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# Implementing a Flexible Approach to Teacher Assignments and Placement of Students with Special Needs: A Policy Advocacy Document

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IMPLEMENTING A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO TEACHER ASSIGNMENTS AND  
PLACEMENT OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:  
A POLICY ADVOCACY DOCUMENT

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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of the requirements of  
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National College of Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

In February 2013, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) informed school districts that they were considering changing the rules related to special education class size and the percentage of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) who can be enrolled in regular education classrooms. As of January 17, 2014, the rules related to special education staffing and the percentage of regular and special education students in classrooms are still pending approval by ISBE (Special Education Today, 2014). The purposes of this project are as follows: to advocate for the maintenance of the current rule while building in some flexibility, to ensure a least restrictive environment with the understanding that no fixed percentage is reasonable, to reflect on situations where severity of student needs demand that students are appropriately educated in an appropriate setting, to maintain current staffing practices, and to retain self-contained special education classes in Grey County School District. All students will continue to receive instruction and support services by highly qualified teachers and other staff. This researcher argues that the special education rules and guidelines in place as of February 2014 should be maintained in order to allow school districts to address the unique needs of their students as well as provide adequate resources and related professional development opportunities.

## PREFACE

The policy advocacy project has been a challenge for me as an administrator. I needed to look at what was best for students as well as teachers. I truly believe every child deserves to be educated by a highly qualified educator and that every child should be instructed in the appropriate educational placement. I expect special needs students, English language learners (ELL), and enrichment students to receive most of their instruction in a regular education setting.

When the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) began discussing changing the rules related to the percentage of special needs students who could be placed in the regular education classes, teachers and administrators statewide began to voice their concerns (Di Benedetto, 2013; Dickinson 2013; Harris, 2013). I found myself engaging in many more discussions with the Director of Special Service as to how our district makes decisions for special needs students. We did not always agree, but she kept me informed about special education law and changes in federal and state rules and regulations. We discussed the financial implications and what the federal and state government proposed for the future. She also helped explain the mission of our district as it pertains to her department.

I have also discussed my concerns with the ELL and Enrichment Program directors. We have deliberated about their expectations regarding the appropriate educational settings of these student groups. I will continue to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders about their fears and concerns as well as their solutions for any needed changes, including those prescribed by legislature. I now have a better

understanding about the proposed changes and will continue to advocate for what is best for all our students and teachers.

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## **SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

The success of the teachers begins with their educational training and ongoing professional support. The education training I received in the 1970s did not include any classes addressing how to meet the needs of special education students. What I have learned about teaching special needs students has been learned on the job. As a teacher, I taught junior high mathematics with approximately 150 regular education students daily. I had very few special education students in my classes. All students were expected to cover the curriculum and master state goals and objectives, which included the skills necessary to graduate to the next level. I also taught a six-week math class to all junior high students, which included special needs students, and my instruction was adjusted to meet their needs.

One of my administrative roles is serving as a member of a team to determine the appropriate placement for students with special needs. The team considers every aspect of the student, including but not limited to their educational, social-emotional and behavior needs. Every child and their parent deserve the correct placement to ensure the student's educational success. Students with special needs are placed either in a regular education class with minimal pullout or push-in services, in a self-contained special education class with a maximum of 13 students, or outside the district with specialized services as determined by the team. Self-contained special education students are mainstreamed for art, music, PE, and lunch. When possible, the team prefers to meet the needs of the students by serving them within our district due to the cost of services and transportation.



Every week I receive articles and publications apprising me of educational reforms and best practices throughout Illinois and the United States. As I peruse the articles, I decide if they pertain directly to me and/or my school district. In February 2013, the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) notified school district administrators of an action alert, imploring districts to contact the Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) to support State Superintendent Christopher A. Koch and ISBE in regard to proposed regulatory language related to Special Education; ISBE was considering changing the rules related to the percentage of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) who can be in the regular education classroom and eliminating special education class size restrictions (Koch, 2013). Prior to the proposed change in state rules and regulations, the percentage of special needs students who could be enrolled in a regular education classroom was capped at 30%: “The [state] rule’s original intention [of the 70/30 rule] was to ease the burden on teachers already managing general education students who have differing needs” (Di Benedetto, 2013).

Illinois’s proposed rules for special education supercede federal guidelines by eliminating special education class size restrictions. On February 11, 2013 State Superintendent Koch wrote in his weekly message that “the state should not dictate limits on class size,” which would effectively eliminate the 70/30 rule. He continued by stating the following:

Class size is an issue that is best addressed locally. Artificial limits are actually keeping students with disabilities out of general education classrooms. It is limiting these special education students’ access to the curriculum and instruction they deserve and need to be successful. (Koch, 2013, para. 7)

This change could be problematic for regular education teachers who may not be highly qualified to teach all students: Do they have the training to address the needs of

the special education students? Are the students in the most appropriate setting to meet their educational needs? Teachers' unions have also voiced their concerns about these proposed changes. Cynthia Riseman of the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) stated:

The IFT and our members believe in providing students with disabilities access to the most effective and appropriate education within the least restrictive environment, but we do not believe removing these two rules [the 70/30 rule and maximum number of students in self-contained classrooms] will accomplish that goal, but rather place teachers in a position where they can't provide all necessary services. (IFT, 2013, para. 5)

The vision of Grey County School District administrators and board of education is to be knowledgeable and proactive when new initiatives discussed at the state level may affect operations and service delivery at the local level.

In order to be prepared for the 2013-2014 school year, I approached my superintendent to discuss the possible change of the 70/30 state guideline, i.e., the percentage of students with IEPs who can be enrolled in a regular education classroom. Because students with IEPs may have one or more special education needs, e.g., a learning disability, speech impairment, occupational or physical impairment, behavior issues, or other health impairment, there are many implications for staffing, budget, service delivery, and support services. The superintendent requested that data be compiled regarding current services being offered, class sizes of regular education and self-contained special education classes, and staffing needs for both. The superintendent, the director of special services, and I kept current regarding discussions taking place at the state level to determine which changes would be needed at our local level for the 2013-2014 school year. We also discussed the educational needs of ELL students and enrichment students. All directors were asked to review and analyze their class sizes and staffing and professional development needs.

Under the 2010 Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) and Illinois Senate Bill 7, by 2016 teacher evaluations will include student growth measures that will affect teacher ratings. However, until 2016, ISBE has given school districts latitude in terms of how and when they include student growth measures into their teacher evaluation process.

### **Critical Issues**

Grey County School District provides a broad spectrum of services for ELL, students with special needs, and enrichment students; in most cases, the services required are available in every school either on a part-time or full-time basis. Additionally, services for speech/language therapy, psychological evaluation, social work and guidance counseling, occupational and physical therapy, and school nurse services are provided as deemed necessary.

If the state rule of 70/30 is changed, there would be no restriction on the percentage of students with IEPs who could be in a regular classroom, and the ratio of students to teachers in a special education classroom would be eliminated. It is possible that with more special needs students, it would be more difficult for the teacher to meet their instructional needs. Furthermore, the classroom teacher might not have sufficient time to devote to all students, depending on the number and needs of the special education students. For each special education student, the teacher would also be required to attend IEP meetings and collaborate with other special needs staff.

All teachers would require training to work effectively with all students. Some might also need to hone their skills related to working in a team-teaching setting and with special education staff in particular. The teacher education training I received was during

the 1970s did not include any special education or ELL classes. I was not taught about writing or implementing a student's IEP in the classroom. What I have learned about teaching special needs students has been on the job.

Parents would also need to be educated as to the academic and behavioral changes that their children might experience in the classroom. During my fifth year as an administrator, I encountered a young student with behavior issues in a regular education classroom. His behavior hindered the academic success of the other students and contributed to a high level of stress in the teacher. Some parents addressed the issue with me because of their apprehension for their own children's well-being; they demanded the removal of the student. My job was to educate the parents that all children have the right to a public education as well as ensure that classroom modifications would be in place for all of the students.

### **Recommended Policy and Envisioned Effect**

In the event that the rule is no longer a state requirement, I am recommending to our district's school board that we continue to apply the 70/30 rule as a guideline for placing students in regular education classes though implement it with flexibility, with the understanding that the current percentages (70/30) could increase or decrease in a given classroom depending on student need and level of teacher expertise.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was developed to encourage and enforce teacher accountability. As of 2014, every child is expected to meet or exceed expectations on the state-mandated achievement test given during the spring of each year.

Administrators in my school district believe that amending the concentration of special education students in a regular classroom will definitely hinder meeting this goal. Special

education students' needs are not always met in a regular education classroom due to large class sizes, the complexity of student needs, or teachers without the proper training and support to accommodate their students' needs. Special education students are also working at a slower pace than regular education students, and therefore teachers need to be highly skilled in differentiating instruction.

Teachers are expected to teach every child in their classroom and are required to help every child demonstrate at least one year's growth as per No Child Left Behind. Teachers will need support through professional development in differentiation, team-teaching, and strategies for meeting the demands of executing the Common Core Standards as measurement of student growth becomes a requirement of the teacher evaluation process.

## **SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF NEED**

### **Education Needs**

After re-examining and analyzing the educational needs of all students, the district needs to be more flexible in its approach to the placement of special education students in regular education and self-contained classes. Whether or not the state changes its current 70/30 rule, the district needs to make improvements in current staffing practices, class size, professional development, curriculum, and academic testing.

### **Staffing and Class Size**

The composition of a classroom, along with class size, has always been a topic of debate among educators (Di Benedetto, 2013; Dickinson 2013; Harris, 2013). The No Child Left Behind Act states that students with disabilities must be given the same high-quality curriculum and instruction as all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). As of spring 2014, the district has followed the 70/30 state rule when assigning special needs students into regular education classes.

Applying the current 70/30 model should be continued, while building in some flexibility due to the possibility that some students may not yet be identified as having special needs and requiring supplemental services. More—or less—staff support will be determined based on student needs. I recommend the district continue to offer self-contained special education classes in the cases where students need the majority of their services delivered in a smaller classroom setting.

At the February 2013 meeting with ISBE members, Illinois State Superintendent Koch stated: “Class size is an issue that is best addressed locally” (Koch, 2013, para. 7).

In order to give quality education, class sizes need to be manageable in order to address the needs of all students.

If the state 70/30 rule is eliminated, Superintendent Dr. Judith Hackett, representing the Illinois Association of School Administrators, argued:

The only alternatives districts have is to continue to increase general education class sizes, to utilize more direct instruction of special education students, or to eliminate other programs... These are difficult choices, but choices such as class size are best made at the local level by duly elected boards of education who are accountable to the students and families that they serve. (IASA, 2013, para. 11)

The educational and emotional needs of the special education student are outlined through a detailed IEP, which needs to be implemented legally with the appropriate documentation. If there are no guidelines about the number of special needs students in a classroom, it is possible that regular education teachers would be unable to adequately address the educational and emotional needs of both regular and special education students. There is a definite connection between academics and social-emotional learning (SEL). Many special education students have IEP goals related to SEL: the social worker and students work in a small group setting while the classroom teacher reinforces the skills, e.g., problem-solving strategies through game and role playing, which are then transferred to reading and math instruction (Elias, 2006).

Recommendations for regular education class sizes in Grey County School District are defined by the teachers' bargaining contract. Many teachers in Grey County School District are concerned that changes in class size would impact their ability to deliver quality instruction to all students. Their concerns are similar to those expressed by Equip for Equality, a national disability rights advocacy organization, whose staff attorney stated that "general education teachers won't be able to faithfully implement

students' Individualized Education Programs if they have too many students with disabilities in a class" (as cited in Harris, 2013, para. 15). If changes in class size were to be made, as a result of a more flexible approach, then our teachers' union would need to be represented.

### **Curriculum**

ISAT test data from 2008-2013 indicated that 39.1% of a group of special education met or exceeded the standards in reading in 2008. That group showed increases and decreases throughout the next 5 years and finished with only 6.1% meeting or exceeding the standards in 2013. Twenty-three special education students were tested in 2008; this number rose to 33 students in 2013. The achievement gap between district students with IEPs and students without IEPs has widened from 41% in 2008 to 46% in 2013. The question remains: what do we need to do differently to more effectively meet the needs of our students?

Every child is worthy of a quality education and deserves to be taught by highly qualified teachers. Students' success is determined by the instruction or curriculum delivered in the appropriate classroom setting (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

This district has recently adopted the Common Core Standards, which stress critical thinking; a deeper learning of reading, writing, and math; and foster the development of a comprehensive vocabulary. Both special needs students and ELL students are at a disadvantage when dealing with these Common Core Standards, but teachers hope that the standards will boost achievement levels for all students: "Forcing all students into the same, age-pegged standards deprives atypical students of optimized learning opportunities and attainable goals at their level of developmental readiness"



(Beals, 2014). Teachers will need professional development to understand these learning standards and how they might be applied all students to meet their educational needs.

### **Differentiation**

The goal of a differentiated classroom is maximum student growth and individual success: “Differentiated instruction is student centered and focuses on the learner to determine student readiness, interest, and learning profile” (Tomlinson et al., 2003). All students require differentiation to some extent; regular education teachers would need to be trained in differentiating instruction, something in which special education teachers have already received extensive preparation. “Differentiation is simply an instructional decision making through which a teacher creates varied learning options to address students’ diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences” (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 1).

### **Economic Needs**

Since 2007, school districts nationwide have been adversely affected by the financial crisis of the recession. Homes have gone into foreclosure, limiting revenue from property taxes, which has resulted in a major deficit in school district budgets.

Given the financial crisis, it becomes even more difficult to provide students with the supports and accommodations needed to accommodate the least restrictive environment. Illinois ranks 49<sup>th</sup> compared to other states in terms of its support of public education (Purinton & Mangan, 2010). The Illinois Federation of Teachers Director Cynthia Riseman stated, “Even though Illinois is in a financial crisis, our focus should be on providing the best possible services to all students and making decisions that are educationally sound” (IFT, 2013, para. 5). My intent is to advocate for more flexibility in

placing students, which would allow the district to provide the best possible services to all.

Mary Fergus, the ISBE's spokeswoman, stated that "if changes happen, they won't affect how much state and federal funding school districts receive for special education, but they [school districts] will be able to use their funding more flexibly" (as cited in Dickinson, 2013, p. 7).

Since 2004, Grey County School District has had a balanced budget. However, the recession has started to affect the district's finances for general education. In May 2014, while discussing the budget with the director of special services and the business manager, I was informed that though the number of special needs students in the district has increased in the past four years from 2.2% to 16.9%, as stated on the 2013 Illinois School Report Card, special education funding has decreased by 30%. As such, the budget has been reorganized to meet the financial obligations of educating the students. As of the 2013-2014 school year, however, there has been no discussion of cutting programs or staff. The self-contained special education classrooms in Grey County School District have a maximum of 13 students, with one special education teacher and one aide, which follows the recommendations of 2009 Illinois Administrative Code 226.730. The regular education classes usually range from 22 to 30 students with one teacher, with 22 as optimum amount of students versus 30, the maximum number of students as listed in the teachers' negotiated contract. According to the teachers' negotiated contract, once the maximum number of students is reached, an instructional aide should be hired to help balance the teacher-student ratio. Ensuring that all students receive appropriate support and accommodations is critical when we assign special needs

students to regular education classes. If there is a need for additional staff, whether or not the IEP process has formally begun, the district needs to be flexible in its staffing approach and provide the required assistance to the classroom teacher. This ensures continuity of instruction for all students in the respective classroom by employing flexibility in changing the percentage of special education students (or students with specific behavioral needs but not yet identified).

During the 2013-2014 school year, Grey County School District employed 15 special education teachers and 15 special education aides. I don't anticipate any significant changes to these numbers if student numbers and need remain consistent. If Grey County School District maintains the current 70/30 rule with the needed flexibility to assign staff to situations where the severity of students' needs can be met in the least restrictive environment, this will allow the district to have more control of its spending: the district is obligated to guarantee that students will have access to the educational services they require through the reallocation of scarce resources to areas of high priority or need, in order to ensure equity (Odden, 2012).

Odden and Picus (2008) understand that education budgets are declining and in order to improve student achievement, adequacy needs to be addressed. They agree that resources need to be reallocated while developing a plan of action including cutbacks as necessary. Funds need to be distributed to help with student learning and achievement through professional development, smaller class sizes, and reassigning of teachers.

### **Social Needs**

Grey County School District's mission is to provide students with a core of knowledge and basic skills as well as build character so that their lives will be productive

and purposeful in this culturally diverse and competitive society. The district's goals are to implement methods and strategies to improve students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

To meet students' social needs, district social workers help all students in the area of social-emotional growth, with an emphasis on conflict resolution and problem solving in everyday situations. Regular education students in particular need to be aware and sensitive to the fact that their fellow classmates may have different academic and social needs. Regular education students also need to know how to interact with their fellow classmates in core curriculum classes as well as music, art, PE, and lunch: "Social skill is not a 'service' but a *functional skill* necessary for daily living activities" (Wrightslaw, 2012, para. 2). The district follows CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making taught in physical education, art, music, and lunch. The district needs to revisit its strategic/long range plan and focus on how to better meet all students' SEL needs by integrating a variety of lessons in every classroom that address social-emotional learning. These lessons, while dealing with social and emotional skills, are essential for students' success in school and beyond.

### **Political Needs**

There is much research related to the importance of involving stakeholders in both the planning and reviewing of school improvement plans, as well as new initiatives related to school finances, curriculum and assessment, staffing allocation, and how best to meet student needs. Fullan (2002) includes teachers, school and district administration,

students, external consultants, parents, and community as critical stakeholders in the education system. He believes each one of these stakeholders warrants participation for change to actually occur. Fullan summarized his book by stating that “the ultimate goal of change was when people envision themselves as shareholders with a stake in the success of the system as a whole, with the pursuit of meaning as the elusive key” (p. 272).

According to this researcher, decision making in Grey County School District is top-down, and could be improved by more deliberate involvement of the stakeholders who might be affected by a particular decision or action. The district collects related data to develop goals and action statements and communicates them to various stakeholder groups; however, they are only superficially involved in making decisions. For example, parents of special needs students are members of the IEP team and play an active role in making decisions about their children. They also participate in classroom activities, attend informational meetings, and may gain access to support systems within and outside the district. However, they are not major players in the district’s decision-making process related to curriculum, staffing, and/or special programs.

A possible framework for making decisions and involving stakeholders in the process would be to apply the change leadership framework developed by Wagner et al. (2006), in which a problem or issue is analyzed as it is and how it could be. Studying the data related to conditions, culture, context, and competencies of the organization could be part of the problem solving and decision making process.

The regular education classrooms currently have between 20 and 30 students, which can include up to 30% students with special needs. A classroom of 20 first graders

may contain 6 students who have been identified as having some type of special need(s) ranging from occupational therapy or speech/language issues to a learning disability or behavioral disorder. Those 6 students have IEPs that need to be followed, though the other 14 students still have instructional needs that must be addressed. Students may need extra attention due to low scores, or even if they have not officially been identified as special needs and thus needing extra supplemental services. Both regular and special education teachers have shared their concerns about the possibility of the state eliminating the 70/30 student placement guideline; regular education teachers are concerned about how many students with disabilities they would be required to serve in their classrooms, and special education self-contained teachers are concerned about possible changes to their classroom composition, such as going beyond the current 13 students limit without receiving extra adult help, or having all their students moved into regular education classes for total inclusion.

The Chicago Teachers' Union has been vocal since ISBE announced its plans to change class size limits: "General ed teachers also had some protection because every student mainstreamed into the classroom counted as two regular students, so if the class size limit was 30 students and you had three special education students, the class size could only be 24 students" (Wilson, 2013, p. 1). Classrooms cannot overflow with students without meeting the needs of the special education students as determined by their IEPs. The Illinois Education Association's position is "ensuring that all students receive the appropriate support and accommodations" (IEA, 2013, para. 4).

Some parents have voiced their concerns at IEP meetings regarding the possibility of their children being mainstreamed into regular education classrooms; they prefer that

their child remain in a self-contained special education classroom with fewer students and with more adult supervision.

### **Moral and Ethical Needs**

District teachers are worried about curriculum changes and implementing Common Core Standards while trying to meet the educational needs of all of their students. Along with these concerns, the inclusion of student growth measures into the new teacher evaluation process has yet to be finalized in the district and throughout the state.

In our district, special education students have not made AYP on state mandated-tests for the last four years. The teachers are concerned that if the number of special education students in one's classroom increases, it will be even harder to achieve the necessary student growth outcomes to ensure a high rating. Teachers are working to better prepare their students but require more knowledge and professional development to achieve this goal.

As of September 2013, district administrators had not yet informed teachers and parents about the possibility of the ISBE rule changes. Our district expects ALL of our students to be successful as well as assuring the success of the teachers in providing the tools necessary for their classrooms. Extra services are provided for all students depending on their needs.

I am advocating that Grey County School District continues to follow the 70/30 rule but develop a plan of action with clear goals to examine current staffing and ensure flexibility of development for education strategies. I want to advocate that regular education classrooms are not filled with students with IEPs, eliminating the fewer student

self-contained special education classrooms. In regular education classrooms, students with disabilities are not assured of having highly qualified teachers with special education training educating them.



## **SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT**

### **Policy Goals and Objectives**

At this time, Grey County School District adheres to the 70/30 rule dictating that no more than 30% of students in a regular education classroom may have special needs. I am advocating that Grey County School District continue to limit the number of special education students and ELL students in a regular education class, or demonstrate flexibility to create a least restrictive environment that ensures all students are educated and are successful by understanding that a fixed percentage is unreasonable. The district could continue the 30% ruling as a guiding principle but with the understanding that there could be some flexibility in student placement and teacher assignment based on student needs. The district should maintain the current staffing of regular education classes, pullout and/or push-in services by specialists, ELL teachers, and learning disability resource teachers, while maintaining the self-contained special education classrooms. As building principal, I will support the teachers to ensure a manageable classroom setting with optimal instruction. Class size, highly qualified teachers, appropriate curriculum, and support services will be reviewed to ensure the continued success by teachers and students.

At the present time, the school board has approved the budgets for both regular education and special education. However, the district needs to assess the academic and behavioral needs of all students and reallocate funds as necessary, and whether that might entail additional funds for staffing.

The district needs to continue to involve internal and external stakeholders in the school improvement process, and in particular, decisions related to placement of special

needs students and teacher assignment based on student data. According to DeNisco (2013), “About 1 in 6 students are now diagnosed with a developmental disability, a 17 percent increase between 1997 and 2008. And prevalence of autism increased nearly 290 percent during that time” (p. 35). The implications of adding special needs students or students with autism to a regular education class could result in these students—as well as the rest of the class—not receiving the appropriate education with the necessary adult or educational supports. Teachers considered ‘Highly qualified’ a regular education classroom may not be considered ‘highly qualified’ to deal with these students.

The ultimate goal is to address the needs of students and provide appropriate support for staff. School districts need to have adequate resources in order to offer quality education for all students. Adequate resources should include, but not be limited to, the training of staff as well as ensuring financial responsibility for maintaining classrooms with appropriate curricula, technology, and staffing.

### **Needs, Values, and Preferences**

I am advocating for special needs students, regular education students, ELL students, and teachers through the continuation of our current practices in order to deliver the best education to all students in the most appropriate classroom setting. However, it is also important to have the flexibility to adjust teacher assignment and student placement based on student needs. I believe students with special needs and ELL students deserve to have the equivalent high quality experiences as every other student. Nevertheless, I know that some special needs students cannot handle large crowds, loud noises, or understand the complexity of certain educational lessons as presented in regular education classrooms.

Conversely, all students deserve to receive an education without the distractions of inappropriate behaviors that take away from their academic learning environment. As long as the state or federal government is making idealistic demands on the students' educational growth, these students merit the attention as justified by their teacher.

Teachers are expected to execute daily interactive lessons for the academic success of their students. As more special needs students are placed in regular education classrooms, more IEPs will need to be implemented by the teacher. This may detract from the instruction received by the regular education students.

As the state has executed Senate Bill 7, PERA and the Performance Evaluation Advisory Council (PEAC), teachers will be evaluated by student growth measures as an alternative to Annual Yearly Progress as part of NCLB. Unless teachers receive more professional training related to working with children with special needs or receive extra help in their classrooms, I anticipate an increase in teacher fatigue and a decrease in the retention of teachers.

## **SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT**

### **If the 70/30 Rule Were Eliminated**

There is pressure from Illinois State Superintendent Koch and the Illinois Principals Association, Illinois Association of School Boards, Illinois Association of School Administrators and Illinois Association of School Business Officials to eliminate the 70/30 rule (Harris, 2013). According to Di Benedetto (2013), a statement reporter for the *Northwest Herald*, “Special education students would have better access to the general education curriculum and heightened interaction with their peers and allow more flexibility with classroom scheduling” (para. 4).

On the other hand, if the 70/30 rule were no longer an ISBE requirement, special education classes with a maximum of 13 students could possibly be increased to include more students but without the appropriate classroom support.

### **Continuation of Current Policy**

In the event that the 70/30 rule is no longer a state requirement, I will recommend to the school board that we continue to apply the 70/30 rule as a guideline for placing students in regular education classes and implement it with flexibility, understanding that the current percentages (70/30) could increase or decrease in a given classroom depending on student need and level of teacher expertise. This researcher is confident that the district has the structure and capacity to implement a more flexible policy.

Grey County School District is successfully educating its students. Our district maintains an appropriate education for all students. Educators comprise a team to work together to determine the proper assignment of the students. Monthly, quarterly and

yearly data is collected and reviewed to ensure that curricula, programs, and student placement indicates suitable educational growth of students.

Staff development and professional training in co-teaching as well as addressing the adaptation and modification of curriculum would be required to meet the needs of students if inclusion was a determination. In addition to developing high-functioning teams, all teachers would also need to hone their skills in differentiating instruction. Special education teachers as well as regular education teachers would be required to receive additional academic training to update their certification.

Placement and instructional objectives of special needs students are written in their IEPs. Time spent with special education teachers or specialists and related services as well as goals are determined at the time of student placement. By law, the district's current IEP process follows a specified timeline. A team reviews all data presented by teachers, specialists and parents, and the IEP is written based on test data and recommendations of the team. The least restrictive environment is selected as the placement of the student in conjunction with the required amount of time, special accommodations, and services.

Special education teachers develop daily and long-term goals for their students, planning with their aide or co-teacher for the academic and behavioral success of their students. Their self-contained special education classrooms have a maximum of 13 students. Harris (2013) lists some possible ramifications of unlimited class sizes for special education:

- Students' lack of attention to task due to excessive distractions
- Less small group or one-on-one instruction

- Impaired ability for teachers to directly impact a student's particular academic needs
- Less time for teachers to prepare pertinent lessons
- More paperwork for special education teachers who are already inundated with state- and federally-mandated forms, plans, and data
- Downfall of student progress

These possible ramifications have been discussed among the teachers and administrators of our district. They, along with parents, expect the best education for all their children. We all collectively want what is best for each student and will need to re-evaluate the whole special education process, placement of students, staffing, and professional development in our district in order to address students' needs and ensure their successful education.

## **SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

If the Illinois State Board of Education proposes that the 70/30 rule will no longer guide placement of special needs students, Grey County School District will need to re-evaluate current practices and make improvements where necessary. One option is for the district to apply the 70/30 rule as a guideline for placing students in regular education classes and implement it with flexibility, understanding that the current percentages could increase or decrease in a given classroom depending on student need and level of teacher expertise. This option would require school board approval. The school board would need to anticipate budget needs, professional development for all teachers and staff, and also organize a task force to review baseline data and make recommendations for implementation.

If finances from the state continue to decline, another strategy would be to first implement the flexible staffing and student assignment ratios at the junior high level, where only one building is affected. Self-contained special education classes, which are now in different areas of the building, would be physically moved so that students were more integrated with their sixth, seventh, and eighth grade peers. Special education teachers and aides would co-teach with the regular education classes, and be available for more push-in services in regular education classes if there was a demonstrated need.

The district should develop a task force committee, including regular and special education teachers and administrators, to review baseline data of student achievement. The committee would decide on the types of ongoing assessment to be used for reviewing student achievement. The committee should review the data halfway through the school year and make recommendations for improved implementation at that time. End-of-year

data would be used to evaluate curriculum choices as well as ensure that staffing and student placement continue to be the most appropriate.

At this time, I do not anticipate the need for additional resources, specifically a need for additional special education staff. However, I do see the need for professional development to reflect the change in policy.

Professional development will be required in order to support teachers. Academic requirements of coursework for regular education teachers working with special needs students is often limited as compared to the training received by certified special education teachers. For the most part, special education teachers receive the same training as regular education teachers but have more coursework and training in characteristics of learners, and often pursue specialized endorsements in learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, or other disability.

However, there would be a need for additional resources to support this professional development. In order for teachers to benefit from the professional development offered by the district, a needs assessment will be developed by the task force and administered to all teachers and support staff. Professional development options would be differentiated to meet teacher needs and would include: observing fellow teachers throughout the district, offering a variety of in-service programs on differentiating instruction, providing coaching training to those interested in serving as a mentor to other teachers, etc.

I also endorse focusing our professional development resources on strengthening our grade level and subject area teams. Drago-Severson (2009) advocates for the use of building teams “to harness energy and capitalize on learning...as an effective approach to



professional development” (p. 91). She believes that building strong teams can help to “improve instruction and school-wide decision making, help adjust to change, help manage adaptive challenges, build professional learning communities, develop and enhance skills for reflection and dialogue, and build collegial relationships” (p. 103).

## **SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN**

If the district were to apply the 70/30 rule as a guideline for placing students with special needs in regular education classes and implement it with flexibility, the current percentages could increase or decrease in a given classroom depending on student need and level of teacher expertise. Concurrently, there would be a need to re-assess our current implementation of special education assignments, looking deeply at our staffing procedures, student progress, curriculum, professional development, level of team collaboration, and the needed professional growth opportunities.

To assess how well the new procedures are working, administrators, along with the task force committee, will bi-annually review student achievement data. The task force will administer surveys to teachers, their students, and parents. Areas of discussion among internal stakeholders include placement of students, classroom teaching with support, student interactions, and communication among students, teachers and parents. Procedures would also need to be developed for administrators and teachers to monitor individual IEPs. Administration also needs the opportunity to review current practices and ensure that best practices are being followed.

Internal and external stakeholders would be informed about the decision the district has taken regarding this policy and assured that student needs will be met and appropriate educational opportunities will be provided to all students. The Department of Special Services and the administrative staff would also communicate assessment results to internal and external stakeholders.

## **SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT**

As of January 17, 2014, the rules related to special education staffing as well as the percentage of regular and special education students in classrooms are still pending approval by ISBE (Di Benedetto, 2014). In its attempt to be prepared for new initiatives from the state and federal government, the Grey County School District administration and special services department have begun studying the implications of the potential elimination of the 70/30 rule and how to proceed. The director of special services, superintendent, and administrators are now in the process of reviewing the needs of the special education students, along with related staffing needs for co-teaching models and for push-in or pullout services.

As an administrator, I am studying what is best for my teachers, students, and parents. The teachers and administrators continue to learn about Common Core Standards, how to best meet the educational and emotional needs of their students, and new teacher evaluation procedures. By 2016, 30% of the teacher evaluation rating will be based on student growth.

As Grey County School District looks to the future, communication between internal and external stakeholders, including school board members, needs to be strengthened. The district will continue to review current practices and ensure that best practices are being followed. Teachers and administrators will review feedback from stakeholders in order to improve the high quality education services provided.

I am concerned that if the 70/30 rule is eliminated, good teachers will leave the profession if they are not given the provisions to meet the needs of their students, such as

professional development, smaller class sizes, and extra teacher/aide support in the classroom.

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