

Something Has to Give

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“I need to speak to you immediately,” said Ms. Johnson, the director of Brightonville School. Laura Henderson thought to herself, what is it now?

When they were seated in her office, Ms. Johnson said, “Ms. Henderson, you are here to provide legally mandated resource room services to our students. I want you to see the students out of the classroom, but I do not want you to take them out of their academic classes. You may see them during their gym, art, or tech periods.”

“But Ms. Johnson,” Laura patiently explained, “I service students in two schools in this building. It’s impossible to adjust my schedule to satisfy everyone’s needs. Besides, the students hate it when I take them out of art and gym. Some of them simply refuse to come or disappear while I’m trying to pick up others.”

Ms. Johnson remained firm. “You must service these students daily; it is up to you to adjust your schedule.”

The meeting ended abruptly. Laura walked down the eight flights to her small room thinking of how she was going to teach these students.

Brightonville School for the Arts

The Brightonville School for the Arts (BSA) was a middle school located on the fifth floor in a hundred-year-old building. This building also housed Samuel Adams Elementary School on its first three floors and another elementary school on its fourth floor. BSA’s population consisted of 182 students: 58% of the students were Latino; 40% were African American; and 2% were Caucasian. 88% of the students were eligible for free lunch. There were three seventh grade classes, three eighth grade classes, and one self-contained special education class. The instructional staff consisted of eight full-time teachers who each taught one or two subjects. The director, Ms. Henderson, was the administrator of BSA. The other schools in the building each had their own administrator.

The instructional day was organized into eight periods; students traveled from room to room with all of their belongings, as there were no lockers. The school space consisted of eight classrooms. These were separated on opposite sides of the floor by the school gymnasium which was shared by all of the schools in the building. Students frequently crossed the gym to switch classes or used the restrooms which gave them the opportunity to misbehave.

Two years ago, Ms. Leota Johnson, was appointed administrator of Brightonville. Classroom management and school-wide discipline were already serious concerns before she took command. Since her arrival, half the staff voluntarily left and or was replaced each year. The new staff was unable to maintain consistent order either in or out of the classrooms. In the narrow, curved hallways, students cursed, yelled, pushed, and hit each other. Sometimes they kissed and hugged each other in equally inappropriate ways. During class, students were often disruptive and extremely disrespectful to adults. There were no consistent procedures for removing students from the classroom; often, they remained and impeded instruction from taking place.

This September, 9 out of 182 students in the general education classes had individual educational plans (IEP’s). Four students were in seventh grade and five students were eighth. By

December, this number had increased to fifteen: five seventh graders and ten eighth graders. These students were identified as having learning disabilities and/or speech and language impairment. They were mandated to receive special education services which included resource room, an academic program designed to help students with language arts and mathematic skills. A resource room student received service for 45 minutes—one period—a day in a group of up to eight students. Some of them also received speech and language services and counseling. Seven of the students had been retained for at least one year; two for three years. All of the students were reading and writing at least two years below grade level; two of the students had severe decoding problems which required an intensive daily program. Twelve of the students were functioning at least two years below grade level computational skills and mathematical problem solving.

The Educators

Laura Henderson was a special education teacher with twenty-two years of experience. For seventeen years, she taught early childhood, self-contained classes full-time and frequently taught resource room students as an after-school job. Five years ago, she came to Samuel Adams Elementary School and was assigned as a full-time resource room teacher for grades kindergarten through sixth. She had an excellent relationship with the newly appointed principal of Samuel Adams, Mr. Albert Rodriguez, who respected her experience and expertise. She regularly conducted after-school workshops for parents and staff, helped write grants, and worked on various other extra-curricular projects.

Even though Laura was a veteran teacher, she was secretly nervous about teaching upper elementary grade students. For over a decade, she had worked only with kindergarten and first graders. However, after the first few months, she began to gain confidence and enjoyed teaching material that was more academically challenging than the alphabet, colors, and numbers.

During her first year at Samuel Adams, Laura was told she would also service the seventh and eighth graders of BSA on the fifth floor. This not only made her nervous; but it terrified her. Although she was licensed to teach middle school, she had only two brief experiences at this level during the very beginning of her teaching career, and they were complete disasters. Mr. Rodriguez maintained firm discipline at Samuel Adams; the hallways were silent and each classroom's atmosphere was peaceful and productive. On the other hand, BSA was well known for its disrespectful students and chaotic atmosphere. This could be disaster number three. However, there were just five students who needed services at the time so it would only be for one period in the day. Laura rationalized: how bad could it be?

For the first three years, Laura serviced students within their regular classrooms to deliver instruction. The numbers of students she served then grew to ten and later to twelve so she spent two to three periods a day at BSA. She enjoyed collaborating with the veteran staff of English and math teachers and was able to work with her students on their assignments in their classrooms. Laura's own room was on the first floor of the building. There was no need to waste instructional time climbing up and down one hundred and twelve stairs with her students. If she needed to work with them separately, she pulled them into a corner of the room or into a small alcove in the hallway. The students were not always easy to deal with and the classrooms were noisy at times. Laura had difficulty seeing each student for the mandated time but she worked with them the best she could. She sometimes felt guilty that she did not have the materials, space, time, or professional support to give the students the instruction they needed. Laura sometimes thought that she was the only one who noticed or cared if she was even teaching her students.

When Leota Johnson became the administrator of BSA two years ago, she was determined to make significant changes from the way the former administrator, Ms. Romano, had run the school. She wanted to hold her staff accountable for providing the highest quality of instruction. She knew that the discipline had been lax, and she requested that her staff, half of whom were first year teachers, give her complete cooperation. She met with Laura and the other part-time special education providers at the beginning of the year and told them that they must service students exactly as indicated in their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). As the year progressed, Ms. Johnson observed Laura as she worked with small groups in the classrooms or the alcove in the hallway. Ms. Johnson was doubtful that Laura was seeing each student for the mandated amount of time; she inquired why Laura did not bring students to her first floor classroom.

From the beginning of the new school year, Laura found it difficult to address her students' needs. The new teachers could not control the classes and the noise level was often intolerable. Moreover, some of the students were openly rebellious against receiving her services because they were teased by their friends as being special ed students. When she entered the classroom, she would hear students yelling, "Your mommy is here!" Ironically, Laura frequently ended up working with students who were not SPED but were eager to receive her help.

Laura knew that working collaboratively with the teachers was crucial to helping her students succeed. Research showed that students were most successful when special educators and general educators worked together using team teaching models¹. But, in these studies, teachers were provided with daily common planning time in addition to individual planning time. Teachers in BSA had two daily planning periods since they were middle school teachers; Laura had only one planning period, since she was officially an elementary school teacher. Since this common planning time was not scheduled, Laura tried to implement written communication such as student progress logs and clearly defined teacher and student responsibilities with the teachers. Research showed that a transition procedure using this communication resulted in student improvement in the form of completed assignments and positive classroom behavior².

Even though there was no planning time built into the schedule, some teachers worked with Laura. Henry Bauman, the eighth grade math teacher, had taught at Brightonville for ten years and had twenty years of teaching experience in middle school, high school, and college. Although his class was noisy and chaotic at times, his lessons and assignments were clearly posted and it was easy for Laura to enter the room and begin instruction. Henry regularly discussed the curriculum, shared materials, and gave Laura monthly progress reports on her students. Henry and Laura exchanged information in random minutes grabbed from different parts of the school day: during class, in the hallways, at lunch, before or after school. The two teachers worked well together, because they respected each other's concern for the students and they both really enjoyed math.

Another teacher, Katherine Lewis, taught seventh grade English; she was in her first year, and had difficulty with behavior management. Still her lesson plans were thorough and the projects she assigned engaged the students' interests and built on their abilities. One month, Katherine and Laura made blank books from heavyweight drawing paper for students' reading response journals.

¹ Rea, McLaughlin, Walther-Thomas. *Outcomes for Students With Learning Disabilities in Inclusive and Pullout Programs*, 2002.

² De Norme, *Improving the Transition Process for Middle School Learning Disabled Students*, 1994.

Laura's other partnerships were not as fruitful. Ms. Johnson was fortunate to hire a veteran English and Social Studies teacher, Mrs. Alison, but she left at Christmas on maternity leave and did not plan to return. Jenny Holland, a pleasant, well-meaning first-year teacher, replaced her as a long-term substitute. Jenny's goal was to get through each day in one piece; the work she gave the students seemed to be randomly pulled from whatever material she could find.

Andrea Sullivan had worked at Brightonville for eight years as a computer science teacher prior to Ms. Johnson's appointment. She had earned her administrative certification and was disappointed in not being named director. Ms. Johnson aggravated the situation by reassigning Andrea as a science teacher and turning Andrea's classroom into her own office. This naturally led to a level of tension between the two women. Laura tried to work with Andrea, showing her how they could modify the reading material, but Andrea responded, "I can't afford to spend the time and effort on these few students when I have so many others who really want to learn."

The Situation Worsens

Even though Laura's caseload had increased to fifteen students, the time that was available to see them remained the same. According to their IEP's, the students could be seen in groups of eight which meant she could theoretically continue to work with them for two periods. A study was conducted which analyzed the effects of increasing the resource room group size from five to eight students³. While it did result in saving millions of dollars, the study concluded that the quality of services received was diminished and very little time was spent on individual instruction. Observations also indicated that about 25% of instructional time was spent escorting students to and from their classrooms.

Laura's first floor resource room had the dimensions of seven feet by eight feet. Mr. Rodriguez assigned this space to Laura because no larger space was available. He suggested that she could limit her groups to five students despite the eight student limit. Ms. Johnson insisted that Laura see her BSA students in this room as well. With only two periods available, this would mean one group of seven students and one group of eight students. Ms. Johnson told Laura that it was Mr. Rodriguez's responsibility to provide her with a larger space. She also told Laura that the students must be escorted to and from their classrooms to prevent loitering in the hallway. This meant Laura walked up and down eight staircases four times each afternoon which wasted time and physically taxed her. Finally, Ms. Johnson told her that the students should not be pulled out of core subjects, since they would miss instruction and would be unable to make it up.

While Laura bristled at Ms. Johnson's preemptory manner and fumed at the constraints of the situation, she secretly acknowledged that Ms. Johnson's demands had merit. Given the current classroom arrangement, it made sense for Laura to work with her students in a separate location. Laura could only work productively in the classrooms of two teachers whose schedules did not always coincide with the times she worked with the students. Moreover, the students she worked with in each grade were scattered among all three classes; she could not be in three rooms at the same time. Therefore, it made sense to pull the students out. But there was just no place big enough and quiet enough for her to see them. Mr. Rodriguez sympathized with Laura but could not offer her any larger space.

³ Gottlieb, *An Evaluation Study of the Impact of Modifying Instructional Group Sizes in Resource Room and Related Service Groups in New York City*, 1997.

Ms. Johnson also had good reasons for suggesting that Laura escort the students to and from her classroom. Students did act up in the hallway and on the stairwells. They also wandered around different parts of the building. Escorting them up and down the stairs prevented this. But Laura felt that if students were given the privileges that accompanied responsibility, they would meet her expectations.

It also seemed reasonable that students who struggled in their academic subjects should not be pulled out of them to receive resource room services. Yet Laura knew the students needed and enjoyed their gym and art periods. Plus, students were mandated by the state to receive physical education daily.

Every day Laura continued to work with students in a variety of ways. She entered each classroom to determine what instruction was taking place or spoke to the teacher in the doorway if she thought her entrance would create a disturbance. Laura decided day by day whether to teach in the classrooms or in her own room. She avoided Ms. Johnson as much as possible.

A Change for the Better

In February, a new teachers' contract provided the impetus for change. According to the contract, 37 ½ minutes were added to the instructional day for four days a week. This time would be used by teachers to work with small groups of selected students. Laura had worked during the hours of the Samuel Adams school day which were 8:40 to 3:00. BSA's school hours were 8:00 to 2:20. With Mr. Rodriguez's permission, Laura could use these 37 ½ minutes to service five of her most difficult Brightonville eighth graders from 8:00 to 8:38 in her own room. The students would come to her directly as soon as they entered the school. She could review their assignments and give them a positive start to their day. Moreover, she would be able to work with her the remaining students in groups of five during the afternoon periods.

When Laura mentioned this to Ms. Johnson, she replied in a noncommittal tone: "The students have English or mathematics first period. You must make sure you teach them all the material and bring them up to their classroom quietly."

Henry, the veteran math teacher, stated, "I think it's a great idea. If I'm giving a test or doing a project, I'll give you a heads up and you can push in."

Jenny, the bewildered English teacher, said, "That's no problem. Forty-five minutes without Danny, Deon, Carlton, Jackie, and Darwin is fine with me. I'll send you the work."

Finally Andrea, the science teacher, heard of the plan and remarked doubtfully, "Those students you mentioned rarely come to school on time. They come in between 8:20 and 8:45. They're not really morning people."

Laura declared, "Then they are going to become morning people! BSA's school day starts at 8:00, and if it requires calling their parents daily to remind them of this, I will."

Yet Laura knew Andrea was right. She would have five sulky teenage boys dragging into her room each morning. She would have to coax, motivate, and demand that they get their work done, while the students upstairs often socialized and wasted time during their first period. She still had ten more students to see during the rest of the day with the same problems of space, materials, discipline, and support.

Discussion Questions

1. Should supplemental instruction for special education students be delivered within the classroom or in a separate location?

2. How do small schools which share service providers with other schools ensure that services are delivered at an appropriate time in an appropriate space?
3. Why is no common planning time provided for teachers who service special education students? Why do teachers who service elementary and middle school students only receive one planning period per day as compared to middle school teachers who receive two planning periods per day?
4. Are middle school students who receive mandated special education services also entitled to receive physical education, art, and other special classes? How will their schedules accommodate both their classes and services?
5. Should group size be determined by the resource room teacher? Since the related service providers are allowed to determine and justify group size for each student, shouldn't resource room teacher be given the same flexibility?