

**Transcript of
National Catholic Partnership on Disability
“Access in Catholic Elementary Schools”
October 13, 2009**

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Participants

Marie Powell, Executive Director - USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education
Sally Todd, Associate Superintendent - Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools
Eileen Grams, Inclusion Specialist - Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Elementary School

Presentation

Operator

Greetings and welcome to the National Catholic Partnership on Disability webinar entitled, "Access in Catholic Education for Students with Disabilities, Part I: Elementary Schools." [Operator Instructions].

It is now my pleasure to introduce your host, Mrs. Marie Powell from US Conference Catholic Bishops. Thank you Mrs. Powell. You may begin.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Thank you. Good afternoon and welcome to our webinar on Access in Catholic Education for Students with Disabilities. Today's webinar is the first of a two-part series and focuses on students with disabilities who are in or whose parents are considering a Catholic elementary school. The PowerPoint slides for today's presentation and the related resources will be available later on. Please watch for an announcement on the ncpd.org homepage.

My name is Marie Powell. I serve as the executive director of the Secretariat of Catholic Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and will be the moderator of today's session. I am very pleased to be part of a program which is designed to highlight the ways Catholic schools can include students with disabilities in their school communities.

I am also delighted to have two experienced Catholic educator colleagues who will share their insights on this topic with you. Examining the inclusion of students with disabilities from the point of view of an administrator is Sally Todd, Associate Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Orange, California. Sally has a Master's Degree in Education, a Special Education Credential, a Resource Specialist Certificate and has been involved in Catholic education for over 30 years as a teacher, learning specialist and administrator. Eileen Grams will focus on working with elementary children with disabilities from the standpoint of the classroom teacher. Eileen has served for 12 years as Inclusion Specialist at Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Elementary School in Potomac, Maryland and has a Master's degree in Special Education.



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Today’s webinar is co-sponsored by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat of Catholic Education.

We would like to thank our partners in serving persons with disabilities, the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership, the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry, and the National Catholic Office for the Deaf.

Before we begin, let me be sure to explain that the last part of this one-hour program will be used to respond to questions our audience may have. If you wish to submit a question, please click on the Question button in the upper right corner above the slide, type your question, and then click Submit. If we do not have time to answer all the questions submitted, we will try to e-mail you an answer within several days of this webinar. If you wish to have us e-mail you a response, please include your e-mail address with your question.

Serving students with disabilities is an important topic and one most appropriately begun with prayer. I invite all of our participants to join in the prayer you see on your screen. Lord Jesus Christ, you loved children so much that you said, “Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me.” Assist those of us involved in Catholic education to welcome especially those children who come to us with a disability. Help us to understand their needs and to see the possibilities for including them in our school communities. Enable us to reach out lovingly to your children. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

For over 30 years, the bishops of the United States have called upon the Catholic community to welcome the full participation of persons with disabilities into the life of the Church. In 1978, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the “Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities.” In 1995, the bishops published “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities” and in 1998 issued the statement “Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: a Framework of Access and Inclusion.” All of these statements provide encouragement and guidance to those seeking ways to become a more inclusive Catholic community. More recently, the National Directory for Catechesis, published in 2005, specifically calls for Catholic schoolteachers to be provided training on making their classrooms more accessible.

Today’s webinar focuses particularly on how Catholic Elementary schools can successfully bring more children with disabilities into the faith, academic, and social life of a school. Our team, Sally, Eileen, and myself, have all had the benefit of working with students, parents, teachers, and administrators who took the time to communicate about an individual student’s strengths, needs requiring support, and potential for succeeding in a particular school. On the other hand, we also know that Catholic schools have varying resources and facilities and some schools are less able to provide an appropriate education to students with some special needs.

We believe it important, however, that within their resources, Catholic schools should be as inclusive as Possible. Catholic schools have many dedicated faculty Members

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who have been successful at working with students and parents to provide an appropriate education for students with disabilities. Our personal experiences convince us that a Catholic school community is enriched when it welcomes and celebrates students with varying needs and gifts.

The extent to which more Catholic schools in the United States are welcoming students with disabilities into their communities can be seen by the increase of reports coming to the Secretariat of Catholic Education when we have revised the Special Needs Resource Directory, first published in 2001. Our most recent edition, on our USCCB website, shows that schools in more dioceses continue to expand their Ability to educate students with varying disabilities. If you have not seen this publication, I encourage you to browse through it. The website address will be found on the list of resources, which will be available from this webinar site at ncpd.org.

Before we begin our first presentation, we would like our participants to answer the poll you see on your screen. Please indicate how far along your program is in including students with disabilities. Check all that apply and then click VOTE. Shortly we will be able to view the results. A bar graph will allow all of us to better understand our audience. Go ahead and vote now. I am happy to report to you that we have over 250 sites that have registered for this webinar. They include personnel from over 50 diocesan offices and faculty members from over 160 schools. So we are very pleased with the interest in this particular webinar. Alright, we will see what now what the result of our poll. It looks like we have included disabilities for 5 or more years. That represents most of the people who are participating. That really is very exciting to know about. We have quite a range of persons and we hope this webinar is helpful to all of you.

Now I am very pleased to turn the microphone over to Sally Todd. Sally, what are the critical aspects for a Catholic school or diocesan administrator to consider regarding students with disabilities in a Catholic elementary school?

Sally Todd, Associate Superintendent, Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools

Thank you, Marie. It is my pleasure to share some thoughts gathered from our work in supporting special needs learners over the past 11 years. It has been a challenging but very rewarding for the Diocese of Orange and we do see the benefits each day. Just one example of success can be found in a narrative about a student named “Michael” which was shared by one of our Learning Support Coordinators in anticipation of this presentation. It can be found within the resources designed for this webinar at ncpd.org.

Though there are many, many things that could be mentioned, I have categorized some of what we have learned into six important elements that may help other dioceses and schools administratively. They include seeking support, both in initial planning as well as throughout program implementation. Articulating and communicating an inclusionary philosophy throughout the diocese and/or school and parish communities. Developing written policies and procedures. Having realistic expectations for students, teachers and the program. Providing ongoing assessment and monitoring, both for students and the program. Also important is understanding

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learning interventions levels which can support students to varying degrees. Let's look at these further.

Any strong program needs to have the approval, understanding, and commitment of the administration whether from the diocesan or local site level. We were fortunate eleven years ago that our previous Superintendent and Associate saw the need for greater student diversity within our schools as a social justice issue. Through their original influence and enthusiasm, all of our schools have committed themselves to an inclusionary philosophy and support practices. Their program successes have kept them moving even further in this direction of service. Top support, as you can understand, is most important.

As our school programs have developed, ongoing connections and resources continue to be vital in keeping energy alive and motivation strong. For example, one school has formed a site committee composed of the mother of an autistic student, a psychologist who is also a parent, and a speech and language specialist who is a parishioner. This committee provides direction and also gives credibility to the school program.

Several schools have a psychologist within the parish or community providing psycho-educational assessment, at a reduced rate for school families, in lieu of public education testing. Other schools have volunteer tutors. These are just a few examples of how supporters of our schools can become involved on several levels of an inclusion program. Though it may seem difficult in the beginning to find individuals, these often can be fairly easy to identify when a need to serve children is articulated.

When reviewing a school's mission and philosophy statements, it is important to build upon the strong school Catholic identity and incorporate the concepts of social justice and the call to open doors to diversity. In doing so, it becomes very clear that serving learning needs is a priority. This, too, can also be applied to the diocesan level.

We knew we needed a statement that connected our faith values to the concept of “welcoming all”. For our diocese, this foundation is reflected in this inclusionary statement: Catholic school education within the Diocese of Orange exists to support and complement the parents in their responsibility to be the primary educators of their children. Its primary purpose is to assist students, each with a unique learning style and varying exceptionalities, to grow into the fullness of life in Jesus, to be members of the community of believers and to teach the redeeming message of God's love. Just to note, giving special attention to parents is oftentimes equally important as teaching children, considering their sometimes very difficult role in raising a special needs child. Though meeting the needs of children who struggle academically is a natural outcome to the scripture passage of “Let the little children come to me”, we do so in concert with developing strong support structures with parents.

A philosophical foundation which embraces children with special needs is important, but establishing practical guidelines gives substance to the program. In many instances an inclusion program begins in a pioneering manner of one child with special needs appearing at the door of a school. Though this is a good beginning and

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paves the way, formalizing clear policies and procedures regarding student acceptance, the ability to instruct and issues surrounding assessment and grading are necessary.

Our own policy within the Diocese of Orange is simple: “A Catholic school will accept any child for whom an appropriate program can be designed and implemented following its prescribed enrollment procedures. Each child is to be admitted to and continued enrollment in a diocesan school based upon his/her emotional, academic and physical needs, and the resources available to the school in meeting those needs.” It is further indicated that the final decision is made by the school administrator. In the last seven years, this has withstood the test of time. Implementation of this policy has allowed schools to better understand their own programs while expanding their ability to address a wider range of needs, through diocesan encouragement and staff development.

Following our original policy, our office developed an Inclusion Handbook, which outlined procedures and gave standard diocesan forms to assist schools. This handbook is currently in the process of revision. Within this revision, our program has been given a new name to better reflect the uniqueness of parochial school service and distinguish it further from the public school special education model. Therefore, the diocesan and subsequently school programs are now identified as “Diversified Education” programs. A draft document of our new handbook can be found at ncpd.org. This resource includes additional rationale materials, team meeting resources, forms for monitoring student progress and notes on adaptations. I invite you to review this and feel free to use or adapt any material that may meet your own needs. As noted, this handbook is still a “work in progress”. Please continue to check the ncpd.org website for the final copy which should be completed within the next month.

Understanding that Catholic schools operate under the constraints of resource issues and often have access to only the limited federal funding portion that IDEA prescribes, schools need to be extremely creative in providing service, support and integration. It is important, therefore, that a school is aware of what it can and cannot provide at a specific point in time. However, beginning with a “can do” attitude, may open channels of acceptance that may not previously been present. Modified student schedules, additional periods in core subjects, differentiated instruction, and after school tutorials are all practical ways schools can accommodate and modify. The important thing to remember is that oftentimes “where there is a will, there is a way” and the way may not always be found in our traditional education practices.

Besides the school having realistic expectations, administrators also need to keep in mind the variety of perspectives among teachers and staff regarding special needs students. Though the basic philosophy might be accepted, fear and the feeling that all students must perform at a certain level can inhibit a teacher from being open on a practical level. A “label” such as “autism” might be considered by some as requiring support only a public school special education program would be able to provide. Though a Catholic school might meet a learning need in a different way, it too can be successful in providing learning growth within a Catholic faith environment, the latter being something a public education program cannot do.

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Feeling that all children should be at grade level or having a teaching style contrary to differentiated instruction can be extremely frustrating for a teacher, not to mention the student. Therefore, ongoing staff development as well as careful consideration of student placement within a classroom are important elements to consider.

An excellent discussion book for a school’s Professional Learning Community is “Failure Is Not an Option” by Alan M. Blankstein. Chapter 6: Ensuring Achievement for All Students, Systems for Prevention and Intervention is particularly noteworthy. This book gives helpful information regarding a school's resources.

The application and acceptance process for a student with special needs, as with any student, should determine whether the school is the right “fit”, both by the school and the parents. Only then can a mutually collaborative working relation hope to happen. Initial questions such as the strengths and needs of the student, previous assessment done, reason for enrollment, student commitment, parent supports, ability of classroom teacher and ongoing assessment of the student are all pieces of conversation that assist in the initial determination. It is wise that a student be accepted conditionally for a period of time and some type of written Memorandum of Understanding between the school and parents should be part of the acceptance process. This would outline clearly the roles/responsibilities of the school and of the parents, as well as what the school can provide to meet needs, which again may be different than what the public school would provide. A sample form is provided in our diocesan resource. The important thing to remember, though, is to communicate that the school wishes to meet the learning needs of a child, if at all possible.

In our schools, after a probationary period, an Individualized Learning Plan, or ILP is developed, most likely through a Learning Support Team approach. Since in practice, IEPs do not transition to private schools in California, ILPs form the direction for service within a parochial school. This is carefully monitored by the Learning Support Coordinator, classroom teacher and support personnel, if any, on an ongoing basis. In our diocese, a Learning Support Coordinator is an expected part of the faculty and he/she monitors the progress of students, provides direct intervention and supports classroom teachers.

When a Catholic school accepts any student, there is a responsibility to monitor progress of that student through assessment and grading procedures. These practices on the elementary level should and can be flexible to include a wide range of options. Differentiation in both instruction and assessment is key. Our diocesan student reporting system includes options of students working below or above the grade level curriculum so that progress of the student is clearly understood. Written narratives sometime accompany the formal Student Learning Assessment or what we call SLA, which is our response to a standard elementary report card.

In addition to the assessment of student progress, schools need to maintain constant monitoring of the overall program. What is working and what is not working should be constantly evaluated. Recently, one of our schools totally revamped its program. The school realized that it was now serving students with greater learning involvement than in the past. Procedures, following diocesan guidelines, needed to reflect greater

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intervention. On a recent school visit, I heard very positive comments about the renewed direction from both staff as well as from a parent. I observed also three autistic children integrated well into their classrooms. Change is good if it benefits greater inclusivity!

An overall understanding of the levels of learning support within inclusive education can provide another framework for schools in terms of what a school/teacher can provide. These involve adaptations both within and outside the regular classroom in the form of instructional accommodations and curricular modifications in a continuum of intervention. An instructional accommodation allows the student to access the regular grade level curriculum with limited adaptation. Curricular modifications, on the other hand, require changes to the grade level curriculum itself and are definitely more involved. Both levels have a place within our Catholic schools and these levels are given to all of our schools to understand and follow based upon needs presented and resources available.

Instructional accommodations are comprised of two levels. The first indicates that though there is a special need, the student might not need anything special except close monitoring, while the second, support or reinforcement, provides extra assistance within the expectation of the same classroom activity and goals. Examples of the latter would include; monitoring, reminder highlighting, study aids, extra practice, tutoring, alternative assessment, student contracts and/or behavioral management plans.

Curricular modifications, on the other hand, imply, again, stronger intervention for students. In Level 3, students would have the same goals but there may be an altered pace of instruction, adapted class work, adapted tests or alternative assessments. Level 4 would indicate that basic goals, materials and assignments be modified. Such examples would include more suitable learning tools be provided, sometimes from other grade levels, high interest/low vocabulary texts, and/or real life activities. With partial participation students would definitely have different goals and it is understood that he or she would benefit from some parts of classroom activities but not all. A part of a lesson would be identified as a new outcome for the student and/or there would be different goals for the same activity. With Level 6, again, there would be different goals and activities; curricular modification would be great; the student may participate in an activity in a very limited manner and his/her day school day may be significantly modified. This last level should be decided upon only after trying other options. The student can still be part of the general classroom to the best of his/her ability. The main concern with any of these levels should be how and to what extent a child can participate in the life of the school.

In initiating a program at a school, discussion should explore how far the school and teachers can move on this continuum. It is not uncommon that, in the beginning, schools and teachers are comfortable to accommodate and modify at the upper levels. We have found that it is very important, on the diocesan level, to accept where an individual school is at in relation to providing inclusion services and to assist in broadening perspectives, again within the context of their resources. The same is true at the site level with individual teachers. However, “hiring for mission” should be

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the norm and the expectation is that eventually all faculty and staff can and will embrace the concept of “welcoming all”.

Success of any program depends on steps and processes that will ensure that success. In summary, a few hints would be: Believe in what you are doing, have common understandings. Begin slowly, maybe just a student at a time. Develop supports within a strong faith community environment, including the formalizing of policies and procedures. Communicate effectively on the school and parent level. Continue to assess progress and as always, pray constantly for guidance.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Thank you, Sally, for sharing with us your experience and guidance for welcoming students with disabilities into Catholic schools. I am sure our participants are especially grateful for your willingness to share some of the resources developed by the Diocese of Orange. I should mention that the slides and the resources and the handbook or the Diocese of Orange are not yet on the NCPD website, but we anticipate having them up later so we encourage you to check back so that you can access all of these resources.

Let me remind our participants that if you wish to e-mail a question for our presenters, just click on the Question button, type your Question, then click on Submit.

Eileen Grams will now provide more specifics about steps that should be taken if a Catholic elementary school is successfully to include children with disabilities into the religious, academic, and social life of the school. Eileen, what guidance can you offer to a particular school which is considering including more students with special needs?

Eileen Grams, Inclusion Specialist, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Elementary School

Thank you, Marie. The initial guidance I'd like to offer is to say, including students with special needs can be done. I'm a believer. I've seen the many benefits that happen when Catholic schools become more accessible yet still maintain an academically demanding curriculum with high behavioral expectations. Increasing accessibility has many benefits for all learners and their families. For instance, it allows often vulnerable students to become part of a small, nurturing, faith-filled community while cultivating a spirit of encouragement among typical peers. In addition, it provides appropriate social and academic role models for special needs students and a support system for their parents. Yet although these outcomes may be desirable, misunderstandings and even fear may result when traditional Catholic schools start to make these changes. Since hindsight is 20/20, I'll try to share strategies some Catholic schools have learned to make the process a little smoother.

Start by addressing the shift in pedagogy that may need to occur. In an educational environment that supports students with learning, developmental, and intellectual disabilities, all stakeholders must understand that the focus for students with disabilities will be on providing necessary supports so that they can make progress on individualized goals. It may be helpful to hang a sign in each classroom that states your school's philosophy and also addresses the apprehension that some teachers,

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parents, administrators, and students may feel. One school adopted a philosophy espoused by an educator that provided school-wide staff development training. It essentially stated: “In a classroom fair means that everybody gets what they need in order to learn.” I would also add, “and to demonstrate what they know.” This simple, one sentence philosophy allows teachers and parents to understand that creating a more accessible environment is accomplished by making adaptations, some minor and some more significant, to address the strengths and weaknesses of students who may not be able to make appropriate progress in a traditional, general education setting.

By focusing on a child’s strengths and weaknesses, it becomes clear that what is appropriate for one child may not be appropriate for another. Some parents or colleagues may suggest that it is not fair to change academic expectations or classroom procedures. Yet I would argue that, in fact, it’s not fair not to do so. For instance, one child may have slow processing speed. Another child may have weaknesses in sequencing and working memory. Is it fair to deny these children a Catholic education simply because we don’t want to make adjustments that are needed for them to succeed? The perception that it is unfair to change expectations or procedures is most often an issue for students whose disabilities are not readily apparent as opposed to those with more significant disabilities. For example, parents can easily understand the need to change academic expectations for a student with Down Syndrome but cannot appreciate why a student with learning disabilities needs testing accommodations.

I would also caution at this point that confidentiality is key when dealing with fairness and other issues for students with special needs. If a parent or student asks for an explanation of why another student is receiving accommodations in the classroom, simply state that you cannot talk to them about another child just as you would never speak about their child to another parent or student. Referring back to the school philosophy on individualized goals and fairness can be helpful at this point.

One school began to tackle such thorny issues as they began the process of making their school more accessible. Almost 20 years ago, they hired a reading specialist for students with learning disabilities. Subsequently, they increased their commitment to accessibility with the acceptance of one student with intellectual disabilities. Currently accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom, pull out support, team teaching between general and special educators, individualized instruction and schedules, a peer mentor program, and social skills and life skills classes are offered. But they didn’t offer them all right away. The program evolved from supporting students with learning disabilities to supporting a more diverse group of students with a variety of learning, intellectual and developmental disabilities.

However, I don’t believe that full inclusion is the only way or necessarily the best way for every student. Some students require more support than an inclusive environment can provide. Therefore, an assessment of the child, his or her needed supports, and the school’s ability to provide appropriate supports is a critical first step. We do a disservice to a child when we fail to provide the social and academic support they need to make progress.

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Assessing student needs is facilitated by developing a more extensive application packet for students who may need the additional support. In addition to the information required of typical peers, it is reasonable to expect parents to provide further information about their child with special needs. A copy of a recent psycho-educational evaluation is critical along with a copy of the child’s most recent IEP or 504 Plan, if available. Also, a copy of several work samples that would indicate the child’s current level of academic functioning is useful. A letter from the parents with a brief description of the educational impact of their child’s disability and the type of support they believe would be necessary for the child to be successful is also helpful.

In addition, a Behavior Policy and Agreement that parents sign can clarify the mission, program goals, and the approach to be implemented when a child’s behavior is interfering with his or her social and academic growth. It can identify techniques used to reinforce positive behavior and those used to modify or interrupt inappropriate behaviors. Finally, it should emphasize your ultimate goal of providing a safe, nurturing environment which helps ensure a successful learning experience for students with special needs. Parents could also sign a form which allows your staff to discuss with the staff at the student’s previous school any confidential information related to special education services or evaluations. This facilitates appropriate educational planning for the new student. Once a determination has been made that you may be able to meet the child’s needs, ask for permission for one or more teachers to observe the child in his current educational setting. After this, ask if the student would like to make a “shadow visit” for a day with his potential classmates. This allows the school, the parents, and the child to determine if this will be a good fit.

After analyzing relevant information gleaned from both written records and behavioral observations, first determine if the parents have reasonable expectations of the school and what it can possibly provide for their child. If so, establish the level of support the child will need. For students whose disability indicates there will be a less significant educational impact, accommodations may be all that is needed to ensure success. Accommodations indicate that a student is held responsible for mastering grade level material, but minor changes have been made. An asterisk next to the grade on the report card can be used to indicate accommodations were put in place to enable the child to learn and demonstrate what they know.

Examples of accommodations are: Completing every other question on homework, class work, and or tests, providing word banks for fill-in-the-blank tests, allowing time and a half to complete tests and quizzes, highlighting key words and operational signs on tests, assignments, and quizzes. Reading tests aloud to the entire class or just to the special needs students ensures that students focus on the concept presented rather than decoding skills. I would argue that it helps all students to hear someone model good test taking skills. As long as it is not a reading comprehension test, the integrity of the test should not be compromised. Allowing students to use books on tape, a near point reference when copying notes, or providing a hard copy of class lecture notes can be critical. Using visual cues whenever possible alerts students to important information or changes in routine. Color coding books, notebooks, and materials is helpful for students with weaknesses in executive functioning skills. As teachers begin to implement accommodations, the “fairness question” may haunt

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them, so they may feel more confident if they have the support of an administrator or colleague before making these adjustments.

For students whose disabilities present a more significant educational impact, modifications may be in order. A child with a modified curriculum receives academic, behavioral, and/or social skills support during the school day and is not held to grade level expectations in one or more content areas. Parentheses around a letter grade on a report card could indicate more significant changes were made to the curriculum.

Examples of modifications include: Schedule changes to eliminate or reduce grade level course requirements. For example, you could occasionally eliminate a class, other than language arts or mathematics, in order to allow a student the opportunity to receive direct instruction in reading, writing, and/or arithmetic. This can take place in small group or even one-to-one settings. The rationale is that although a student may miss a course such as American History or Physical Science in elementary school, they will have the opportunity to take it again in high school, but they will not achieve commensurate with their potential unless their weaknesses in reading and math are addressed. This small group or one-to-one support in the core content areas ensures that a student will receive direct instruction at their ability level; it usually takes the form of pull out support provided for math and/or language arts. Social skills and life skills classes address weaknesses in adaptive skills. This is critical if students are to make progress socially. Role playing can be especially helpful. Eliminate requirements such as “challenge words” in spelling, or change course requirements by allowing the student to be responsible for five vocabulary words as opposed to twenty. Use word processing or white out to eliminate some multiple choice possibilities, use a different rubric to grade tests and assignments. Any time an entire section of a test or assignment is eliminated or the difficulty level is impacted by a change, this represents a modification. Modifications on report cards could be noted by putting the grade in parentheses. In addition, establishing behavioral expectations and consequences similar to those of typical peers will hold all students accountable. Daily report cards or communication notebooks between home and school may be necessary in the beginning.

There is a wealth of information to help you make the appropriate changes. But it's important to remember that there are no magic wands in special education. What works for a student with special needs will often work with typical peers and vice versa. That said, some resources are particularly helpful. Specific information on the resources I mentioned is on the NCPD website at ncpd.org. The Four Square Writing Method: A Unique Approach to Teaching Basic Writing Skills is a good place to start to teach beginning writers how to organize their thoughts. The Four Square series contains many other books and can be invaluable to a school. The Four Square Method can even be incorporated school wide for all students. Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Teachers and Teaching Math to People with Down Syndrome and Other Hands-On Learners: Basic Survival Skills are two other good resources. In addition, the Ready-To-Use Social Skills and Activities books geared to specific grade levels and Life Skills Activities for Special Children are great resources to teach social and life skills classes. E.Z.C Highlighter Tape from reallygoodstuff.com is removable highlighter tape to let you highlight important information in textbooks. Boardmaker Software Family allows you to make

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printed picture symbol communication and educational materials. It is helpful for non readers. It also allows you to make customized picture symbols to go along with “Social Stories.” Developed by Carol Gray, these personalized stories are custom made to target the skill needed to address a specific deficit. They can be very motivating for a child.

For some students with special needs, whether they are receiving accommodations or modifications or some combination of the two, a few additional suggestions may be helpful. First, class wide sensitivity awareness sessions can be designed to allow typical peers to understand the impact of a child’s disability on social skills. It is important to remember that if you are mentioning a specific child or specific disability that you receive the permission of the child’s parents, in writing, before you proceed. Then, begin by addressing the fact that everyone has special needs, but some special needs are more apparent in a school setting than others. After some discussion with the students regarding types of disabilities and the meaning of the term “social cues”, distribute a brief paragraph with the spacing, and letters p, d, b, and q all mixed up. Rick Lavoie originally used this technique to demonstrate the frustration, anxiety and tension students with disabilities may feel. Other techniques to simulate the impact of a disability, such as requiring students to trace between the lines of two stars using their non-dominant hand and only looking in a mirror, could be used. After allowing the typical students to experience some degree of frustration trying to complete a task “with a disability”, make the connection that students with special needs may have a similar degree of difficulty trying to read or follow social cues. This allows classmates to be more understanding when a student with special needs behaves inappropriately because they could not interpret social cues. Also, peer mentor programs permit older students to interact with special needs students in a more structured way. Pairs of 7th and 8th grade volunteers could plan fun activities for their special needs schoolmates for one period a week. Depending on how many volunteers step forward, middle school students may have several opportunities each school year. In addition, suggest that parents of applicants maintain or begin a relationship with their Local Educational Agency. In this manner, they can access related or direct services from their local school that they are legally entitled to receive. Finally, beware of the “bridesmaids” and “groomsmen”! However well meaning, some peers may overwhelm their special needs counterparts. The goal is for all students to increase their independence. By allowing peers to fuss over and perform tasks for the special needs child, we can rob them of their independence and a valuable opportunity to model the behavior of another student.

Increasing accessibility in Catholic elementary schools does not mean that the supports will be identical to those of the local public schools. For example, inform parents up front if you cannot guarantee aides will accompany children with disabilities at all times. In fact, doing so may be isolating for them and may rob them and their classmates of valuable problem solving opportunities. In addition, limited resources may dictate that related services such as Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, or physical Therapy cannot be provided. Furthermore, the goal of inclusion is to challenge a child academically, therefore exemplary grades are not guaranteed but must be earned on appropriate assessments.

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Increasing accessibility in Catholic schools may not be easy and it may not be done overnight, but it can be done. May God bless your efforts to do so!

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Eileen, thank you for all the detail you have provided about how a Catholic elementary school can assess an individual student's needs and determine how best to support this child as a member of the school community. The resources you have offered are quite valuable.

We now ask our audience to give us some idea of the challenges you face in including students with disabilities into your work. Please answer the poll you see on your screen. Check all that apply and then click Vote. We are most interested in the results of this poll. As you can see, it deals with whether assessments are available, whether your problems are in finding the finances to support services or whether you have done pretty well on the academic modifications you need to make, but somehow the social aspects of having a student with disabilities is still a challenge. So please go ahead and select those that apply in your case and go ahead and vote. Let's see what we have. Supporting students with more severe disabilities it seems that and financing support services. I think all of us would not find those surprising. But it is nice to know actually that so many of you are at the more advanced challenges and it looks like lots of people have in fact been able to deal with some of the other things.

During the remainder of our time we are pleased to respond to the questions you have e-mailed us. As we mentioned before, if we do not have time to answer all the questions submitted, we will try to e-mail you an answer within several days of the webinar. If you wish to have us e-mail you a response, please include your e-mail address with your question.

I am happy to say that the handbook for the Diocese of Orange is currently on the website for the ncpd.org and so questions about forms that Sally talked about or that modifications or accommodations can be obtained there. You won't have to wait for that.

These are some of the questions that have come in. Fairly basic one, perhaps we should have started with. How are you at defining a disability? Sally would you like to take that one?

Sally Todd, Associate Superintendent, Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools

We consider a disability in two senses of the word. It can be identified through psycho-educational evaluations or it can be identified in relationship to just a student's particular need in learning. Disability can also be a physical disability. It is a broad spectrum range, the public school identifies a disability in a specific way as far as through their psycho-education evaluation. We look at a student that has a need and we try to meet that need whether or not that need has been identified through the public school. It is a broad category and I think it is one that you have to determine within your school site whether you can either meet or whether you need to modify or accommodate for.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

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Okay, thank you Sally. Your response to that really relates to some other questions that came in that deal with why do the public schools use an IEP, an Individual Educational Program and the Diocese of Orange uses an ILP and some others use something else. The IEP, as Sally pointed out, really relates to what the public schools are required to do by law. They specifically -- federal law and the state Board of Education have definitions and the federal law requires an individualized educational program. But it is for very specifically defined disabilities. As both of our presenters have explained, we really look at what specifically a child needs. It may not be a full-scale disability in one area, but we still want to meet the need. That is a more modified plan is generally what the Catholic schools and they don't just copy the IEP, that would not be appropriate because that's based on federal law.

A couple of other questions that came in. This is I think really a very important one. What steps do any of us recommend to get the staff and the teachers to commit to a philosophy of differentiated instruction? Would one of you like to take that?

Sally Todd, Associate Superintendent, Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools

I think staff development is key in this particular area. We encourage all of our schools to provide intensive staff development in understanding and meeting special needs learners. Also, it is just good practice in relationship to a classroom situation to differentiate -- differentiate instruction. It also comes down to supervision and evaluation of teachers based upon research based interventions and research-based instruction so the principal has a very strong role in moving the course of inclusion in relationship to the classroom teacher. On a diocesan level, we move and encourage our schools on the school level -- principals move and encourage schools and their classes. Teachers need to continue to meet the needs of all students that they have within their classrooms.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Thank you Sally. Eileen I will toss these your way. Several people have asked how you deal with a student that is passive aggressive or generally has emotional or behavioral challenges that confront the classroom teacher.

Eileen Grams, Inclusion Specialist, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Elementary School

Well I think the social skills and life skills aspect of the program would be important. If you don't have something like that currently in place, just be sure that you are making very specific requests and recommendations of the child and the parents. It may not be possible to do it on your own, but is counseling a piece of that. I think that's important especially as the child moves forward. As I mentioned, I think in my presentation, role-playing can be very effective with students if they see how the behavior appears to others, that can be motivating to them. I think if you get very specific with a child, out of the classroom of course, not in front of their peers and hold them accountable then we have found not that it changes overnight, but it definitely grows over time that the child is moving in a positive direction.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Thank you Eileen. Sally, do you have anything to add to that?

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Sally Todd, Associate Superintendent, Diocese of Orange Catholic Schools

We have found that a program called Love and Logic, it's a discipline program. I don't have, unfortunately, the site for that, but I can certainly get it to anyone. But it is a program that has worked very well with behavioral issues within some of our schools and has been effective.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Thank you for that resource Sally. Another question that came in is and I think this relates to a lot of the experiences we have all had. You have students in school and they were admitted to the school without any particular knowledge that they had a disability and then as they are in the school longer it becomes apparent that there is perhaps a disability. For example, the teacher suspects they may have ADHD. How do you work with a family when there is a suspected, but not confirmed disability, with a student that is not succeeding terribly well in the classroom?

Unidentified Female Speaker

I think it's important for the school to recommend assessment. You need additional information regarding that student's performance and what is hampering or hindering that performance in the classroom. If the parents are hesitant in that area you have to make the decision as a school whether you can continue to meet the needs of the students regardless of lack of assessment. It does the student a disservice if we do not know what is happening to that student or because of that, how we can help that student. So putting it in a very proactive way and suggesting sometimes low cost assessments programs might benefit the parents in moving in that direction and help the school.

Unidentified Female Speaker

I would also suggest that if you are providing support to the student, as I think you should, even without a label or a formal diagnosis that you know as the child moves forward and gets more toward the middle school level it may be appropriate if there has not been a diagnosis to say, okay, let's see what happens. We will not let the child sink or swim, but considering the fact there is no diagnosis, perhaps we will pull back a little bit on the support because we don't want them to move on to high school and not have the diagnosis that would allow them to receive the support. Let's see what happens more toward the middle school level if we gently pull back and then in that manner may be the parents will understand that yes, my child does need the support so I need to go through with the steps that are necessary in order to get the formal diagnosis.

Marie Powell, Executive Director, USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education

Thank you both Sally and Eileen for the answers to the questions that have come in. We had additional ones that we were not able to answer, but we will try to do it subsequent to this particular program if we can.

At this time we need to close our question and answer session, but we want you to know about other related programs. We invite you to join us on February 16, 2010 for Part II of Access in Catholic Education for students with Disabilities. This will focus on how Catholic high schools can become more inclusive. We hope many of you are able to participate in this session too.

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**Transcript:
National Catholic Partnership on Disability
“Access in Catholic Elementary Schools”
October 13, 2009**

Another webinar sponsored by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability will be next Tuesday, October 20, 2009 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Eastern time. The topic will be “Access to Tools in Addressing Suicide: Pastoral Supports and Prevention Strategies.” This, unfortunately, is a pastoral challenge that many of us have faced. You may register for this webinar on the ncpd.org website.

If you are interested in a whole conference devoted to serving students with special needs, you may want to attend a conference in Anaheim, California in January 2010 sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association. Information on registering is on the NCEA website. Sally and the Diocese of Orange would be delighted to have you visit southern California.

We wish to thank you for participating in today’s webinar. We are convinced that our faith inspires us to look at all options for making Catholic schools, programs, and parishes as inclusive as possible. The Catholic community is so fortunate to have the personnel and resources of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability to assist us in our work. Some 14 million Catholics have some type of disability. The NCPD relies on funds from members, affiliates, donors, and grants. I encourage you to consider supporting the work of the NCPD with a donation.

Sally, Eileen and I are grateful to NCPD for hosting this webinar and wish to thank Dr. Nancy Thompson, Jan Benton, and Bob Quinlan from the NCPD staff for their extensive assistance in making this form of professional development available throughout our nation.

As the final part of this webinar, please complete the Evaluation on your screen. You must do this within 20 minutes or the site will close down at that time.

In closing let me say: May God bless your efforts on behalf of all of his children. Thank you again for joining us.

Operator

This concludes today’s teleconference. You may disconnect your lines at this time. Thank you for your participation.

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