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Growth and Success in Special Education

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Abstract

The agency I interned at was a charter school in Monterey Bay. They provide education for all students including students with special educational needs. I address the problem of structure and resources within the Special Education department. They struggled with high staff turn arounds, a loose tracking system, misused resources and a lack of communication within the special education staff, teachers and administrators. In order to solve all those challenges they have now assigned jobs and duties to get work done more efficiently and have put systems and protocols in place. My capstone project was to report on the growth and success of the ever changing special education department. With the help of my mentor, we created a system that has facilitated how they track student progress. We found that with a set system that could be used throughout the program to report information kept everyone up to date. It also opened a gateway to better communication and collaboration. Recommendations for them would be to take advantage of intern opportunities because they could bring a lot of great potential to the school and different programs within.

Keywords: Special education program, systems, communication, growth and services

Agency & Communities Served

The public charter school I interned at was founded in 1998. The community they serve consists of students, families, teachers and a Special Education Department (SpEd.) They range from grades K-8th. The school uses a holistic approach and their education style is influenced by the Waldorf Education principles. Their mission statement is to “Inspire Joyful Learning and Courageous Living ” (MBCS, 2020). Their values are community, collaborating, experiential learning, integrity, creativity, self-awareness, communication and diversity (MBCS, 2020). According to the California Department of Education, the most current demographics for MBCS are for the 2018-2019 school year and they are made up of 59.3% White, 17.7% Hispanic, 13.4% are 2 races or more, 3.9% Asian, 2.2% Filipino, 1.7% African American, 0.9% Pacific Islander, 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native and 0.4% are are not reported. The school is located in Pacific Grove, CA with a small second campus located in Seaside, CA. They accept students from all over Monterey County, but the majority are Pacific Grove and Seaside residents. MBCS provides education for students in grades K-8th and also offers special education services to students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). My internship was with the special education department. They focus on providing services to students with learning disabilities like reading, writing and mathematics. Our goals are to make lesson plans a lot more accessible and understandable for students who have a hard time grasping concepts as well as helping them keep up with their peers.

Problem Description

At the start of my internship I went in thinking I was going to play a minor role for them, but I quickly learned that my time there was going to be beneficial for both them and myself. I

then learned that they had problems with structure. There were a lot of pieces missing in order for it to run smoothly. Those pieces consisted of an inconsistent staff, recording and tracking student progress, too many students in need and not enough staff, parent concerns and a lack of communication between teachers and the SpEd staff.

One of the main troubles was training staff members in order for them to help out with providing services to students. There was never enough time for my mentor to train them because of the other number of tasks she needed to complete. There needed to be someone specifically responsible for that, but it was never possible. Recording and tracking student progress was also something they had trouble with. When it was getting done it would consist of everyday activities and not actual progress. The way they tried communicating with each other about what they were doing with the students was not as effective as it could've been. For the amount of students that needed to be provided designated academic service minutes, there was barely enough staff to be compliant with providing these services. The systems they were using were fairly new which made it more challenging.

Another big part as to why they were having some trouble was because they didn't have a program director who could deal with listening, managing and resolving parent concerns. It added a lot of stress trying to deal and please parents while also trying to serve their students as best they could. The lack of communication between teachers and SpEd staff was also a reason as to why the program was not running smoothly. They did not collaborate with each other which led to teachers not being educated on the tools and resources needed to help their SpEd students in the classrooms. During the beginning of working on the Capstone project, the Special

Education department was still fine tuning its structure. There were a lot of pieces missing for it to run smoothly.

Contributing Factors

Contributing factors that added to the SpEd program not functioning properly were high staff turn arounds, a loose tracking system, resources being misused and parent concerns were too time consuming. All of these factors added to the problem of a troubling department, which made it harder to find a solution for them. The high staff turnover made it difficult for the staff to deliver services because they kept having to train new people too often. The tracking system they had was also never used consistently because not many knew about it since people were always in and out. Those who did know of it were using it wrong or very loosely and added to it not having any structure. Communication after a session with a student kept getting lost.

Another of the contributing factors as to why the SpEd department wasn't running smoothly was the fact that the staff who was being trained kept getting pulled every direction and being reassigned to different tasks or projects. Those who were being trained and stayed to work with the school kept being reassigned around the school since they are very small. They were losing some of the staff members who had started delivering services to the students and that caused them to have to start over often. Inclusion Facilitators were often being taken from classrooms and their specific students to do other tasks because of the low numbers of staff. That altogether caused changes in schedules and resources too often, so it led to the SpEd staff taking on more than they should.

Parent communications to the school about their thoughts and opinions was also something the SpEd department dealt with too often. There was no program manager that could

deal with all the constant emails and phone calls, so they had to take them on themselves. It would take up too much time that could have been spent focusing on students and their academic needs.

The last of the contributing factors is that the general education and special education staff lacked communication. There were never any designated times to meet and discuss any concerns, thoughts or ideas. Their schedules were too busy and school days were hectic. Teachers didn't know where to access any IEP information that could help them better understand their students and the SpEd staff didn't know when or how to contact them without implying the teachers needed the help or weren't doing their jobs well enough.

Consequences

Due to a shaky structure of the special education department, heightened awareness of possible legal ramifications, high staff turnover, and unsatisfied families pulling students out of the school, there were consequences. The need for more structure, and solid processes and personnel were apparent. The new staff, new team collaboration, new mindset, and a few new resources allowed for the department to grow and be more strong. Now, more than ever the department continues to collaborate, grow, and are in a better place to serve the students and hopefully prevent going to court for any reason.

The structure of how the department was run, in regards to staff, contributed to the shakiness of it. The staff turnover was high. When staff were available, there were many inconsistencies, for example, they would only work with a student for a little while, then be asked to work with someone else. Having the Specialists of the different programs within the SpEd department be the ones mainly providing services is ideal, but was not the most efficient

way to deliver all services because of all the other work that came along with that. It was not the most efficient. Not only did they have to provide services to students, they also had to do the administration side to it. The administration side of the department was very tedious and time consuming. There were IEPs to complete, reports to write, progress report tracking to do, meetings with teachers and parents, and emails to write. There was never enough time to do it all and that led to high stress levels, less collaboration, and many inconsistencies within the program (for instance, how to track progress, scheduling issues, miscommunications with the teachers, etc.).

Unhappy families are a concern for every school and at our school it has been no different. There have been a few cases where parents leave unhappy because their issues don't become resolved, or they determine this school environment isn't what is best for their child. Everyone has expectations, and the special education department decided it was time to look in the mirror and do a solid self-reflection and what resulted was a much more functional department and special education program.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems were still being developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The functioning of the SpEd Dept due to lack of organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible legal ramifications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency of support 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No designated roles & job boundaries/roles/duties

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

At the beginning of my capstone journey I intended to create a brochure that would highlight the special education department at my internship. I was one of the first interns to work there and from what I could see then, they needed help. I wanted to create a brochure that would incentivize CSUMB students to look into the program and hopefully become a part of it to help students with executive functioning deficits & with kids with IEPs.

My plan was to meet with the special education staff to get input on what the program was and their perspective. I was also going to ask the administration staff and some of the teachers for some input to include information about more than just the SpEd department. Unfortunately, COVID-19 hit before I could get started and put me at a halt. I spent that next summer working with my mentor trying to figure out how we would make the following at home school year work. There were a lot of things we had to figure out in order to make sure every student was getting the help they needed, but once the school year started everything fell into place. It was then when my mentor & I realized the major positive shift in the SpEd department and my new capstone project was born.

My capstone project became a report on the growth and development of the SpEd department. I went from planning to create a brochure to increase the number of interns interested, to realizing that what we needed was to utilize the resources and people we already had working with us.

Project Purpose

The purpose for my capstone project is to help make the SpEd program better in every aspect. We have created a structure and system that is helping them with the tracking and documentation of student progress along with everything else they are doing whether it be providing services or the administration side of it. I also want to leave behind a type of documentation of how the SpEd department and staff has grown and overcome their challenges. At the beginning of our journey the SpEd staff had no structure (due to no fault of their own) and had a problem with keeping a consistent staff that would dedicate time to students in need, but with the pandemic and the school closing, they learned that what they needed was to have a small determined group of people that was willing to work together to make the program work. Thanks to the structure and systems we have now, everything is running smoothly. Work is getting done because there is a small group of people who are communicating with each other and documenting what they do. It is easier to manage more now than before.

Project Justification

The reason behind this project was that the students needed the best resources they could possibly get. Everything the SpEd program aims to achieve is a better education for the students. In order to make that happen they needed the structure to work better and be successful. The special education department is legally mandated as it provides services to students with disabilities. The justification to help this program grow is to in turn better serve the students with special needs. The system the staff was following was making the job challenging since it was missing key components.

Project Implementation

To start off this project I had to take a look back at how things were run before and during my time there when their systems were not running their best. I had conversations with my mentor about her past experience and how it worked when she first started working there, what she wanted to happen, including collaborating with many others. She needed me to help get certain things started so the program can continue on using these templates, documents, and other forms I helped create.

Assessment Plan

The tool I used to measure the progress of the new systems, documents, templates and charts I created along with my mentor was tracking. Everything I did I put in a folder that was specifically for my internship work. The amount of work I accumulated throughout the year and a half I was there was unbelievable. Everything I did had a purpose. Everything I created was meant to help out the staff or a student in their education journey. I was able to see how much time I saved teachers and SpEd staff by creating tables, charts and documents for them to use when working with a student. They now had more time to focus on teaching and not on creating resources. Another great thing about this whole project was that my mentor always reported back to me. Everytime she shared something I did with a teacher or special education specialist she would give me feedback that they told her. It was always “thank you’s” and “wow this was so helpful and it saved me so much time.” It’s at this time I wish I would have asked them for their input on if what I was doing was helpful, but my mentor did a great job at appreciating me and telling me all the time how grateful and lucky they all were.

Expected Outcomes

Starting a project and not knowing what it will evolve into is quite nerve wracking. I started this project confused as to what I wanted it to be, but one thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to leave my mark and help them continue to grow their program. I wanted to help make my mentor's job easier because I witnessed the high stress she dealt with. I expected her to give me projects that would help further the systems and protocols they used. I expected a lot from myself and the work I was about to put into this project.

Project Results

Due to the re-evaluation that the special education specialists did on the program after the school closed due to covid, they have created clear designated roles and job duties for everyone involved in the SpEd department. The program now has someone who takes care of everything to do with administration. There are paraeducators that help manage the student caseload by helping provide services to students under teacher supervision. Many other tasks that were shared by everyone have now found their place with one specific staff member. For example, there is a designated person who takes care of writing up the IEPs for every student which was a huge responsibility that my mentor would take upon herself. Thankfully now one of the staff members has been given that task as their main responsibility to fulfill.

Collaboration and communication within SpEd staff, teachers and school administration is another great win that has come out of this project. There are weekly meetings that staff members attend where they communicate their comments and concerns, so they can collaborate to solve their issues. It has helped everyone be on the same page and have clear expectations of

each other. Before this project they kept trying their own systems which kept them from ever having something strong that worked for everyone.

Providing services to students also became easier to do. Since there are now designated jobs and duties, student needs are being met and they are being given the attention they need. I've helped my mentor with specific tasks she needs done in order to provide the best possible for the students. That has ranged from tables and charts to finding worksheets they can use as homework or practice. In the end it was always about serving the students in any way I could to help pave their way to higher education.

The special education departments foundation was not very strong when I began my internship. They had systems and protocols that they followed loosely, but as time passed I learned that they were not working. It now gives me great pleasure knowing I helped create programs that they are currently using to run their program. Along with that, the communication between staff members and certain key roles were missing, but it is now something to admire. The growth from this program and myself is evident and something I'm proud of. I would say that the biggest accomplishment I'm leaving behind is the system the staff now uses to track student progress. It is working so well because everything is clear and concise. I'm glad that during my time there I helped make my mentor's job become a little bit easier because of all the projects and tasks she trusted me with. I know that this program will continue to grow and become even better and I'm excited for them.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the results shown it is evident that the special education program was positively impacted by my project. It has gained structure and consistency which is something major that

was missing. I, along with my mentors' help managed to create a system that is easy and clear to use. It is working as best it can, but it is ever growing and evolving. Work has become less stressful for everyone not just because of the new system in place, but also because they found their way through the rough times.

Throughout the process of the special education staff struggling with a high staff turnover, a weak tracking system, not enough resources and a lack of communication between teachers and staff, their main focus was to always serve their students and provide them with the resources they deserved. Even though the stress was high, the job always got done at the end of the day. They found ways to solve the problems they were facing and they continue to grow and get better at it. They have assigned jobs and responsibilities to certain staff members which has helped get tasks done more efficiently, the communication between teachers, staff and administrators has developed thanks to weekly meetings they all attend to communicate comments and concerns, and the new systems and protocols set in place now have helped everyone stay in check and keep a clear documentation of their work. It's safe to say that the work setting between the staff has improved, so when it comes to working with students that has also improved. I know that what we created has helped everyone develop their ways of documenting student information and my hope is that they continue to use the system we have now and make it better as the years go by. With time things will change, so it is going to need updating to become what they need it to be in order to be successful.

The only recommendation I have for my internship would be that when and if they decide to take in new interns, they should create an accurate job description and be prepared for them to join their school. Whether it be helping a special education specialist or creating a new role, they

now have an idea of what an intern could offer so they should take advantage of the opportunity. Before I landed with the special education program I was going to have a completely different area of focus, but I'm glad I ended up where I did. I got lucky and had such a great experience so I hope that any incoming interns enjoy their time there as much as I did.

Personal Reflection

My internship focused on the education and well being of the students they served. The work they do is help facilitate the education of their students with special needs and help pave the way for them to reach higher education. The staff worked with the resources they had and made it work as best they could, but there were definitely things that could be improved. My mentor shared past experiences and stories on how they worked and things they did in order to provide services and if we compare it to how things are now, they have for sure surpassed their expectations.

The first day of my internship was nerve wracking because I didn't know what I would be doing, but I was up for the challenge. I knew the agency I chose was very different from the agencies that other classmates had chosen because I was not going to be working in the "typical" office job setting. Looking back now I'm so grateful I chose to go there. The past year and a half has been such a great learning experience for myself and the staff because of all the great things everyone accomplished.

When I met my mentor I got such a warm welcoming vibe from her that made me feel like I was going to enjoy my time there. We got to know each other very quickly because we spent a lot of time together since our workspace was so close to each other. She was always there

for me if I had any questions about work or life and so was I. The appreciation she had for me and the help I was providing her was something she always showed me. I will always be grateful for her and the relationship we grew to have. She was such a bright light that helped me through my internship experience and life in general. We became friends and mental health counselors for each other. She says I helped her stay sane when work would get too stressful and honestly she did the same for me. I couldn't have asked for a better internship and mentor to work with and I say that with all sincerity.

References

Monterey Bay Charter School, *School Overview*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://mbayschool.org/school-overview/>