

# Utilizing Differentiation, Co-Teaching, and Support Staff

by Kim Willard, T-C, '93 [kwillard@bcps.org](mailto:kwillard@bcps.org)



Kim Willard

## *MWP Mini-Grant helps make sense of alphabet soup*

In today's schoolhouse, educators have more on their plates than ever before, and the alphabet soup gets tougher to swallow with each year. Educators are more accountable than ever due to AYP, HSAs, MSA, SAT, ACT, AP, AVID, and, of course, the IEPs, EYS, FBAs, BIPs, AAC, and LRE that all fall under IDEA. Whew! It makes me tired (and hungry) just thinking about it.

As expected, schools are intent on the success of all students but there is also a new focus on some groups that previously have been overlooked. Since "No Child Left Behind" mandates that all subgroups of students meet with success, schools are taking a closer look at traditional special education classrooms and services.

As more and more students exercise their right to experience an inclusive education, educators must reconfigure time and resources to support students in general education classrooms rather than segregated, self-contained settings. The good news is that all students benefit when differentiation, support personnel, and co-teaching are used effectively and efficiently.

Thanks to the MWP Mini-Grant, a group of educators at Hereford High School formed a study group to consider these issues. Consisting of general educators, special educators, classroom assistants, and one-on-one support personnel, the group worked throughout the 2005-2006 school year to discuss books, share resources, and participate in a workshop with an ex-

pert in the field. This grant coincided with Baltimore County Public School's distribution of *The Guide for Inclusive Education* to all educators during a professional study day in October. It was during that presentation that the Hereford faculty was invited to join the study group that would meet throughout the year for further discussion and study.

The group began by reading and discussing *Inclusive High Schools*. As expected, the group agreed that all students should be given the opportunity to meet their potential in appropriate environments; however, group members had different ideas about whether or not students' needs could be met in the general education classes. The text provided real-life examples from the authors' experiences that added to the educators' own experiences. As the participants talked and debated, it was very obvious that all educators want to serve their students effectively; however, they are constantly frustrated with obstacles such as paperwork, bureaucracy, class sizes, schedules, and policies that keep them from implementing the most effective and efficient plans for their students. They know that the education can be better than it is but are not sure how to make that happen.

The school's PTSA supported the group by purchasing a copy of *The Inclusion Facilitator's Guide* for each participant. With its lists of "Inclusion is... and Inclusion is not...", this book helped the group members to visualize

effective inclusive education and consider what changes could be made in their own classrooms.

In January, Carol Quirk, Ph.D. from Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education visited the school for a half-day workshop for the study group and any other educators who wanted to attend. In her positive and enthusiastic way, Quirk explained how co-teaching, use of support personnel, and differentiated instruction can work together to provide quality education for all students. Her materials included a variety of planning tools that helped the participants visualize how schools and classrooms can become inclusive. With her light-hearted sense of humor and determination to help all students feel as if they belong to the school community, she helped the educators gauge their progress on the road to an inclusive schooling and determine what the next steps should be.

As the school year ended, educators' responses to the study group varied. Some felt that the information was life-changing while others felt that it was a "kind of refresher of best practices that all good teachers should be doing." One teacher felt that she envisioned herself as more of a "change agent" after the year of study. She commented that she needs to work on not making "separate inclusion steps" in her lessons for students who are supported by special education services, "as this can defeat some of the idea of inclusion." Another teacher commented that she realized that "one

modified worksheet is not differentiation.”

Now, these educators will work to create lessons that use the architectural concept of universal design so that one lesson can meet the needs of all learners in the room. Using universal design in the planning process creates a complete, seamless, efficient, effective, natural, and beautiful lesson rather than the traditional concept of modifying, or retrofitting, a typical lesson to meet the needs of different learners. It's the difference in buildings before and after the Americans with Disabilities Act mandated access for all. The giant ramp or boxy elevator that was added

to the Lincoln Memorial to allow access to all is an eyesore; it looks as if it isn't supposed to be there because it's not—just like supports added to an already-constructed lesson that is not designed for all learners; they were not part of the original design. However, the more recently constructed FDR Memorial, like a lesson designed to include all learners, is pleasing to the eye because, the belief that all citizens must have access was incorporated in the original design. No retrofitting needed. Beautiful.

The books, speakers and discussion often came back to the idea that communication is key. The educational

process needs to center on all students becoming empowered to advocate for themselves and determine their own futures. Educators, parents and students must keep the lines of communication open and be active members of the entire process.

Well, I hope you're hungry because we all might as well get used to the flavor of the alphabet soup—it will continue to be the main diet of educators for the foreseeable future. However, when educators are empowered to stir up those letters in the pot and focus on what's most important—the overall flavor, not the jumble of letters—everyone benefits.

## Talking Math

*Carol J. DePasquale, TC, '88 [cdepasquale@bcps.org](mailto:cdepasquale@bcps.org)*

### *MWP Mini-Grant establishes model program for math teachers*

Last summer, after receiving both an e-mail and a letter from Barbara Bass, I spent much time contemplating the invitation from the Maryland Writing Project asking T-C's to submit mini-grant proposals for a project of interest. While I thought the initiative was very interesting and several ideas for projects came to mind, I had no experience writing grant proposals. Although the format seemed manageable, I hesitated until I spoke with my principal. He pointed out that I had nothing to lose by trying and everything to gain. Had I known how true his words were to become, I never would have hesitated. The project that I completed with the mini-grant money has proven to be virtually life-changing for many people—but, I am jumping way ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning...

After dabbling with journal article discussion groups the year before, I decided to invite ten teachers and my two administrators to join me for a math book club. The plan was to read two books about math communication—one about math talk and the other about writing in math. We would meet periodically to discuss the books and their implications on our daily instruction. The mini-grant money would be used to purchase the books and to pay a small stipend to each teacher. It was my goal to raise the

awareness about the importance of effective communication in math in order to improve both the quality of math instruction and level of student achievement. In preparation for the first

session, the participants were to read a small section of the book and answer a few guide questions. We met in late October to discuss what we had read and written. As it was the first session, everyone was a bit unsure of what to expect or do, but we had a lively discussion, especially about “talk moves”—strategies teachers could use with students to encourage their thinking and talking about math. The group left eager to read the next section as well as to infuse some of the new strategies into their instruction.

While the first session went well, for the second meeting I decided to try to do more than just have the teachers chat about the responses they wrote to the reading guide questions. I focused the participants by doing partner discussions, some brief writing, and group sharing. They



*(continued on next page)*