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Bruce Harter, Superintendent

Ableism

In December, one of our parents, Phyllis Guinivan, attended an Administrators and Supervisors meeting to help us understand how our schools unintentionally create barriers for students and families with physical / mobility challenges. She shared both pictures and personal experiences of what it's like to bring a child in a wheelchair into our schools. "Schools may meet the ADA technical requirements," she said, "but functionally they are inaccessible."

The next night after her presentation, I walked into a holiday concert through the entrance closest to the stage. As I stepped into the auditorium, I was delighted to see a student I know has multiple impairments including using a wheelchair singing with the choir.

Yet, I was so dismayed when the choir finished to see that he had to be lifted out of the orchestra pit because a ramp does not yet exist at that school.



As a result of Mrs. Guinivan's presentation, we're taking both short and long term steps to address the issues she identified. First and foremost, all of us who heard Mrs. Guinivan have a greatly enhanced awareness of the challenges that people with physical / mobility challenges face at our schools. Marty Tracy volunteered to take a lead role in the planning to improve the access both coming into and being in our schools. What we'll be seeing over the next few weeks and months is improved signage, increased enforcement of parking restrictions, removal of physical barriers (like posts and uneven pavement) and reviews of accessibility issues before events take place.

For me and I hope for many others, Mrs. Guinivan's presentation opened my mind for seeing much more of what gets in the way for our students

with disabilities. Without Mrs. Guinivan's presentation, I might have missed Thomas Hehir's article about the aims of special education that came in the January/February 2006 issue of the Harvard Education Letter. In that article Hehir defines ableism as "societal prejudice against people with disabilities, some of which is blatant – like when disabled people aren't able to attend an event – and some of which is more subtle, such as the desire for disabled people to perform life tasks in the same ways as non-disabled people."

The Peel Ontario Board of Education goes a step further in defining ableism as *set of practices and beliefs that assign inferior value (worth) to people who have developmental, emotional, physical or psychiatric disabilities.*

People who don't have a disability or who aren't close to someone who does, can't see how the world is wired for non-disabled people. It's invisible to us who don't have disabilities. It's not intentional, we're just not aware of the challenges that people with disabilities face until someone points them out.

Hehir believes that the attitudes and practices of the non-disabled world shape our goals as well as our day-to-day practices in special education. Hehir writes, "Special education is so individualized that people often lack the bigger picture of what we should be accomplishing for all children. I believe what we should be doing in special education is *minimizing the impact* of disability and *maximizing the opportunity* to participate in the world... Our role should be to develop educational interventions and conditions under which the impact of a disability is minimized and the opportunities to participate in the curriculum, in the life of the school, are maximize." I believe that Hehir's standard is one worth considering. What would it mean for our initiative toward more inclusive practices if we were guided by those two questions?

1. What would minimize the impact of the disability, and
2. What would maximize opportunities for participation in the regular program?

In implementing Hehir's standards, we'd begin with the assumption that students with disabilities are going to be served in the regular classroom. For many of us across most of our careers, we've come to know special education as place rather than a service. Once students were identified as having a disability, they were moved out of the regular classroom to a special one or another school. By labeling children and sending them off to a special place, we, in fact maximized the impact of the disability. This is exactly what Hehir means by ableism – isolating children with disabilities so 'regular teachers' don't have to deal with them. Hehir is not suggesting that all students with disabilities can best be served in the regular classroom. He writes, "Sometimes being educated in the regular class doesn't minimize the impact of disability." Students who need intensive interventions may be able to learn best in another setting. But our presumption ought to be that the regular class with support is the starting point. That's the premise of the concept of 'least restrictive environment' and it's also the law.

In an article in Harvard Educational Review, Spring 2002, Hehir offers four

suggestions for schools and school districts to eliminate ableism and more effectively serve students with disabilities:

1. *Include disability as part of schools' overall diversity efforts.* For us in Brandywine, this effort would have a double impact since our special educational students are disproportionately African American. Hehir quotes a high school student with Down's syndrome from a truly remarkable high school who said "There are all kinds of kids at my school: Blacks kids, Puerto Rican kids, gay and lesbian kids, Meagan uses a wheel chair. Matt's deaf, and I have Down's syndrome. It's all diversity." According to Hehir, her high school has done a great job of including disabled kids and has incorporated discussions about disability in its efforts to address diversity issues.
2. *Special education should be specialized.* Hehir asserts that once children are placed in special education they receive a different education should be rejected. Though students with disabilities may have individual needs, by and large their education should be based on the same curriculum as that of non-disabled students. Special education must be the vehicle by which students with disabilities access the curriculum and the means by which unique needs that arise out of the children's disability are addressed. "If one accepts that the role of special educators and related services personnel is to help disabled children access the curriculum and meet the unique needs that arise out of their disability, the need for specialization should be obvious." Special education teachers can use their training and experience to pinpoint the intervention or accommodation or support that a disabled child needs to meet the standards of the curriculum.
3. *Move away from the current obsession with placement toward an obsession with results.* Historically special education was a way to keep some students' scores from counting in state testing. Until 2002, many Delaware students who received services under IDEA were not counted. Today all must be counted. There's no doubt in my mind that NCLB's requirement for a special education cell has been a key to changing our expectations for students with disabilities.
4. *Employ concepts of universal design to schooling.* Universal design was first applied to architecture to create the physical access that is so essential for students and family members with physical disabilities. But now the concept applies to instructional strategies. According to the Center for Applied Design Technology (CAST) universal design learning principles help educators customize their teaching for individual differences in each of these three brain

networks. A universally-designed curriculum offers the following:

- o Multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
- o Multiple means of expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know; and
- o Multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

The great news is that we've moving in the direction of more inclusive practices and away from a system built on ableism – thanks to all of you. Two years ago we had 25 classrooms where co-teaching took place. This year we have 125. While we're clearly moving in the right direction, we're going to have to talk about ableism so we can raise our awareness to not only provide physical access to our buildings but to provide authentic access to high levels of learning for all. Just moving toward more inclusive practices won't guarantee that we've been able to successfully deal with a system of advantage based on the absence of disability.

Kudos

Marty Tracy for volunteering to provide leadership around making our schools more accessible and friendly for students and families with physical impairments.

Carol Norman for her facilitation of the conflict between the Carrcroft PTA and the neighbors who live around Carrcroft over a sign that PTA had purchased to go in front of the school.

Donna Smallwood for successfully competing for and earning a promotion to the position of Payroll Supervisor.

Maureen Robinson for her leadership in helping Brandywine students win the Legislative Essay Contest – again this year.

Ann Hilkert, Beth Nobbs and Amy Elliot for all their 'above & beyond' work in preparing for the special education review from Stetson & Associates.

Kim Doherty for her leadership with EPER committee that led to the ratification of the EPER schedule and job descriptions.

Bryan Steinberg and Patti Staker for their substantial contributions to the successful transition of the Data Service Center web applications which happened over the winter break.



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Share your feedback about school leadership, equity, and the
Leadership Jazz newsletter: bruce.harter@bsd.k12.de.us

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