8-22-2011

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CHANGING THE STIGMA OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

August 22, 2011 by cpehrson

Getting the help a child needs in the school system can become a double-edged sword once the label of “special education” is attached to him or her.

Parents have a hard time admitting that their child needs special education services. Other parents may refuse to put their child in special education, even when they know their child would benefit from the services. Many parents hide the fact that their child is in special education because they know that once a child is labeled, that label will stay with them throughout their school years.

As a former special education teacher said, “There is still a stigma for our special education students...Sadly, when some students are labeled, they are ripped out of a general education classroom and put into a special education classroom that is sometimes segregated away from the rest of the school.”

Any student placed in a separate special education class may be at risk of being made fun of by their peers, because they are seen as “different.”

“The stigma is not just coming from other students,” one local special education resource teacher observed. Her greatest concern as she starts a new school year is getting the general education teachers to accept and welcome the students with special needs into their classrooms.

Teachers are working so hard to help their regular students meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind, that sometimes making the necessary accommodations or adaptations for students in special education may become overwhelming.

But, it is the student with special needs who suffers the most. Low self-esteem is the result of being seen as different or needing specialized help with school subjects. Low self-esteem hinders, if not stops altogether, the motivation needed to face and overcome the challenges of having a learning or developmental disability.

Changing the stigma attached to special education is the key to success for these students. Once society accepts the importance of special education services and learns to value differences, not scorn them, these students will move forward at a quicker pace.

“The fact is that special education is a blessing for students who are struggling due to their need for a smaller classroom environment, more support from an additional teacher or paraprofessional, or help outside of the classroom in a specific area,” says Tiffany Rubin, a special education teacher in New York City.

Changing the stigma will require change from the top down.

Administrators must make sure that their schools have zero tolerance for teasing and discrimination based on ability and differences.

Teachers must have the skills to address the academic needs of students mainstreamed into their classes, and model treating all students with respect.

Student must understand that being different is okay, and that their peers are more like them than they are different from them.

Rubin summarizes her thoughts about special education: “Special education is a necessary part of the educational system. When it is done properly, with good educators, and active parents, it can have a positive effect on the families and students. It can serve as a life preserver in a sea of confusion, despair and the unknown.”

Changing the stigma can start today with each of us doing our part.