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**SUCCESS**

## BEYOND THE IEP

Creating a small group for students with learning challenges can help them discover – and practice – what they need to be successful in college well in advance of setting foot on a college campus.

BY MATI SICHERER, ED.D.



In the brightly lit room, a few steps outside of the school counseling office, 10 high school students sit together around a long table and carefully read through their individualized education program (IEP). They read quietly, sometimes stopping to ask questions, sometimes scribbling notes on the margins of the documents. When everyone is finished, and after a brief reminder of the confidential nature of the group, I say, "Let's talk..."

The students in this group have all been in the special education system for most of their educational lives. They range in age from 15-18 and range across the board with learning challenges including dyslexia, dyscalculia, autism spectrum disorder and ADD. All of the students are here voluntarily, willingly giving up their class time, lunch or study hall for this weekly meeting where we talk about everything from how to access disability services on a college campus to frank discussions about social skills. Over and over again these students engage in dialogues with each other and with me that they had never engaged in before. We talk about the disabilities and challenges most of them have spent their lives trying to pretend did not exist. But in this room, once a week, we not only acknowledge their existence, we spotlight them.

The obvious question is why. Why create a group for college-bound students with learning disabilities? What difference does it make whether or not we talk about these learning challenges and the effect they have on these students throughout their lives? And finally, why should this fall on the school counselor when these students have case managers as well?

As school counselors, we serve important roles in helping to maximize student success. We are tasked with the enormous responsibility of addressing the academic, career and social/emotional development of all of our students. Within that role, we promote educational access and equity to all students and work diligently with our students to establish goals and develop their future plans. For many of our students, these goals and future plans center around college. We may spend many hours guiding their course choices, scheduling college rep visits, reviewing their transcripts and, eventually, guiding them through the college process. For our college-bound special education students, we make certain to create equity and provide them with the same opportunities as their peers outside of the special education realm. Yet, despite the seemingly equitable treatment, recent data from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) suggests high school students with disabilities are enrolling in postsecondary education programs at half the rate of all of their peers. The study also suggests that of those students who do enroll in college, only a third of these students graduate within eight years.

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Research also suggests several other issues that seem to be affecting the college attendance and completion rates of students with learning disabilities. Difficulty with self-advocacy and self-regulatory skills, a lack of knowledge about academic and social expectations in college, difficulty with perseverance, fears about stigma related to their disabilities and a lack of knowledge about how to access disability services seem to be contributing factors to the problem. According to the NCLD report, only 24 percent of all college students with disabilities informed their college about their disability. Of those who did not, a lack of understanding of the nature of their disability seems to be at the core of their decision not to disclose; 69 percent of those who did not disclose chose not to do so because they believed they no longer had a learning disability.

Our role as school counselors is about maximizing the success of all of our students. If, by providing the same services for both special and general education students, we are failing to see success with our special education students once they leave high school, then we have a unique responsibility to create appropriate and targeted programming for this population. As school counselors, and specifically as high school counselors, one of our key roles in maximizing this success is in helping prepare our students for the transition from high school to postsecondary opportunities. With our distinctive and expansive base of knowledge, we, in conjunction with case managers, special education teachers and parents, are the obvious starting point for creating this type of programming.

## Beginning Stages

The program we created at Wayne Hills High School in Wayne, N.J., is a skills-based group focused on key issues shown to have an impact on college success and retention. To facilitate this group there were several steps we had to take prior to initializing contact with the students and their families – and the most important one was buy-in.

Wayne Hills High School has approximately 1,400 students, and I am one of six school counselors. We follow our students from grades nine through 12; as such, I only know about one-sixth of the students. Thus, it was imperative to involve the other school counselors in group development. After explaining the group's purpose to the other school counselors and getting positive feedback and support, I then approached our child study team for input. Between the school counselors and the case managers, we developed a sizeable list of potential group members.

I then presented the idea and outline to administration and got their support and permission. I sent an initial interest assessment e-mail to the parents of the students on the list the case managers and the other school counselors and I had developed. I described the group's purpose and detailed the weekly topics we would address. Ten of the parents we contacted were interested in the group for their child. We interviewed the 10 students to ensure they would be a good match for the group and ended up inviting all 10 of them to participate. To be eligible, students had to have an IEP or a 504, had to express interest in attending either a two- or four-year college, had to be on track toward graduating high school and had to express interest in joining the group.

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After getting signed consent from the parents – and asking them to discuss confidentiality among group members with their children, we were ready to start. I developed a six-week schedule focused on a rotating period basis to avoid pulling students from the same class each week.



Week one began with a basic review of each participant's IEP. In our high school, where students routinely attend their IEP meetings, as do their school counselors, there is an underlying assumption that the students' attendance at their IEP meeting translates into an understanding of the challenges and strengths being addressed through the IEP. The first time the group met, after a few quiet minutes of pages being turned while they read through their IEPs, one of the group members finally raised her hand and said, "I don't get this. What is this, Dr. S?" The nine other group members were experiencing similar confusion.

It quickly became apparent that just because they'd attended their IEP meeting that didn't necessarily mean they fully understood their learning issues. Without this understanding, self-advocacy, an important aspect of college success, is not effective. I took the time at that point to sit with the students individually to review and discuss their IEP. Even more importantly, we discussed their challenges, how they dealt with them and what methods they had used to manage them. We followed up the IEP review with discussion and activities centered on discovering strengths and challenges and realistic goal setting. At the end of the session, we distributed an interest inventory and used the results to plan later discussion about finding the right school.

Week two focused on learning styles, stigma and acceptance of disability. Week three focused on self-advocacy, accessing services on campus and the difference between services in high school and college. Week four was about the use of assistive technology and study skills. Week five helped the students assess their own college readiness through executive functioning and reading self-assessments and discussion. Week six focused on finding the right school and assessing needs and different levels of support.

At the end of our six-week group, we sat together in the same room we had started in, long fluorescent lights blinking overhead, while we talked about colleges and careers and life and whatever else seemed to flow naturally through the time we spent together. We discussed roommates and eating alone in the dining hall and making mistakes and taking classes that were too hard. As the period wound down to its final 10 minutes, we reframed the discussion toward closure. We reflected about the things we had discussed through the weeks, including the most and least useful parts of the group and how to continue to implement the things they had learned. Right before the bell rang, as they gathered their backpacks and notebooks, I asked, "Any final thoughts?" "Well," said one of my students, "I've never talked about this so openly until now. I've never even told my closest friends that I have an IEP because it was too embarrassing, but you know, I'm definitely not embarrassed anymore. I feel good. This was good."

Mati Sicherer, Ed.D., is a school counselor at Wayne Hills High School, Wayne, N.J. She can be reached at [msicherer@wayneschools.com](mailto:msicherer@wayneschools.com).