

Special education leads the way

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Parents today are not only discontent with certain methods of teaching but are distrustful of the system used to measure student accomplishments. Two questions frequently asked by parents and as frequently dismissed by administrators are: "Why can't the schools tell us what they're teaching our kids? Why can't they tell us how well our children are learning what they teach?"

Criticisms once unspoken are now voiced at meetings, in the media and used as excuses for turning down levies. However, one mother of five school-age children, one of whom is enrolled in the Seattle School District's special education classes for the handicapped, is not criticizing the entire system.

She says: "Why don't the regular school programs tell me in plain words what my children are doing and how well they're doing it? They do it for my handicapped child!"

In the State of Washington, special education leads the way when it comes to accountability in our school systems. Here's why.

The mandate from the state legislature in 1971 to educate all handicapped children brought with it a command to identify the purpose of the programs designed for these new special education students.

The rules and regulations of H.B. 90 (the Mandatory Education Law) demanded that goals and objectives be set by administrators and teachers and that a means of measuring the progress in reaching these goals be established.

"This became the best prodding we ever received," said Bill Attebery, special education administrative super-

visor in the Seattle system. "It forced us to consider what we wanted to accomplish in our programs and our department."

"Management by Objectives" is the name of the system used in most special education departments today. This method of training staff within the school system was encouraged in a workshop conducted approximately three years ago. There, personnel from the special education section of the state superintendent of public instruction's office demonstrated and discussed various techniques for measuring progress toward established goals.

Parts of the management system, however, (such as use of the six-cycle graph paper used for charting purposes) were abandoned as impractical. But the basic system and the philosophy behind it made deep inroads into the thinking of most special education administrators.

"Many of the students new to the school system were mentally retarded children," said Charlene Behrns, director of special education in Seattle. "They had been denied the opportunity to attend school because it was believed that they were unable to learn. Now, through this new method of accountability, we know that retarded children learn in much the same way as normal students do. If a student fails to learn, it is probably because we are not teaching effectively or well."

"To be effective," Bill Attebery added, "it becomes necessary to establish a goal for each child. Then we must set down some methods of reaching that goal and, at the same time, estimate the length of time it will take to get there."

To a teacher this means specifically that a goal must be established for each

particular student and a method of objectives or ways to reach that goal firmly adhered to. In the process of achieving that goal, a method of evaluating is used to see if the teacher and staff are successfully reaching their stated goals.

One example of this new philosophy is in operation at the Apollo School in Issaquah where a list of objectives for each child is taped to a wall of the classroom. For example, on the page of objectives for one of the multiply handicapped students named Sherrie are the words, "Will walk 25 steps without aid." Beneath this sentence is a list of duties used by each staff person to help Sherrie reach the goal set for her.

Parents are given a copy of the paper listing the goals and frequent reports of the child's progress in attaining the goal. Once Sherrie walked the 25 steps unaided, it was obvious that she was well on her way to success. This goal then disappeared, and a new one replaced it.

Nor is it difficult for an evaluation team to determine the most desirable goal for the pre-school child who is not yet toilet-trained. Teachers and aides in an Edmonds classroom developed a dignified method of objectives by means of a color-coded chart. It showed in a subtle way the time of day when each untrained child normally had a movement.

After three weeks of observation, the teacher was then able to set the ideal time for this daily objective. Such a method of toilet training is the same used by most mothers with normal children. However, most young mothers would probably not use the word "goal" to describe such efforts.

In this same Edmonds classroom of severely and multiply handicapped

youngsters, a teacher-intern was helping a child to scoop up food. The goal, he explained, was to teach scooping; the objective, to train the arm in this movement. Careful data was taken to determine what would or would not work. After a specific period of time elapsed and the child did not learn to scoop, a new list of objectives was created.

In one of the state's larger districts, top administrators neglected to set goals and objectives for themselves. Thus, they handicapped the system of goal-setting. Both in theory and good practice, it is necessary that all administrators be involved in the goal-setting process. Otherwise, the system has gaps of understanding. What further develops is loss of direction by department heads and individuals who are then not aware of where the rest of the system is planning to go with its curriculum, methods of discipline and plans of implementing its policies.

This failure to set goals resulted in total frustration for all lower-level administrators. The top administrator then asked for pledges of support from "his team" and urged department heads to be "team players." Such an admonition led only to further confusion for those who most earnestly wanted to understand where the team was headed.

As Bill Attebery pointed out, "Special education is just one part of education. It cannot successfully set goals unless the whole district participates and shares its goals. For perfect understanding, it is important that every department and each individual use the same forms and vocabulary. The purpose of doing the latter is to build confidence and trust through communication."