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How to Design A School

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When potential exceeds performance... as it does in bright children with learning disabilities such as those at Community School...what is the best formula for treatment? Back in 1968, in the founding days of Community School we thought we knew. We all felt that our school had a mission which was to depart most dramatically from the pattern of treatment in place at that time. We were not content to be just another special education facility. We knew that our students, though they may have had to struggle to learn some very basic school skills, were intellectually active and needed, in addition to remediation, stimulating, age appropriate instruction in the conventional school curriculum.

Just a little background to set the scene may be needed now, because dramatic changes have taken place in the treatment of bright children with learning disabilities. When

Community School began back then teaching to the intellect was a groundbreaking idea. Our unique approach: a therapeutic environment, attention to the intellect, exposure to a wide range of stimulating activities. The formula now so common and familiar, was indeed revolutionary. We knew what we had to do and we did it.

A broad interdisciplinary curriculum had to be established. It was not enough to develop an individualized instructional plan to remediate weaknesses. Nor was it enough to present content without regard to the inevitable skill delays. A new method had to be found to implement the combined goals of content exposure and remediation. Our philosophy then was to keep the remediation and the general education in balance.

Let's start with the therapeutic component first. Bright children who aren't making it get discouraged. We recognized the need to

ENCOURAGE our students as a need basic to success. Our students also had to be enlisted in the solution. These children must be helped to recognize that they could succeed given the proper procedures and they themselves must accept responsibility for learning. Thus, it was essential that they buy into the plan and help make the decisions. They must understand the goals and accept them. Explanations were given. Recording methods were developed with the children and results were shared. Even the most minimal progress, we felt, could be used to encourage the children and we were certain that success would feed on itself.

Structure and flexibility were the coin of the realm. They would make the program work. A flexible grade level system would allow each student to benefit from a tailored instructional program. A one:three (1:3) teacher-student ratio

was established and has held ever since. Tutors were on hand to provide one-on-one instruction in basic reading skills and in language development. Instructors who taught social sciences, natural science, math, art, home economics and physical education all had to have a background in the special needs of the learning disabled. Many wonderful courses were developed over the years as opportunities came along. There was a wood shop and a communications workshop at one time. The latter became quite famous as a matter of fact, and both programs were highly popular with students. Changes of course have occurred as time passed. Programs were dropped and others picked up, but the underlying assumptions remained; that bright children with learning disabilities, those whose potential exceeds their performance, need to learn just as much and in ways just as exciting as their peers.

The Professional Monograph Series
The Community School of Bergen County

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