

The Role of *Specials* & Student Services Educators in *College and Career Ready Focused Schools*

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with

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There is no shortage of discussion around the importance of preparing the children of our Nation for college and career readiness—even in the middle school and elementary years. There is however, a dire need for better focus and support for all the areas we call *Specials* and Student Services—Music, Media/Library Art, Physical Education, Counseling, Nursing/Health, World Languages, Safety & Security, Office Support team members and the others. For the most part, in far too many schools and school systems, we do not recognize these areas as core or even necessary work in this age of high stakes accountability. Worse, many schools and school districts have cut-back or even cut-out the quality, frequency, and offering of these important subjects and services which limits opportunities for students.

In the Chicago-based *Distinctive Schools* network of K-8 charter schools, there is a keen focus on the importance of the *Specials* areas rooted in three fundamentals:

1. *Specials* areas must be taught or led by a highly-qualified and well-credentialed educator in the subject area or service.
2. *Specials* areas must have a stand-alone academic or developmental priority in the education of every child.
3. There must be well-developed linkages among each of the *Specials* areas to the core subject areas and to the college and career ready strategies employed in the school.

Due to a change in the management contracts for the *Distinctive Schools* network of schools in Chicago—every employee had the opportunity to re-apply for his or her prior position in the network. This afforded the *Distinctive Schools* team to ensure the credentials and experiences of each *Specials* area teacher and paraprofessional was of high-caliber.

Each *Specials* area educator ensures a strong fidelity to his/her area of study and quality of instruction in the area of study or service. Additionally, their curricular work is mapped just like each of the “core” subject areas.

Even though school schedules in the *Distinctive Schools* network are as time-challenged as is the case in other schools, each *Specials* area is carefully arranged to ensure the maximum instructional or developmental effect is created for the students.

The work of planning linkages from *Specials* areas to core subjects has been carefully designed by all the *Specials* educators. School and network leaders facilitated the

planning, but the educators themselves completed the concept development and action plans.

In the Fall of 2011, Student Services and *Specials* educators attended data information sessions along with their colleagues teaching in core subject areas. Together they achieved an understanding of NWEA Rausch Interval Test (RIT) ranges used to assess how much academic growth each student must make to be on track for college and career readiness by the time they reach 8th grade graduation. Then, in a separate work-group *Specials* teachers tackled how the *Specials* areas and student services staff could best support students in becoming on-track for career and college readiness.

This inquiry was guided by the following questions:

1. What role do we play?
2. How can we support core subject area teachers?
3. How can we support our students to be college and career ready?

The inquiry was led by two of the *Distinctive Schools* network leaders to, in-part, relay the importance of Fine Arts and Student Services educators in the network. The work session also encompassed the importance their roles are in supporting students reaching their academic goals, while also providing each student with a balanced, safe and emotionally enriched environment. In the past, Student Services and *Specials* area educators affiliated with these schools were given “free time” during core area teachers’ professional development time and were not required to know about the academic goals of the campuses. The difference was part of the *Distinctive Schools* network philosophy that we are all one team of educators working with the students to support them however necessary. The importance of all educators playing an equally important role in helping students becoming on-track for college and career readiness permeated the work session.

For the work 3 critical areas of focus were explored

1. What do we mean by becoming on-track for college and career ready?

Student Services areas specialists examined their role in student advocacy, knowing and acting upon students’ needs, fostering confidence, maturity, study and self-starter skills. They also examined their roles in tending to the student health, and building students good habits around punctuality, responsibility, social skills, and organizational behaviors. There was discussion affirming that in the Student Services areas, we can best plant the seed for college and high-wage earning careers with the students.

Counselors and Social Workers examined their roles in helping to shape students’ attitudes and good habits around maintaining good perspective in what it takes to work toward college and career readiness, good discipline, and concentrating on their academic work without other life-factors negatively affecting their academic progress. This group also honed their work in the uses of their 8th grade advisory time to reinforce what needed to be done to achieve college and career readiness.

Physical Education teachers focused their time on this critical area on their roles in problem solving, advancing social skills, helping students master metacognition in thinking about how they learn in conjunction with what they learn. Team work and how to foster that within their students was reinforced. Predictably the PE teachers also honed in on how important physical health and fitness are to the academic development of their students.

Foreign Languages and Character Education educators focused their time on their roles in shaping critical thinking, emotional maturity, open-mindedness, curiosity, organizational skills, positive demeanor, communication skills, creativity, and reflective self-awareness.

Art teachers navigated their roles in problem solving and communicating ideas and the importance of visual literacy, visual culture, and appreciative inquiry on the parts of their students.

Paraprofessionals and Teaching Assistants brought clarity to their roles in helping students, understanding daily tasks and demands, modeling appropriate social and problem-solving skills, preparation for the future, self sufficiency and communication and maintaining students' focus on achieving their goals. This group also reinforced the importance of a safe and motivated environment where students feel comfortable for change and transition, and making the work a "family and school community effort."

Music teachers offered their commitments to instilling motivation for continuous learning, helping to increase student desire to seek out new experiences, becoming more open minded to new music and cultures, students responsibility for learning, providing students with unique opportunities and experiences in creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication, and being part of an ensemble (team), performing and analyzing performances, communicate meaning through musical experiences and different ways of thinking about the world.

Media Specialists focused on student wherewithal to successfully complete college and effectively managing their educational pursuits and assume responsibility for their own actions, developing effective communication skills and having a plan and taking ownership of their path.

Media Specialists work also re-affirmed their roles in student academic achievement in students' research skills and writing about and presenting topics of interest or necessity. The Media Specialists also saw their role clearly around helping to emphasize college, exploring "the future" and emphasizing how knowledge extends beyond the classroom walls. The media Specialists also understand their role in creating an environment to successfully and appropriately use social media.

2. What is the meaning behind the benchmark assessments and progress monitoring used by *Distinctive Schools*?

The *Specials* teachers and Student Services staff explored, in facilitated discussion, what the benchmarks look like and how they could support students and core area teachers in reaching each students' individual academic and benchmark goals. A summary of NWEA protocols and use of the RIT equal-interval, vertical scale core assessment was conducted. The facilitators walked the group through what their core subject area teachers were doing in the other breakout session. Facilitators modeled the graphing process to be used for setting the necessary individual student trajectory to be on track for college and career ready. The group also identified what a student's progress report looks like from NWEA.

3. What are the 9 widely accepted 21st Century thinking skills for students and which are well-suited for the work in *Specials* area

Distinctive Schools Student Services staff and *Specials* teachers studied the nine 21st Century high yield instructional strategies by Robert J. Marzano (2001). Six of the strategies were developed in the workshop to bolster the work of *Specials* teachers and student services educators to provide structure on how to embed these skills to guide instruction and support students in each of their roles.

In *Classroom Instruction that Works*, Marzano (2001) and his colleagues identify nine high yield strategies through a meta-analysis of over 100 independent studies. They determined that these strategies have the greatest positive effect on student achievement for all students, in all subject areas, at all grade levels

Six of the nine 21st Century thinking skills were selected and developed in the work sessions to bolster the work of *Specials* educators to provide structure on how embed these skills to guide instruction and support students. For each of the skill areas Music, Art, Physical Education, Media, Foreign Language and Student Services educators explored these positive examples of how this 21st Century skill can be reinforced in their settings:

Skill 1—Setting objectives and providing feedback

- Teacher feedback is specific to song being rehearsed
- Students give teacher feedback on songs they would like to learn and perform
- Stating lesson focus and allowing students choices of different levels of each activity
- Instant feedback during activities
- Including peer feedback components into lessons
- Objectives displayed on classroom walls and stated verbally by students before class starts
- Learning objectives are posted but still allow flexibility for student feedback and interests
- Goals displayed and focus of lesson stated

- Students signed behavior contract to be in compliance with school and classroom rules
- Goals vary per student need
- Keeping in compliance with behavior plans and IEP goals and benchmarks

Skill 2—Identifying similarities and differences

- Comparing loud and soft music, different styles, long and short sounds, high and low sounds, different instrument sounds
- Aerobic versus anaerobic
- Throwing a football versus a baseball
- Comparing different propaganda techniques
- Comparing and contrasting language used in different situations
- How certain holidays are celebrated in Spanish speaking countries in comparison to the USA
- Comparing and contrasting colors (warm vs. cold, light vs. dark) and artwork (themes, subject, mood)
- Students share how they relate to works of art (similarity)
- Cause and effect
- What they did versus how they could do it differently

Skill 3—Homework and practice

- Large group (music) rehearsal
- Practicing an instrument, piece of music, or song
- Journal for personal reflection
- Practicing skills
- Practicing movements
- Activity choices to work on specific areas that a student feels they need practice
- Independent reading
- Writing rough drafts
- Students practice days of the week and high-frequency words in a class setting as well as individually
- Students practice art skills by doing a rough draft and then final or practicing a skill in their sketchbooks
- Practicing skills modeled in class at home for homework
- Practicing anger management and coping skills, especially in Student Services venues

Skill 4—Reinforcing effort and providing recognition

- Different students play different parts
- Complimenting a student on their improvement and practice
- Special performances for parents and teachers
- Small group meetings and lessons to provide individual help
- Knowing what to do, not necessarily how well your skill is
- Rewarding for effort and participation

- Students asked to share exceptional work with the class. Class provides feedback.
- Possible rewards for students who go above and beyond and exhibit positive effort (Eagle tickets)
- Whole class recognition for a job well done
- Students are given “bocas” (mouths) for answering questions in Spanish and are given “orejas” (ears) for showing good listening skills. Certain bocas and orejas are tagged for rewards at the end of class.
- Complementing students on specific visual elements
- Have several bulletin boards throughout school to display work
- Always giving possible rewards. Students work towards a goal. This shows they are getting recognized for their behaviors.

Skill 5—Cooperative learning

- Instrument and voice part of sections
- Team building
- Random groups (keeping students from choosing friends)
- Peer assessments
- Small group components to projects
- Classroom student-led discussions
- Peer editing and assessment
- Students participate in centers. Certain centers are designed for different ability levels while others are used to pair up high and low level students
- Pair and share: Art vocabulary words
- Pair and share: describing a new piece of art
- Collaborative drawing games where one person begins and someone finishes their drawing
- Social skills plays

Skill 6—Nonlinguistic Representations

- Moving and dancing to music
- Students pantomime instruments that they hear in the music
- Visualization of movements
- Visual success- make a shot, catch a ball
- Student projects include options to present information in a nonlinguistic manner (PowerPoint presentations, posters, illustrated stories)
- Visual representations of information are provided when possible (charts, graphs, etc.)
- Students will create illustrations to demonstrate comprehension of Spanish high-frequency words
- Visual examples to demonstrate objectives
- Students create maps of project to have a plan of action when they color (like a blueprint)

- Visuals of coping skills
- Books students make to illustrate feelings and situations

At the conclusion of the work session, the *Distinctive Schools* network of *Specials* educators provided evidence of their positive attitudes and affirming direction for the work ahead through an exit-ticket (feedback) activity. Exit ticket comments were also directed at next steps each member of this team deemed appropriate for their group and for the Distinctive Schools network as a whole. Verbatim of these comments can be found at URL: distinctiveschools.org click on **The Role of *Specials* Teachers in College and Career Ready Focused Schools**.

By helping *Specials* teachers and other “non-core” staff create linkages to high-stakes accountability we increase the odds for increased cognitive development and accelerated academic achievement. Evidence is borne-out in the Art classroom, where lessons in visual perspective link to lessons in estimation and geometry in Mathematics. Evidence is borne-out when uses of crisp consonants and phonemes are linked in students’ minds in their English Literacy Arts work to their study in Foreign Languages. Mathematics skills in measurement and computation are reinforced in their study in Music when navigating new rhythmic and notational patterns. The evidence is strong, but less useful unless explicitly discussed, agreed upon and mapped between core area subject teachers and *Specials* teachers. Our *Specials* teachers and student services staff are making connections to the Common Core State Standards and Illinois state standards through their cooperative planning and instruction throughout the school year.

At a time when the work of schools has never been more critical we can ill-afford any group of educators to be left out of the work. This certainly includes *Specials* teachers and any other school team members not typically included in the work of the core subjects.

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