

# Site Visit to Victor, NY Public Schools

April 22 & 23, 2003

## *Sites Visited*

### **1. Victor Primary School**

Demographics:

Grades K-3

975 Students

Suburban/Rural

Service delivery: various models (single grade; multi-age; team taught)

16 paraprofessionals in school; 11 of those assigned to special education

(Note: Info listed below is based primarily on the Grade 2-3 Multi-Age Option)

### **2. Victor Intermediate School**

### **3. Victor Central Office (Committee on Special Education)**

## *People Observed or Interviewed*

1. (Grade 2-3 Teacher/Dual Certified in General & Special Education)
2. (Grade 2-3 Teacher/Dual Certified in General & Special Education)
3. (Grade 4-5-6 Teacher/Dual Certified in General & Special Education)
4. (Grade 4-5-6 Teacher/Dual Certified in General Ed & Literacy)
5. (Grade 4-5-6 Teacher/Dual Certified in General & Special Education)
6. (Grade 4-5-6 Teacher/Certified General Ed -- Long-Term Sub)
7. (Principal, Victor Primary/Certified General & Special Ed & Admin)
8. (Chairperson -- Committee on Special Education)
9. (Parent of a Child with a Disability)
10. (Paraprofessional Assigned to Class 40 minutes per day)
11. (Parent Volunteer)

## *Model of Service Delivery Designed to Support All Students*

### *Primary Components Identified (all present)*

- Multi-age class (e.g., 2-3; 4-6)

- Collaborative/Team Teaching (2 teachers)
- Teachers are Dual Certified (General & Special Ed) Support All Students, serving as both general education teacher and special educator
- Natural Proportion of Students with and Without Disabilities (e.g., 3 students per class)
- Includes all types of students with disabilities (varies from year to year)
- Limited class size (originally envisioned to be 20 or under; currently at 21)
- *"Program of Choice"*: Parents of children with and without disabilities informed of model and can chose this as an option). Information is shared at a *Parent Information Night*, through informal coffees, and through newsletters
- Parents whose children have disabilities often find that their child's educational needs are being met through modifications, and individualized, supplementary, or differentiated instruction. Therefore, although a child might have a disability, he or she is not in need of special education because the extensive level of individualized instruction offered to all students.
- Teachers are thoroughly committed to welcoming, including, and teaching all students within the context of the general education classroom.
- Teachers apply principles of differentiated instruction, multi-level curriculum/instruction, and curriculum overlapping to students across the range of characteristics and abilities, from students with disabilities and those "at risk" to students who have advanced skills for their age. *"This [differentiating instruction and multi-level instruction] is our modus operandi for all our students; we strive to individualize for all our students.*
- Teachers infuse *"... services within the context of daily instruction."* (Teacher)
- Classroom uses a combination of large group, small group, and independent work. Large group (e.g., "Read aloud" or whole group instruction) typically is no more than 25% of the daily schedule.

#### *Supportive Components*

- School Principal is supportive of the multi-age/inclusive model.
- Principal and assistant principal have special education background/ certification
- The Grade (2-3) classroom has access to a paraprofessional 40 minutes daily.

- The Grade (2-3) classroom has access to Literacy Specialist 90 minutes per day. The frequency and duration of these services change from year to year depending upon the number of students targeted for support in reading and/or writing.
- Parents volunteers spend time in the classrooms (1 hr in a.m.; 1 and 1/2 in the p.m.).

#### *Current Status and Related Facts*

- Model was teacher-initiated in 1992
- The Primary School has an Instructional Support Team and there are schoolwide support services (e.g., Reading Recovery Teachers).
- Principal stresses a support system where there is an expectation of ownership by the classrooms teachers for educating all students and where teachers are accountable to collect data and document their efforts to support students.
- Only 2% of the students in the Primary school have a disability label. Another, approximately 10% would likely be labeled as having a disability in a more traditional model. This allows the school to provide supports while avoiding much of the paperwork, red tape and bureaucracy associated with the special education system.
- Multi-age Grade 2-3 class has 42 students; 2 dual-certified teachers; 1 group paraprofessional for 40 minutes daily; 6 students with special needs who are, or would typically be, labeled
- Principal and classroom teachers reported that standardized test scores for students in these inclusive multi-age classes are as good or better than other service delivery options.
- Disability categories of students placed in the multi-age classrooms vary from year to year. They have included the following, among others: Learning Disabilities, intellectual disability, PDD/ Autism, Traumatic Brain Injury, Other Health Impaired.
- Teachers are unionized -- there has been no interference from the union for the teachers wearing "two hats" (serving in dual role of general and special educator).
- Primary School Principal attempts to hire as many dual-certified teachers as possible; currently more than half the staff is either dual-certified in general and special education or has an advanced degree focused on literacy.

- Across the three multi-age classes that were visited, only one individually assigned paraprofessional was observed supporting a student with a TBI.
- Because the model is not systemic, there are times that students who were formerly not classified as "disabled" go through the identification and labeling process to assure continuation of modifications, and individualized, supplementary, or differentiated instruction as students transition to settings that don't have an inclusive regular education model.

### *Perspectives of Members of the Community*

- Team teaching of double class allows for flexible groupings (Teachers)
- Less paperwork (especially when students who may be perceived as having disabilities are served without labeling)
- Structures allow the interaction among co-teachers to be "fluid"
- Classroom has a "sense of community"
- Peers provide support to each other (Teacher)
- **MG:** *What would you say to people who think this is too much to do?*

**Teacher:** *Why are we teachers? We're teachers because we want to educate children. We differentiate our curriculum and instruction to give everybody what they need to succeed in our classroom. We individualize for all kids.*

**Teacher:** *It's a little harder and takes a little more time -- but it's worth it! It's gotten easier over time; our collaboration has grown. The real thing is experiences and outcomes for the students are so much better; especially when we know what the alternative is -- a self-contained special ed class. Doing it this way feeds my soul. Parents never say 'Billy (pseudonym) doesn't like to come to school', instead they say, 'He loves coming to school -- he loves learning'".*

- Teachers reported that "pull-out" services are generally not working for them (e.g., scheduling problems) or students (e.g., students resistant to leaving the classroom); some of the teachers didn't like "push-in" services any better, preferring to infuse support within their classroom routines and practices.
- Model of services is "beyond push-in."
- Although the classrooms were originally designed for 20 students, more parents requested the option for their children, "... so we ditched our teachers' desks and made room for four more kids."

- *"We are teaching kids, not teaching stuff!"* (Teacher)
- *"We don't think of what we do as innovative; it's just what we do."* (Teacher)
- On the lack of need to classify students as disabled: *"The fact is that we wouldn't be doing anything differently if the student had a disability."*
- In cases where students do have a disability, these classroom teachers facilitate the development of the IEP if the student's primary area of need is in academic areas (i.e., not speech and language or motor).
- Parent of a child who been in the class in past years was extremely positive, *"The program is wonderful!"* There was *"... open communication with parents."* The teachers accepted input and materials from parents, *"... allowed the parents to be a resource.* The parent explained that she developed trust in the teachers; *"They gave me a gift – the freedom and comfort to be able to go back to work [knowing that things at school were good]."* In highlighting the positive aspects of the primary classroom the parent said, *'My son loved coming to school! He'd say 'Oh boy ! I get to go to school!' The teachers were fun and they have a great working relationship; he learned; he had friends. These teachers had a positive attitude and desire to work with all the kids. At the heart of it each child belonged.*

#### *Reasons Why The Traditional System is Limited*

- If students with disabilities in the multi-age option were labeled *"... nothing would be different except that the students may have lost reading services"* (Teacher)
- If students were labeled disabled, under the existing system they would not be eligible for the services of the Literacy Specialist since she is not assigned to students on IEPs
- Because the primary school supports many students without labeling them there is a concern that the school will lose resources.

#### *Model Limitations or Unanswered Questions*

- Students with more severe disabilities typically are educated in regional special education classrooms out of district.
- Model is not systemic -- highly dependent on individual teachers
- Still seems that the program may be "flying under radar" in terms of state regulations and funding.

- Still unclear, what portion, if any, of the multi-age classroom is funded by special education funds.
- How do students with seemingly similar characteristics end up in either an inclusive, multi-age classroom vs. a self-contained special education classroom? At the intermediate school a special education class is physically situated between two inclusive multi-age (4-5-6) classrooms.
- According to several of the individuals interviewed, the quality of the model is highly dependent on the high quality of the teachers. (My note: This is true in any classroom.)

#### *Observer Perspectives*

- The multi-age, team-taught, inclusive classroom model has merged general education and special education to an extraordinary degree.
- The classroom is a wonderful, caring, fun environment.
- The classroom "management" is based firmly on positive relationships between the teachers and students (rather than a system of rewards and consequences).
- The students seem to enjoy the classroom environment.

**NOTE: A draft version of his report was sent to the primary individuals who were interviewed and observed, so that they could review and edit this document for accuracy. This version reflects their review.**