Since this is a private school, teachers are not required to be state-licensed and therefore many do not have educational training.

Therefore, IEP training during in-service times must be the first step. We need to be honest and train teachers in how to write and carry out an IEP. There must be a generic IEP form created for our district, most likely by the resource teacher.

Second, after training teachers in generic IEP practices, we must specifically define how it will look in our school. IDEA (P.L. 94-142) requires that students be placed in the least restrictive environment, which is often defined by a continuum of services. “This continuum of services ranges from the full-time general education classroom to a special day school or residential facility” (Vaughn et al., 2007, p. 6). Also, multi-disciplinary teams (MDT) must be created to begin working on the technical aspects of creating IEP’s. “The MDT serves two purposes. First, the team determines whether the student has a disability and is eligible for special education services. If this is the case, the team then develops the IEP, which provides the foundation for establishing the educational program for the student” (Vaughn et al., 2007, p. 9). By creating MDT, our school will be able to begin facilitating IEP development.

After the first two steps, teachers have been trained in IEP policies and multi-disciplinary teams have been developed to begin identifying students and creating IEP’s. The last step in this goal is setting up accountability to be sure that the process continued. One of the issues in this problem of practice is the lack of attention to the problem from the resource teacher. Someone, probably a general education teacher, must be put in charge of ensuring that IEP recommendations are being met. There needs to be a person in charge who is tracking that students are getting the help they both need and deserve. This is also a piece of the evaluation plan.

Goal #2:

The second goal for resolving this problem of practice is to create formal, collaborative teams which provide help and support. Again, one of the biggest issues in this problem of

practice is the lack of attention from the resource teacher, which sets expectations for general education teachers to provide special resources to struggling students. However, there is a lack of knowledge and expertise in how to help these students. To resolve this goal, the first step would be to create professional learning communities.

There are two types of professional learning communities which should be developed. First, there must be cross-grade level teams which involve the primary, intermediate, and middle grades in isolation, with both the general education and the resource teacher. This should be a scheduled meeting which is non-negotiable by administration. "Time is the most precious and necessary resource for effective collaboration. Unless time is built into teachers' and other professionals' schedules and workloads, collaboration simply cannot occur regularly" (Vaughn et al., 2007, p. 42). During this time, teachers can discuss individual students and concerns while sharing ideas and hints to help teachers provide the best education possible for the students.

Second, an attitude of consultation and collaboration must be developed among teachers. It is important that teachers do not feel alone in providing the best education to struggling students. By having an attitude of consultation and collaboration, teachers will be able to get the support and help they need. One thing to be aware of can be the strain between the educators. There must be a sharing attitude with open honesty that considers the student's needs to be the first priority. "If teachers develop a mind-set for learning and a positive attitude about seeking help to bring the best resources to the student, such disadvantages can be overcome" (Vaughn et al., 2007, p. 41). This attitude will need to be modeled and supported by the administration.

Goal #3:

The third goal overlaps somewhat into the first two as it is designed to continue and support what was already created. Teachers must be getting continual professional development. I would also recommend that a book study is created to provide teachers with more support and

research-based strategies. This could be done in either a large-group staff meeting time or on a smaller scale during cross-grade level team meetings. Either way it should be seen as a support to teachers and not one expert “training” another. The attitude during this meeting time must be one of a shared partnership where we are all equals working together.

After book-studies are created, there must also be more formal professional development planned and provided for teachers. The administration must step up and provide structured, monthly trainings for the teacher where experts come and discuss student issues and solutions. Perhaps, each month a different aspect of special education could be discussed ranging from communication disorders to developmental disabilities to gifted and talented students. These issues must be discussed and expert advice must be brought in to give teachers solid, research-based strategies which can be used in the classroom.

Evaluation Plan for Problem of Practice:

There are several considerations in regards to evaluation of struggling students in this school. First, are the student’s skills improving and are they growing academically? Second, do teachers feel supported and more knowledgeable to work with these students? Third, how do parents feel about the changes and do they see positive results in their children? Since this is a private school where parents are paying for their children’s education, their attitude and input must be highly valued.

In regards to student skills I think we will need to evaluate these skills specifically both formally and informally. One easy way to begin the process is to evaluate standardized test scores. After starting this new program, the progress made by students on standardized tests should improve more significantly. Secondly, we can look at report cards. Have their grades increased over the past year? If this student was making C’s or D’s, have our modifications and accommodations helped him or her to move up to B’s or C’s. Lastly, we must consider informal

assessments based on teacher observations. The teachers should be keeping logs of students' progress academically, behaviorally, and socially. We must evaluate whether we have helped these students to improve in other areas besides those measured with formal assessments.

Second, we need to evaluate teacher's attitudes and beliefs about their skills in teaching struggling students. I would use an interview format both before the year began and after the new year of strategies. Specific questions to be asked include their feelings of support from administration and the resource teacher, their comfortableness with using research-based teaching strategies with struggling teachers, and their feeling of connectedness and communication with other teachers in the school.

Lastly, the evaluations of parents must be considered. A survey could be given to parents before the year and then after the year, asking questions about their evaluation of the school and their individual child's education. It would be important to survey all parents and not only parents of the struggling students to ensure accuracy and to be sure that the general-education students are not losing academic ground as part of the new changes.

Conclusion:

Overall, this is an extremely challenging problem of practice to address with the consideration of financial resources. However, there were many ideas presented which are at no cost to the school, but require an adjustment of the current mind-set of teachers and administration. If all parties involved in the school are willing to take on these challenges, I believe they will come out stronger and more effective in the education of students.