by Joseph Wardenski
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The New York City Department of Education has announced its proposed plan to restructure special education, the latest in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's and Chancellor Joel Klein's far-reaching shake-up of the city's school system. The plan, which is scheduled to go into effect by the next school year, will affect some 120,000 city students who are disabled or who otherwise require special education services.

Like the other education reforms that have been announced since February in the Department of Education's " Children First " agenda, the special education plan is based on the primary goals of increasing efficiency in order to free up resources that will lead to higher student achievement; improving accountability; and standardizing instructional practices throughout the system.

Special education students in New York City are at the gravest risk of educational failure. (See previous topic page updates, " Special Education " and " The Policy, but not the Practice, of â€ Inclusion' ").

The mayor and chancellor clearly recognized this record of failure when they announced their new package of reform proposals for special education. (For details see their press release)

Parents and others met their initial announcement with some skepticism. As noted in Advocates for Children 's bi-weekly Insideschools e-mail alert , special education advocates called the goals "worthy" but, before specific details were released, were also dubious about the potential for real long-term improvement based on the city's poor track record in implementing previous reforms.

Instructional Reforms

The two most significant features of the Department of Education's special education instructional reform strategy are: (1) the creation of 200 "Instructional Support Specialist" positions throughout the city and (2) the implementation of uniform, research-based curricular

models in reading and math, similar to the new instructional models for general education classrooms in most city schools.

The 200 instructional support specialists will serve primarily to support special education teachers in teaching the new standardized curriculum. .

The first of the two standardized curricular models is the Orton-Gillingham reading program, a national research-based model described by the department as “a multi-sensory reading approach that has proven successful with emergent readers [and] students with disabilities.” The Inside Schools update described the Orton-Gillingham method as “structured lessons in phonics” that encourage students “to see, hear, and even touch letters.”

The second instructional model is the Schools Attuned Program , described by the department as “a system of supporting strategies for accommodating diverse learners” and “effective both with children with disabilities andâ€¦struggling learners.” Both of these models are designed to supplement, not replace, the standardized citywide math and reading curricula that will be implemented in most city schools.

In addition to the 200 instructional support specialists, 1000 special education teachers will be trained in these two models in the 2003-2004 school year.

There is some concern among advocates because the Orton-Gillingham program has proven most effective when teachers are trained in costly small group settings. Questions have been raised about whether the city has the resources to provide small group trainings and about whether this strategy of training by teachers rather than by the program’s developers will be effective.

New Accountability

The department’s plan aims to improve accountability both on the level of the individual school and at the district level through a combination of support systems for school principals, funding targeted to poorly performing schools, and performance incentives.

The city plans to hire 50 “administrators of special education” to support principals in providing timely and effective services to special needs students and ensure compliance with various legal mandates. Five of these administrators will be assigned to each of the ten new regions, which replace the community school districts. Each administrator will supervise the special education programs in up to 12 schools.

Several million dollars will also be earmarked toward both poorly performing schools to develop corrective action plans and to reward high performance by schools that exceed the achievement benchmarks established in the plan.

Additionally, the existing school improvement program will be overhauled to include these clear new benchmarks and to provide other support to schools with the lowest performance levels.

One of the more controversial proposals in the plan is a proposed “streamlining” of the student evaluation process, which has two major provisions. Until now, special education students and their parents met with school officials to devise their individualized education plans, first at the school level and then at the district level with a Committee on Special Education. The first provision of the department’s plan will reduce the number of committees across the city from the current 37 to a proposed 10. To accompany this reduction, the second component of the plan will shift many of the responsibilities now held by these committees to the school level, and most students’ plans will be developed solely at the school level.

The district contends that these changes will improve efficiency, reduce redundancy, and make the student evaluation process less confusing for parents of special needs students. While this may, as the city hopes, increase convenience and eliminate “unnecessary bureaucracy,” some parents and advocates are not so sure. First, there is concern that even with reduced responsibilities, 10 committees on special education will have more responsibilities than they can handle and simply be too large—geographically and bureaucratically—making it more, not less, difficult for parents to navigate the system. Moreover, the increased concentration of decision-making at the school level has also raised eyebrows among those concerned that the potential costs of increased convenience will be too much control by individual school administrators (who may lack the time, expertise, or resources to meet students’ specific needs) and less flexibility in designing programs catered to students’ individual needs.

Governance changes: Status of District 75

With the major reorganization in the governance structure of the city's schools and districts, there has been some question about the future of District 75, the special district that serves the city's 20,000 most profoundly disabled students. The proposed plan, while making organizational changes to District 75 will leave the district intact as a separate entity. Most of the structural changes are apparently designed, however, to fit District 75 into the city's new school governance system.

Among the key administrative changes in District 75, administrative staff will be reorganized into supervisory school clusters that will closely parallel the system-wide organizational structure. As in the other changes for both regular and special education, District 75 will also adopt standardized math and reading curricula for the small number of District 75 students who participate in standard assessments and will hire instructional "coaches" that will train and support teachers and administrators in curricular models, behavior management, and other instructional issues.

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