

INCLUSION BY NOT EXCLUDING IN THE FIRST PLACE

School: Fulton Elementary (K4-5), Lancaster, PA. (Approx 50,000), Student population: 472 (42% Latino, 33% African-American, 24% white, 1% Asian-American), 90% poverty level.

In a school district that averages 24% students in special education Fulton elementary and J. Drue Miles, Principal, has a special education student body of 4% and that 4% is included. Through the use of asset based community development principles and systems theory thinking Fulton Elementary has gone from 25% (the district norm) of the student body served in special education to only 4% in eight years. "It's a culture," says Mr. Miles "nobody talks special education or thinks in out-of-my-classroom strategies. We simply use a variety of strategies to make learning available to everyone."

The district and school use a three-step process to serve students. Tier one is a teacher requesting individual consultation regarding a student. Tier two is the formation of a small team for consultation. Tier three is a coordinating council that considers students potential as a special education student. Mr. Miles suspended tier three meetings and expected all students to be served by teacher (peer) consultation and assistance.

The key, according to Mr. Miles, is that teachers as a group identify student problems as student competency issues not teacher competency issues. Once the vehicle for passing a student to special education was eliminated (no more tier three) the practice of taking what is considered the lower portion of students and recommending special education came to a halt. By eliminating a relied on process Mr. Miles displayed understanding of the complexities and actions of systems theory.

Mr. Miles decided that the faculty and professionals in the school had the required talents to keep all children in the classroom. He created a resource bank (see asset based community development) of staff skills, talents and interests. Each time a faculty member approaches Mr. Miles about a student he searches the resource bank for the person with the solution. A common gate to special education, in Mr. Miles' experience, is the practice of labeling a first grader with phonemic awareness deficits. The Fulton Elementary speech therapist has competency regarding phonemic awareness and listed a skill for teaching teachers. The therapist has further expressed a desire to get out of the speech office. Now Fulton has a speech therapist that enters the classroom, implements strategies for the student, mentors the teacher, and the student stays in the first grade.

At Fulton Elementary 18 students out of 472 are in special education and most students and faculty cannot identify them to visitors. Four students are in a segregated classroom and are served by an agency separate from the district. Drue Miles explains his motivation and the past problem, "The existing systems causes children to be classified as "thought-to-bes (a term used to define children not yet labeled as special education students and under observation). I was a special education teacher and I dealt with the reality of teachers not wanting children in their classrooms. I wanted to purify special education. Now teachers can do real inclusion and special education teachers can be a real part of the school community"