

Mainstreaming is becoming one of the most visible and controversial issues in educational discussion today.

An operational approach to mainstreaming —making it work

by Gary A. Livingston



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With the signing into law of PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, a new era has emerged in public education. Associated with this apparent educational metamorphosis is a renewed interest in providing handicapped children a myriad of experiences within the more normal constructs of our educational system. This effort of course, addresses very specifically the intent of the law in mandating appropriate educational opportunities, least restrictive educational alternatives and individualized educational programs for all handicapped children.

As implied, mainstreaming is becoming one of the most visible and controversial issues in educational discussion today. School districts across the country are inevitably suffering from growing and modification pains experienced in their efforts to meet these newly mandated requirements.

In reviewing current literature, very little has been written about the actual development and implementation of an appropriate mainstreaming model. Generally, the literature has been descriptive of theoretical frameworks and has addressed administrative implications regarding rights and responsibilities as major issues, rather than practical implementation.

With this in mind, the critical issue becomes one of establishing a viable process for reintegrating handicapped children into regular educational programs. Due to the complexity and practical implications involved in this process, a systemic model for mainstreaming is necessary. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to propose a practical guide describing a procedural system for safeguarding the re-entry of handicapped children into more normal educational experiences.

The operational paradigm and descriptive narrative presented in this paper is an effort to more concretely formulate a procedural system for the mainstreaming

process. More importantly, it attempts to describe and establish safeguards, emphasizing the essential function of inter-program communication and cooperation (special and regular ed.), to ensure more appropriate educational programs for handicapped students.

As depicted in figure 1., the responsibility for implementing an appropriate educational plan for a handicapped child is that of the special education teacher. Therefore, any initial mainstreaming attempt becomes the responsibility of that special education teacher. In addition, the special class teacher is responsible for augmenting a cooperative communication arrangement with regular educational programs, and especially with those regular curricular experiences determined appropriate for that special student.

However, prior to any actual mainstreaming endeavor, three pre-implementation issues need to be addressed. Initially, the special teacher is responsible for assessing the regular classroom to determine the student skill expectations and behavioral standards necessary for an exceptional child to successfully participate in this regular class experience. Secondly, the special teacher is responsible for developing an open four-way communication process. This should involve the special teacher, regular class teacher, building principal and the parents, in an effort to identify appropriate procedural arrangements and safeguards for reintegrating the special student into the proposed regular classroom experience. Thirdly, appropriate assessment of the special student's strengths and weaknesses must be accomplished. With this information compiled, direct application of educational intervention strategies can be implemented within the special classroom. Specifically, these efforts will attempt to strengthen those learning skills identified as deficient, and to improve to a level commensurate with those required for successful reintegration into the proposed regular class.

Having completed the three preliminary responsibilities, communication must occur between the regular teacher, special education teacher, and building principal to approve and implement the proposed mainstreaming experience.

As the mainstreaming endeavor is implemented, it then becomes the responsibility of the special teacher to make a commitment to assist and support the regular classroom program. Often, student skill deficiencies do not present themselves in the isolated special class situation, but may be identified within the context of the regular class. In addition, the building principal, as the administrator of the total school program, would be responsible for monitoring the mainstreaming effort, and for assuring the continuity and appropriateness of this regular class experience in meeting the handicapped student's educational needs.

Ongoing evaluation of the regular class placement is essential. If discrepancies do arise, initial action should be taken cooperatively between the special and regular class teachers to see if, in fact, within the regular class specific alterations, modifications or support strategies could be implemented to maintain the special student in the regular program. If however, these efforts are not successful, then by mutual consent and cooperation the exceptional child could be returned to the special class.

If for some reason, this return process does break down, the building administrator should be consulted. As the building administrator, it would then be his responsibility to make a decision, based on information provided at a building level staffing, as to whether the mainstreaming effort would continue, would be altered, or would be terminated. The building principal may wish to involve assistance from special service staff, on a consultative basis, to augment this decision process.

In summary, any successful mainstreaming attempt must be a cooperative effort involving high level communications between the special teacher, the regular teacher, building administrator and the parents. This four-way communication cycle should provide the vehicle for providing appropriate experiences for special children in the regular class. However, no special student should remain in a regular class, when he cannot materially benefit from such a program. A determination has to be made, whether in fact, the regular class or the special class, for this particular student, is a more restrictive educational environment.

FIGURE 1.
 MAINSTREAMING FLOW CHART
 A PROCEDURAL ARRANGEMENT

