In Delaware, the approach to special education is changing as the state embraces a model of education that creates supportive school climates to highlight the abilities—and adequately meet the needs—of every student. These systems of support deliver tailored academic and behavioral interventions that enable students to remain and thrive in the general education classroom and access the regular academic content.

In the United States, over 6.6 million children between the ages of 3 and 21 have an identified disability and receive special education services through their schools. In Delaware alone, approximately 15,000 children (or 14 percent of enrolled students) qualified for special education services during the 2007-2008 school year. Traditionally, these students who have disabilities are placed in separate classrooms and may not receive instruction in the general education classroom. This practice can limit student growth, both intellectually and socially. Furthermore, students without disabilities may learn academic or behavioral challenges but fail to receive appropriate interventions or support.

Evidence-based Programs for Academics
State-level initiatives are a response, in part, to federal actions. As educational topics gain spotlight recognition, the federal government has put forth new and comprehensive regulations. School districts are thus challenged to implement these regulations through innovative means that balance resources with program viability and student outcome. For instance, the No Child Left Behind Act states that all students, regardless of disability, must be included in an academic assessment program. In Delaware, the Delaware Alternative Portfolio Assessment (DAPA) measures the academic progress of students with significant cognitive disabilities and is a corollary of the traditional Delaware Student Testing Program (see article on page 2).

Legislative mandates require schools to implement research-based programs and teaching practices. One educational model that is required is Response to Intervention (RTI). According to the Delaware Department of Education (DDEOE) website, RTI is "the practice of providing high-quality instruction and intervention matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about change in instruction or goals, and applying child-response data to make important educational decisions."

RTI in Delaware operates through a three-tiered model. School-wide screening assessments in reading and math are given three times a year to determine if any students are experiencing academic difficulty. Increasing levels of interventions and supports are provided to students who are struggling, and their progress is documented. The majority of students receive these targeted, research-based interventions in the general education classroom. One potential outcome, if the interventions at all three tiers have proved ineffective, is that a student may be identified with a specific learning disability and receive special education services.

Creating Behavioral Supports
Like RTI, Positive Behavior Support (PBS) programs operate according to a tiered model of intervention that uses student data to guide implementation (see article on page 3). Yet while RTI targets academic progress, PBS aims to develop positive learning environments and prevent behavior problems. In conjunction with DDEOE, the Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS) leads the Positive Behavior Support Project in the state. Currently, over 55 percent of the public schools in Delaware use a PBS approach.

The first level of intervention entails school-wide behavior support that addresses the behavior of all students in the school. The second and third levels provide interventions for students who experience more frequent or serious behavioral issues. In each PBS school, a team of teachers, support staff, and administrators join to lead PBS activities. However, student involvement is also encouraged, and many schools have worked to include their student body in unique ways (see article on page 4).

Building Inclusive Schools
Educational models such as RTI and PBS operate in schools that serve all students. In Delaware, CDS and the state also collaborate to foster the inclusion of students with learning differences and identified disabilities through the Inclusive Schools Initiative (ISI). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment; this means they should remain, whenever possible, in the same setting as students without disabilities.

ISI embraces this notion of the least restrictive environment. It uses a team-based model to guide implementation and provides materials and professional development that districts and schools use to make inclusion a reality (see article on page 3).
According to federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act, all public school students in second through eleventh grade must be included in an academic assessment program. Delaware, which measures student progress with the Delaware State Testing Program (DSTP), created an ancillary program called the Delaware Alternative Portfolio Assessment (DAPA) to assess nearly 1,100 students with significant cognitive disabilities who cannot (even with accommodations) meaningfully participate in the DSTP. These exceptional students are measured against the same, though often modified, general education standards as their peers.

DAPA is headquartered at the Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS), which works in partnership with the Delaware Department of Education and other education and family stakeholders. Created 10 years ago by former CDS Director Dr. Donald L. Peters, DAPA continues to evolve by adapting its procedures to more adequately meet federal standards. It also serves as a snapshot of each student's improvement of their individualized education program (IEP). With this information, teachers create a portfolio that melds standards-based and IEP objectives to form cohesive instructional activities for their students. Through this process, DAPA aims to promote best practice by aiding teachers in applying research-supported academic guidelines to the classroom. For instance, IEP objectives for students with significant cognitive disabilities often focus on functional life skills in lieu of academic content. Yet Megan Conway, a teacher at John G. Leach School, says, "DAPA has helped us think about the curriculum in different ways. It certainly has helped us to become more academic, which benefits the students." Fellow teachers Ms. Conway and Ms. Jubb extract main ideas from the general education curriculum and state standards to identify the skills that these guidelines promote; teachers then select objectives from a student’s individualized education program (IEP). With this information, teachers create a portfolio that melds standards-based skills and IEP objectives to form cohesive instructional activities for their students. Through this process, DAPA aims to promote best practice by aiding teachers in applying research-supported academic guidelines to the classroom.

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"DAPA has provided us with a great deal of feedback, "notes Ms. Hoshaj. "These sessions definitely help teachers catch and remediate mistakes before the portfolios are scored in the spring."

For more information about DAPA, please contact Alison Chandler, Project Coordinator, at (302) 831-1052 or alisonc@udel.edu.

**Notes:**

- "Because DAPA makes a big push for interaction, we have to work more stringently to uncover such opportunities. However, students who are higher functioning appear more motivated to do classroom work with someone on their own age. It is also a good experience for their typical peers who build awareness of disability."

- To measure student progress across these dimensions, teachers record data continually throughout the DAPA process. Zoj Hoshaj, a special education teacher for the Meadowood Program in the Red Clay Consolidated School District, is one of nine DAPA district consultants. "I think that DAPA is great because teachers are keeping data and documenting student achievement," Ms. Hoshaj explains. "Therefore, the work of these students counts just like the progress of all the other students in the school district."

- Portfolios are developed by the special education teachers who work with students with significant cognitive disabilities. First, teachers examine the general education curriculum and state standards to identify the skills these guidelines promote; teachers then select objectives from a student’s individualized education program (IEP). With this information, teachers create a portfolio that melds standards-based skills and IEP objectives to form cohesive instructional activities for their students. Through this process, DAPA aims to promote best practice by aiding teachers in applying research-supported academic guidelines to the classroom. For instance, IEP objectives for students with significant cognitive disabilities often focus on functional life skills in lieu of academic content. Yet Megan Conway, a teacher at John G. Leach School, says, "DAPA has helped us think about the curriculum in different ways. It certainly has helped us to become more academic, which benefits the students."

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- Fellow teachers Ms. Conway and Ms. Jubb discuss ways in which some civilizations used urns to tell stories; students then construct their own urns. During a unit on the Statue of Liberty, the teachers read a book about the monument to their students and ask general comprehension questions to facilitate discussion. Again, students complete art projects which incorporate the Statue of Liberty theme.

- Assistants from the State Testing Program (DSTP), these exceptional students are measured against the same, though often modified, general education standards as their peers.

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**Measuring Student Progress**

The academic assessment is documented in a portfolio that serves as a snapshot of each student's educational program. The portfolios monitor the same academic content areas as the DSTP (i.e., English, math, science, and social studies). Each academic content area contains four dimensions: activity measures how students interact with general education curriculum, self-determination gauges how students self-manage tasks and receive feedback, settings weights how students generalize skills to various settings, and interactions considers how students interact with peers or coworkers. Measurement across these four dimensions helps create a holistic picture of a student's achievement.

For instance, according to the settings dimension, students must learn to generalize academic skills from the classroom to other environments, such as a job training or a cooperative learning center. Furthermore, the interactions dimension promotes interaction with a broader range of peers than some students in self-contained schools typically encounter. Lisa Jubb, a teacher at the John G. Leach School in the Colonial School District, instru...
Inclusive education for all students at Concord High School has been promoted by Principal Mark Holdick and the school’s special education team since Principal Holdick came to the school three years ago. While many consider inclusion best practice, its emphasis also reflects “The Concord Way,” the school’s guiding philosophy to create a positive environment that benefits individual students and the school as a whole.

According to Debby Boyer, the project leader for school-age programs at the Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS) at the University of Delaware, organizations promoting inclusion work toward changing systems that promote inclusive schools. Two years ago, CDS provided professional development training for the leadership team at Concord and for a coach from the Brandwine School District. Through the collaborative work of these individuals, Concord has adopted a model of inclusion that has changed their school climate and set a standard for other secondary schools.

“The Concord Way”

At Concord, approximately 120 students with disabilities qualify for an individualized education program (IEP), which provides supports to help them achieve their educational goals. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that students must be served in the least restrictive environment needed to meet their needs. In accordance with the provisions, the general education classroom in Concord has been described as an inclusion setting to meet student needs and advance each student’s goals. Special education staff use a student-based, consultative-collaborative model that provides resources to both the teachers and special education students. These staff are assigned, as needed, to individual students instead of a specific classroom.

According to Mark Mayer, Assistant to the Principal, this model allows special education teachers the freedom to support students in a more efficient and effective manner. Special education teacher Susan Krikelis further explains, “Special education teachers maintain close contact with classroom teachers to more directly understand the curriculums and student needs, while classroom teachers design differentiated instruction and modify material appropriately.”

Although co-teaching—a model of inclusive education that pairs a special education teacher with a general education teacher in the classroom—has been used at Concord, Ms. Krikelis’s current role as a facilitator or coach, not a teacher. Ms. Krikelis presents information in a way that a student with a disability can access it. For instance, she might sit and work with a student one on one, modify a test or read test questions to a student, provide a textbook at a lower reading level, or encourage a student to use an adaptive device. In addition, Ms. Krikelis typically spends two periods a day in the study hall where she is available to help students as needed.

Seven years ago, Concord had a separate hallway for special education classrooms. Now all students who are in special education and the diploma track are part of general education classrooms. A small number of students with more significant disabilities remains in a community-based program, but most still attend some general education classes. Mr. Mayer says that inclusion has helped reduce discipline problems and increased school morale. Additionally, students are achieving higher scores on the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP) and other tests while general education teachers are more confident regarding the specific learning needs of special education students.

The Benefits of Inclusion

Concord’s special education team shared its model of inclusion with staff at St. Georges Technical High School, which opened its doors in November 2006 as an inclusive school. Students and teachers at New Castle County Vocational Technical School District’s newest school benefit from the expertise of Dr. Amy Fleet, Professional Development School Inclusion Consultant at the School of Education at University of Delaware’s Center for Secondary Teacher Education, who provides professional development regarding inclusion of students with disabilities. Dr. Laura Eisenman, Associate Professor in the School of Education at University of Delaware and CDS staff member, is working with Dr. Fleet to study the experiences of students and teachers at St. Georges. Dr. Eisenman’s research interest is on the interplay of education and disability, such as in the ways in which schools can foster self-determination in students with disabilities. Dr. Fleet has observed that the inclusion program at St. Georges is helping special education students monitor their own academic progress, seek help when needed, and become self-advocates. Like their peers at Concord, St. Georges’ students are developing these skills within the least restrictive environment of the general education classroom. Special education teachers serve as learning support coaches for teachers and students and provide help to students outside the classroom.

H.A.W.K.S. Succeed

Students Soar at Harlan Elementary with H.A.W.K.S. Succeed

David W. Harlan Elementary School in the Brandywine School District has a diverse population of nearly 600 students in grades four through six. Despite the large enrollment, Harlan has taken proactive, forward-thinking steps to ensure that each of its students receives adequate levels of academic and behavioral support. Two state initiatives exist in Delaware to foster the success of students. Inclusion Support Team (IST) and Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Project. Both projects work with teams in the schools to develop systems for supporting student learning. Many schools view these two as separate processes; traditionally, IST is designed to foster the academic success of students, while PBS focuses on students’ behavior. Yet Stacey Falls, Harlan’s school psychologist, notes, “Academics and behavior are not mutually exclusive. Often, many students have co-occur problems in the two areas.”

With this in mind, Harlan made every effort to combine its IST and PBS processes. “We looked at the programs we had in the school and how we could align them and our resources—particularly our human resources—more effectively,” says Julie Cassel-Martain, International Baccalaureate Coordinator, who has spearheaded the initiative with Ms. Falls. Ms. Cassel-Martain continues, “Under our original model, we found that it was a constant challenge for two separate teams to coordinate academic and behavioral interventions for one student. We knew we needed a more cohesive approach.” Therefore, at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year, Harlan unveiled its H.A.W.K.S. Succeed program, which stands for “Helping All World-Class Kids and Staff Succeed.”

Data Collection

H.A.W.K.S. Succeed is part of a multi-tiered approach with progressively intensified supports at each level. At the first level, teachers identify academic and behavioral strategies are in place for all students through classroom instruction and school-wide PBS. H.A.W.K.S. Succeed comprises the second, or targeted, level of the process. When a teacher requests assistance from the H.A.W.K.S. Succeed team, a case manager is assigned to work with the teacher to pinpoint the problem—whether academic, behavioral, or both—tutor interventions, and collect data. Using this data, the teacher and case manager will continue the problem-solving process until goals are achieved. For students with significant behavioral or academic concerns, an intensive team of support staff and administrators apply more extensive measures.

“Integration was not without its challenges,” says Ms. Cassel-Martain. “But we worked to revise the process at various stages of its implementation.” Moreover, the results have proved well worth the effort and time. In two years, the program has moved Harlan ahead of the educational curve.

In essence, Harlan created its own Response to Intervention (RTI) process through its blending of IST and PBS. With the Delaware Department of Education’s official introduction of RTI, Harlan stands poised to meet the new state requirements. “Data collection is a critical component of RTI and which provides help to students outside the classroom.”
Students “Reel In” Positive Behavior at Redding Middle School

Coming into the FISHES program, I was ready to broaden my horizons, and that’s exactly what being a new FISH has brought me. As a “newbie,” I am able to present to classes and gain better speaking skills. Also, not only am I teaching how to make our school better, I’m learning about it, too. I get to help with advertising activities as well, which is always fun and exciting. The team grows throughout the year and I can’t wait to be a part of them all.1

Jazmine Young and Ryker Calaquian both note that becoming a FISH helped them achieve personal growth. The two members speak of their prior shyness and how working on various public-speaking activities helped them gain confidence and ease in front of their peers. Ryker, who is in the seventh grade, explains, “I knew that there were presentations and that you had to get up in class, present, and actually be good. I used to be shy and quiet in sixth grade, so I became involved in presentations so I could learn to talk in front of a class.”

“This used to be the quietest kid ever!” jokes another FISH, highlighting Ryker’s growth.

Joining to Develop PBS Activities

At one of the FISHES monthly team meetings, Jessica Lawver, the teacher who supervises the PBS activities, tells the group, “We are FISHES and we don’t gossip. As a FISH, you are accepting of everyone.” This attitude fosters a collaborative team environment as all members of the FISHES work together to create a panoply of projects and activities, including fundraisers, classroom presentations, advertising and public relations, and a PBS cart (students “spend” credits earned for exemplary behavior to “buy” items from the cart). The projects—PowerPoint presentations, videos, posters, game shows, and more—center on various themes, such as how to behave with a substitute teacher. The participating students not only learn valuable skills, they also serve as powerful role models for other students.

Chris Clendening, a veteran FISH in his third year, details a project with which he has been involved:

Knights of the Round Wheel, a game show, is introduced to the beginning of the school year. This is used to inform and remind the student body about our school’s “Code of the Knights,” which are our rules of good conduct: be respectful, be responsible, be a good citizen, be safe, and be there, ready. There are many different games and questions to go through depending on what the spin of the wheel is. Throughout the game show, the students’ knowledge of the “Code of the Knights” and teamwork skills are tested.

The School Environment

While the FISHES projects are fun and lighthearted, they also send serious messages to achieve important goals of PBS, such as creating a safer, more socially responsible school environment. Rebecca Gillie, now in seventh grade, has been a FISH since sixth grade. Her sister, Shannon Gillie, is now in high school but was a FISH throughout her middle-school years. Together, they explain how they have strived to improve the school environment by combating bullying, a main focus of the FISHES team:

Over the last four years, the Redding Middle School anti-bullying program has evolved into a school-wide combat against bullying. When it first began, the program depended mainly on teachers to enforce the policies. Then, students became involved in the program and started talking to their peers and doing presentations. There has been more effort on the students’ behalf to stop bullying and promote friendliness in school since this occurred. Now the students host a game show at the beginning of the year and a refresher course halfway through the year, as well as in-class presentations that enforce all aspects of anti-bullying throughout the year.

This year, the motto of the FISHES is “power in numbers,” which urges students not to be bystanders to negative incidents in the school. Eighth grader Fran Ford supports this motto: “I wanted to become a FISH because I was tired of seeing people arguing and fighting or bullying others for no apparent reason. If there is something I can do about it, I am going to try to stop it.”

1 A special thanks to the four students who contributed written pieces to this article: Stephanie Stillwell, Chris Clendening, and Rebecca and Shannon Gillie.