

Chapter 4

Creating a Vision for Special Education Programs

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on creating a vision statement that supports a service delivery model within the field of special education. The chapter discusses the importance of shaping the vision and the impact it may have on the student, school, families, and society as a whole. Components as well as examples of currently used vision statements are included in this chapter, along with a discussion about incorporating a school's vision statement into its professional development program. The chapter concludes with a reflection on ensuring that the needs of students are met while at the same time being cognizant of the fact that standards-based instruction dominates the Individualized Education Plan and service delivery models help shape the vision for all students as more and more students with special needs are being placed into a full-inclusion type of educational environment.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of special education parallels the purpose of elementary and secondary education as a whole: to prepare children to lead productive lives as citizens and members of the community. – Maryland State Department of Education (2001)

Let's assume that you and a group of friends have decided to take a long weekend vacation to an agreed-upon destination. For weeks, you have been emailing, texting, and calling one another to organize your travel plans, hotel arrangements, and many other details that are involved with planning a trip. Based on this interaction, it can

be reasonably assumed that all participants have the same vision for the trip. However, what happens is that once you arrive at your destination, everyone goes in a variety of directions and no one has a common goal.

According to Gabriel and Farmer (2009), this scenario could have been avoided if the following questions would have been asked prior to the start of the excursion:

- What is the reason for the journey?
- What are the group goals for the weekend?
- Has the group collectively discussed these goals?

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This same scenario can be applied to any special education program that is thinking about developing a vision statement for its program. Each stakeholder must be involved in deciding the common goals for the group and then actively pursuing ways to accomplish them.

Before you know where you are going, you must understand where you have been. Special education may not be as old a practice as some programs in the field of education, but there is some history behind it. Special education leaders and their team, also known as stakeholders for the purposes of this chapter, must be aware of this history so that they can shape the vision of the special education program. Practices that were in place long ago are not as effective for present-day special needs students, and thus mandates have changed. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and No Child Left Behind Act (2002) are aligned, and students with special needs are required to attain adequate yearly progress just like their nondisabled peers. Not only does this cause special education leaders to reshape the vision of the program but also to redesign the practices. The special education director is charged with empowering the stakeholders to carry out the vision, structure, and culture of the program based on the vision.

Kauffman (1999) characterized current special education practices as being:

ignorant of history; apologetic for existing; preoccupied with image; lost in space; unrealistic in expectations; unprepared to focus on teaching and learning; unaware of sociopolitical drift; mesmerized by postmodernist and deconstructionist inanities; an easy target for scam artists; and immobilized by anticipation of systematic transformation. (p. 244)

While preparing to create a vision for special education programs in today's schools, stakeholders must understand changes that are impacting special education today, along with the theory of

change. Attempts have been made to develop vision theories, but empirical support for them is lacking. Those changes that impact special education are, according to Kauffman (1999), recognized in:

the boundaries of special education; shifts in service delivery patterns and staffing patterns for special educators and in special education's relationships to general education; changes in state standards and patterns of funding for special education and in personnel preparation; additional changes in state and federal legislation and regulation; and possible loss of special education's focus on the scientific understanding of instruction. (p. 245)

Paying attention to these attributes, theories, and changes within the special education framework can lead the visionary in the proper direction during the planning phase.

This chapter will:

- Summarize the visioning process.
- Compare and contrast the connection between special education history and the creation of special education programs in today's education system.
- Justify the importance of reshaping the vision of special education for society.
- Examine how the vision of special education programs can impact the student, school, family, and society.
- Synthesize the components needed to develop an effective vision for special education programs.

VISION DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS

Regardless of one's area of employment, all organizations have a vision, as it is the driving force behind what makes them function. According to Kantabutra and Avery (2010), there is not one

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