Providing for struggling learners 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 proportionate share plan (PSP) services can be daunting. However, serving students that may experience some marginalization within the school setting due to their unique learning needs is consistent with Catholic social teaching and, therefore, is part of our mission as Catholic educators.

During this school year, this series will describe some common learning disorders that may be seen in the classroom and outline strategies designed to address these specific learning needs. Although these strategies are designed to address specific learning needs, many teachers will find these strategies to be effective with a wide range of students. By using the strategies listed in this series, teachers will be able to expand their repertoire of instructional approaches and stretch the continuum of students that they can serve.

Focus on executive functioning disorders

The diagnosis of learning disabilities is a complex process and requires information from a variety of diagnostic sources. It is important to note that 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 express your concerns the student’s parent or guardian and access your school’s referral system.

For some, “executive functioning disorder” seems to be a new term that is garnering more attention in the popular press. Executive function is a set of higher-order mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action. People use it to perform activities such as planning, organizing, strategizing, paying attention to and remembering details and managing time and space.

According to the National Council of Learning Disabilities, a person with executive functioning disorder has difficulty in any one or more of these areas. This will evidence itself in the classroom in a variety of ways, such as planning and organizing projects, and engaging in tasks requiring simultaneous processing (multi-tasking). Executive functioning difficulties usually arise later in the student’s school career, especially when the curriculum becomes more complex and there is a need to juggle multiple assignment demands.

There is no generic look to executive functioning disorders. It can look very different student to student. In understanding this particular disorder, it is important to see where the difficulty arises. The four management areas to examine are: time, space, materials and work. By targeting these areas where executive functioning disorder can manifest itself, you increase the likelihood of success in intervening with these issues.

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. Here are some suggested strategies:

Managing time
• Break long assignments into chunks and assign time frames for completing each chunk. Do this in written form in order to provide a visual reminder. By creating a timeline, the student can focus more on the "here and now."
• Use visual calendars to keep track of long-term assignments, due dates, chores and activities. A number of free calendars are available on the Web.
• Use technology solutions such as electronic calendar systems that commonly are available on mobile devices.
• Write the due date on top of each assignment.

Managing space
• Organize workspace. For younger students, use masking tape to outline where supplies, textbooks, etc. belong in the desk.
• Minimize clutter in the student’s
desk as well as in the classroom. Classes that are cluttered in appearance can distract the student.

- Consider having separate work areas with complete sets of supplies for different activities.
- Schedule a weekly time to clean and organize the workspace. (This is certainly helpful for all students!)

**Managing materials**
- Use color-coded folders, coding by subject area (such as blue folder for English). Adopting a common process across the whole school can magnify effectiveness of this strategy for all students. This strategy can be taught and then reinforced throughout the years.
- Provide access to two sets of textbooks (one for school, the other for home) to minimize disruption in homework completion. As schools use more technologically based options for textbooks, this may be less of an issue over time.

**Managing work**
- Make a checklist for getting through assignments. For example, a student’s checklist could include such items as: Get out pencil and paper; put name on paper; put due date on paper; read directions. For younger students, these kinds of procedures can be listed on an index card and fixed to the desk (clear contact paper can be applied to help keep it neat). For older students, these checklists can be tucked in the assignment notebooks. If your school allows access to mobile phones, using the notes application available on most phones can be an inconspicuous way to use the checklist.
- Meet with a teacher or supervisor on a regular basis to review work and to troubleshoot problems. Engage the student in planning ahead, especially where the trouble spots may be!

**Pitfalls**

Some potential pitfalls to avoid:

- Taking over too much responsibility from the student by doing the planning and organizing for the student can lead to over-dependence on adults. The focus of these interventions is to impart strategies to the student to facilitate student success, not to disempower them.

Some staff members worry that by using these strategies we are “babying” the student and the student will become over-reliant on external structure. That can be true—if we don’t try to empower the student to “own” the approach, which, in turn, helps to internalize the strategy.

**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 student and to design interventions to meet those specific needs.

- Set your 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 your 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? ❖

**National Catholic Schools Week**

**January 29 – February 5, 2012**

New for 2011-12: The marketing kit is an NCEA member benefit.
To order additional marketing materials, visit:

[http://www.keylinesolutions.net](http://www.keylinesolutions.net)