Serving struggling learners with ADHD within a Catholic school setting

Although the provision of special education services within Catholic school settings can present a challenge to many schools, this does not relieve the school of an obligation to try to serve students with differing learning needs. Yes, resources are limited and the coordination of accommodation services can be daunting; however, serving students who may experience some marginalization within the school setting due to their unique learning needs is consistent with Catholic social teaching and, therefore, part of our mission as Catholic educators.

Focus on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

The diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a complex process and requires information from a variety of diagnostic sources. Only qualified professionals can make these kinds of decisions. If you have a concern that a student in your classroom exhibits the characteristics of this kind of disorder, please discuss your concerns with the student’s parent or guardian and access your school’s referral system.

There are several symptoms related to the diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: inattention and hyperactivity.

The person with ADHD may have difficulty paying attention for sustained amounts of time. This can be seen by careless mistakes on daily assignments or difficulty in performing tasks that require sustained attention. The person with ADHD also can become distracted by irrelevant stimuli, such as the noise of a lawnmower or air conditioning unit. Organization can be a challenge, which can manifest itself in difficulty in completing long-term assignments and meeting deadlines for tasks.

Another classic symptom of ADHD is hyperactivity. Individuals with ADHD can have high levels of activity that make them look like they are “on the go” all of the time. They can be “fidgety” or restless during periods of classroom instruction or talk incessantly. It is critical to note that just because a student may have high levels of activity doesn’t always mean that the person has the diagnosis of ADHD.

Steps for implementing

It is critical that interventions be targeted to the student’s unique learning issues. Interventions should be targeted and only a few important strategies tried. Too many strategies may confuse the student and wear down the teacher. There are many strategies that can help the student with Attention Deficit Disorder. This is an abbreviated list and will serve as a starting point. It is strongly suggested that a school explore professional development to learn more strategies to intervene effectively.

One of the main strategies that physicians may suggest to address the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is medication. There are a number of pharmaceutical approaches that doctors can take to help address concerns with level of attention and activity. It will all depend on the kinds of characteristics that the individual student exhibits. Although school staff can observe the academic and behavioral impact of Attention Deficit Disorder, it is never the place for school staff to endorse the need for medication. It is best that these conversations take place between the parent and the physician. The role of school staff is to support this conversation by collecting data to help the doctor and parent monitor the impact of medication.

One strategy is to look at developing a supportive classroom environment. Survey the physical environment of the class and place the student’s work location away from potentially distracting stimuli (away from a door leading to a busy hallway or an air conditioning unit). Frequent acknowledgment of the student when...
engaged in appropriate behaviors can help to foster positive behavior. The use of extreme criticism and sarcasm only can hurt these efforts.

Students with ADHD also benefit from instruction in organizational strategies. (For some suggestions, please see the first column in this series regarding Executive Functioning Disorder.) Teaching well-planned and concise lessons can also help to focus attention. The use of differentiated instructional approaches can engage students with ADHD positively in the learning process.

It is important for the classroom teacher to monitor the length of time that students are sitting for instruction and alternate that with other strategies such as Think-Pair-Share. Giving motor breaks also can increase student attention. This is most critical for younger grades that do not change classes on a regular basis like their high school counterparts.

**Pitfalls**

- Becoming overly frustrated with the student. In developing classroom approaches for students with ADHD, it is important to note that the level of activity and difficulty with paying attention are not willful behaviors that can easily be controlled by this student. In most cases, the student really is trying to conform to the directions of the teacher. When a student is experiencing extreme difficulty in paying attention and maintaining motor control, this is when they need the most love and support—which, I believe, is a hallmark of the kind of education that Catholic schools provide.

- Over-label instances of inattention/high levels of activity as ADHD. It can be too easy to overuse the label of ADHD to describe every instance of student misbehavior. In the current cultural context, there is a popular misuse of this diagnostic term to describe all inattention as ADHD—regardless of the etiology. However, there are many causes of inattention. A question for self-reflection: "Is the classroom instruction truly engaging or is the assignment worth doing?" This can be difficult for teachers to admit but sometimes inattention or the resulting over-activity can be the result of monotonous delivery of instruction or a task that truly is boring. Tedium classroom routines tend to turn off students' abilities to sustain attention and not just students with identified attention issues. A variety of instructional techniques and approaches can help to address this issue.

**Things to remember about interventions**

- There are no "magic bullets" in using strategies. Rather, it is important to look at the specific needs of the students and design interventions to meet those specific needs.

- Set the baseline data. Prior to intervening, collect data about the target behavior.

- Define success. Change in student behavior is incremental—for some students, more incremental than others. Identify the target that you are trying to achieve, and then plot the data to show how the student is getting closer.

- Monitor the level of involvement. How much is the student being responsible for the intervention? Are there ways that you can increase student participation in the strategy?

**Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D.**
Assistant Director, Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, School of Education, Loyola University Chicago. Mboyle3@luc.edu

You can also follow the author on Twitter (@mboyle3) or you can follow his blog (www.catholicschoolsmatter.net).