

**Vocational Agriculture Education and Students with Learning Needs**  
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**New Haven Teacher Evaluation Process 2008 – 2009 School Year**

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The last two decades has seen an enormous public policy shift in how we educate students with special learning needs or modalities (styles). Previously educational systems typically removed those students who had special learning needs from mainstream classes and provided separate special education services. For many educational researchers the results of this process was deemed insufficient and evidence indicated social equity and legal concerns. Today educational systems as prescribed by law to the greatest extent possible include these students rather than exclude them. Special education is now regular education with legally defined support such as modifications of instruction and accommodations for assessment or grading. That is often referred to as inclusion policies.

I'm certain in 1875 as the Grange organization was promoting the concept of vocational agriculture education across the United States no one envisioned Individual Education Plans or research driven teacher instructional practices for practical agriculture laboratories. That time is here now - no program is excused from following federal laws around I.D.E.A. So how do we modify instruction and how do we make appropriate accommodations to assist these students with special learning needs? The previous term itself has somewhat fallen out of favor – the term special is likely to be dropped to “learning needs” and the appropriate instruction to meet those needs instead of remedial or lowered achievement expectations.

The result, diminished achievement was associated with previous practices that society views as lowering learning and achievement standards for these students. How do we respond as educational professionals within existing educational organizations to ensure that all students can learn and achieve at a high level. How does a vocational agriculture classroom reflect this dramatic change in educational policy and secondly what can vocational agriculture teachers do to assist these students? I have listed two critical statements we need to consider.

**1) Achievement of students with learning needs are both resource and teacher/adult dependent**

If anything we can point to and identify as a tangible response to I.D.E.A. is a look at classroom resources. Students who learn best by text should have books, visual learners have posters and auditory learners have video and interactive media and applied learners manipulative/equipment. Inclusion has identified the need of more resource enriched classrooms. Technology and classroom organization has responded in substantial ways. For example we now encourage students to work cooperatively as a group or teams and not so much as individuals. Therefore more existing and newer classrooms have movable tables and chairs rather than the old single seat slanted tablet chairs. Fortunately Vo Ag

education was always more collaborative and group focused and this type of classroom organization was more typical than not. A move to lessen lecture as the primary instructional delivery method to varied styles is also quite evident. The front teachers desk has been moved to a teachers office in many schools.

Vocational Agriculture education has seen a move from assessments anchored by lower level thinking, such as fact recall to more mastery/fluency, higher order skills of problem solving, synthesizing and multidisciplinary approaches to learning. Across the curriculum reading and writing initiatives are reminders of the breaking down of rigid curricular divisions. Much of this “new” instructional practice had already existed in vocational agriculture coursework and labs for many years. Educational research has shown that a great proportion of special education referrals were for reading problems or language difficulties. The ability to read as well as comprehension is consistently linked to writing. Therefore this issue has been a focus of school reform or school improvement initiatives. Reading and writing is an area that has become a part of every discipline. Cooperative group reading and writing assignments are critical curricular instructional change. The most recent educational research for school success now has placed an emphasis from the student to the educator. That’s not just for special education or students with learning needs, but for all students. Decades ago, student failure was an acceptable casualty of the educational system. Today, it is not. The largest tangible result has been the student data/research data school improvement initiatives. It is a dramatic change in educational policy focusing on teacher beliefs and values. Every student can learn. Gone are the days when teaching time meant learning, we know that to be a false indicator of student achievement. Instead today, teaching is linked to instructional evidence that the learning needs of the students have been met, did the learning actually take place, and were the desired educational outcomes achieved?

Thus, a focus upon what instruction is appropriate to meet individual student learning needs. Documentation has meant more information (data) about each student and the instructional teacher response to that data often in a report form.

**2. The reporting and IEP goal process requires evidence and mirrors many school reform initiatives. [Some focus points to be considered for all students, what’s different].**

- Teacher instructional practices (best practices) are linked to student data and evidence of structured but flexible teacher instructional responses to student data. Attention is placed on learners or subgroups which data indicates response to peer tutoring, study skills grouping, assignment choices, student organizers, etc. would enhance achievement.
- Teaching is not learning “seat time” has no meaningful connection to achievement evidence, for Vo Ag its no longer just about the activity but what can be included with it. Students engaged and ready to learn the material, covering the material does not always equate to student mastery or fluency. Student

- engagement is closely associated to failure rates, teachers are frequently now seen as not directing instruction but facilitating it.
- Quantum shift in student classroom consequences - previous belief was that “students must learn” to “all student will want to learn.” Attendance and truancy policies speak to this change. If students wanted to attend school, were excited about their educational experiences and even looked forward to school, would truancy be a problem?
- Discipline policy or code of conduct often have legal mandates because school policies have been slow to recognize this change. So courts in many areas have stepped in. We now have functional behavioral assessments and improvement plans, as a response. A large part of this new requirement is defining student educational attitudes and aspirations, and as consumers of education rather than mere users of it. Monitoring changes to student attitudes and aspirations after instructional modifications has been shown to lower the drop out rate. But again if all students had positive school attitudes and enhanced educational aspirations would a reduced attrition rate be that surprising? New laws passed last year will set strict guidelines on school suspensions as evidence of this continuing policy shift toward in-school instruction instead of out of school punishment.
- Appropriate IEP teacher responses, evidence of appropriate instruction by teachers and specialists, its not that the adults desire to help but do they have the necessary skills/training to provide it? This is one of the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Is the IEP (which is a legal document) followed and file documentations are (reporting) periodic and timely. This shift follows the inclusion mandates of the 1990’s from self-contained or pullout classrooms to regular education mainstream classes. Documentation pieces surround the question of the student may be in the room but it learning really taking place but couldn’t that be said for other students?
- Huge transition in assessments such as CAPT are evidence of achievement as performance formative structure rather than a summary. The connection to preteaching, reteaching processes and numerous diagnostic assessments such as “finals.” There is little reteaching opportunity after a final. Assessments themselves are becoming learning simulations - constructed to elicit specific student responses in carefully created assessment “instruments.” (They have become both proactive diagnostic and reactive instruction).
- Differentiated instructional approaches - benefit all students not just those students with learning needs. I often hear teacher’s comment that this approach benefits all students and frequently they do examples below can be examined as responses to IEP others just improved or enhanced instructional practices

Some Examples

1. Study guides/review sheets, syllabus
2. Scoring and grading rubrics (course or special project expectations) with modified methods evaluation.
3. Across the curriculum approaches to reading, writing and mathematics (ie such as the aquaculture book list we started a couple of years ago).
4. Assessments that address higher order thinking and problem solving skills - provide for feedback to students (old vocational term trouble shooting).
5. Cooperative or flexible group work, batch assignments, special projects like posters or reports based upon interest.
6. Documentation of student learning profiles/portfolios and instruction to reflect them.
7. Cycle of continuous curricular improvement - materials are created in response to student learning goals - ie highly structured lesson plans.
8. Team approach to establishing educational objectives (PPT meeting process ) from goals. Getting together and talking about a student's progress which leads to instruction change.

Some things I will be looking for:

- Documentation of both collaboration and communication team work with student services success and failures to different instructional approaches/practices. (This worked, this didn't work with results/data to support conclusions). Reports will go into a student IEP file but again adjusting instruction to reduce learning barriers works with students outside of IDEA.
- Direct connections between classroom instruction without of class (homework) assignments, is the homework relevant and meaningful to students. Is it providing assessment progress information – reviewing and strengthening concepts and not introducing new ones? Is the length or duration of projects within a student's I.E.P.
- Behavior – modification/intervention plans and document evidence of strategies to extinguish non productive or disruptive behaviors with seat assignments, flexible groupings, non graded assignments, student/teacher contracts, etc.

A final note, students, parents and guardians have a much greater understanding of the teaching and the education profession. They seek more of a collaborative role in determining their educational experiences. Vocational agriculture education was the forerunner of course selection and school choice. Our Vo Ag senior year with special topics projects or research is an example of this early collaborative model. Today this role is far different and now includes how and where instruction is provided. This is called the least restrictive environment or LRE for short. Many parents and guardians have access to LRE information and the rights and responsibilities associated with it. More and more students themselves will be advocating to be taught with certain instructional styles or methods.

All educators must to be aware and respond to these changes in school law and policies.