

HIGHSOPE AND THE KEANSBURG SCHOOL DISTRICT'S Quest for Educational Excellence

by Amy Goerl

“Many teachers worry about having a child with a disability in their class. They worry they do not have the proper training or expertise to help the child or to deal with a child’s problems. They worry that the child will take up so much extra time and energy that the rest of the class will suffer. These are real and valid concerns. However, most teachers find that when they actually have a child with a disability in their class, the joys far outweigh the problems, real or imagined...”

— Steffan Saifer (as cited in ExchangeEveryDay, 2014)

I came upon this quote in *Exchange-EveryDay* (www.ChildCareExchange.com) recently in a brief excerpt on inclusive classrooms, and it truly struck home for me. I have dedicated my career to young children with disabilities as a speech therapist, as a teacher of preschoolers with disabilities, as a director of instruction in a private school for children with autism, and, finally, as a director of early childhood in an inclusive preschool program. In



Keansburg teachers evaluate children in authentic learning situations. By observing children engaged in activities of their choosing, they are able to document and plan for the children’s developmental progress.

every capacity in which I have served children and families, the joy, elation, and shared tears far outweighed the challenges and energy invested. Picture these experiences: Maggie takes her first steps, Jimmy says his first word, and Peter sits at the kitchen table and eats with his family without distress. Inclusion is about the right of every child to have a sense of belonging. Every child thrives when meaningfully engaged, acting independently and able to communicate interactively with peers and family members.

Many teachers worry about meeting the needs of *all* of the children in their classroom, and especially children with exceptional needs. It is logical to worry; teachers want to do a good job, and they want to see each child grow and develop.

The truth is that, as conscientious early childhood practitioners in high-quality HighScope classrooms, we have the capabilities to teach children with mild to moderate disabilities alongside their typically developing peers. We know child development; we understand that *all* children learn by having direct, hands-on experiences with objects, people, ideas, and events in the world around them. We know that when teachers act as partners in this process, by supporting and extending each child’s learning, children flourish. We know that children with disabilities are children first; they have individual strengths and challenges, as does each and every child in your classroom. The reality is that there will always be a continuum of learners in your classroom. HighScope practices address this continuum of needs, and to illustrate this, it is with passion and commitment that I will tell the story of the Keansburg Preschool Program.

In 1999, the Keansburg public school district’s small preschool program was extensively expanded as a result of a

New Jersey Supreme Court ruling (Abbott vs. Burke) that identified 31 “Abbott districts” — school districts in New Jersey that were given funding to ensure their students would receive a quality public education. As a result of the Abbott decision, more than 300,000 school-age children and 60,000 preschoolers from these low-wealth urban school districts were ensured a “thorough and efficient” education. The districts were directed to implement a comprehensive set of improvements, including a universal preschool for all three- and four-year-old children. The Keansburg Preschool Program was and is a state-funded, high-quality, full-day early childhood program that provides inclusive learning opportunities for children in the context of the HighScope

Curriculum. I joined the administrative team in the Keansburg School district in 1999 as Director of Early Childhood and served the children and families in that role until 2011.

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Key to a successful inclusive program is a philosophy and mission that clearly reflects the value of *all* children

and the involvement of families. It is essential that the program is “welcoming, respectful and accepting of children with special needs and their families” (NECTAC, 2010). The staff of Keansburg’s Preschool Program collaborated in developing their vision for the children and families in the community in the following mission statement for New Jersey’s Self-Assessment Validation Systems (SAVS):

The Keansburg preschool program believes that every child is entitled to a high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool experience that includes many active learning opportunities in an inclusive environment which respects and supports individual differences. We are committed to creating partnerships among families, communi-

The Keansburg School District provides the ingredients of active learning in abundance: open-ended materials, opportunities to manipulate materials, choice, opportunities for children to describe what they are doing and understanding, and adult support.





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ty members, and colleagues to ensure the success of every child.

The New Jersey Department of Education had comprehensive requirements for the Abbott-funded preschool programs, which were formulated on best practice. The *Preschool Implementation Guidelines* set the framework for program development while the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards* identified effective teacher practices and projected student outcomes. Each district was required to select a proven early childhood curriculum that aligned to the standards; Keansburg chose HighScope. Further guidance for our preschool program came from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Council for Exceptional Children in their joint position statement: “The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify early childhood programs and services are access, participation and support” (NAEYC/DEC final, 2009). Clearly, HighScope’s approach supports inclusion through three basic curriculum principles:

- All children in HighScope settings have *access* to interesting materials and activities.
- Adults use a range of strategies to encourage each child’s *participation* in play and learning.
- Teacher *support* is individualized, based on each child’s current and emergent abilities.

Successful inclusion begins with high-quality early childhood education. Keansburg’s program was established and monitored by the use of several classroom-based tools such as the *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECER-R)* and HighScope’s *Preschool Quality Assessment (PQA)*. The target was fidelity to the HighScope Curriculum, so extensive professional development was provided to all classroom teachers, teacher assistants,

speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, nurses, and the administrator. Two master teachers took responsibility for teacher coaching, and teacher evaluations were completed by the Director of Early Childhood. An annual review of the program was required by the New Jersey Department of Education through a tool called the *Self-Assessment Validation System (SAVS)*. The entire staff was involved in collaboratively completing sections of the review; we all owned it!

The goal of an IEP is to support the child in functioning in the classroom. By writing functional goals, the teacher puts the focus on promoting the child’s success in everyday activities.

HighScope and Inclusion

Keansburg’s Preschool Program meets the needs of all learners in the least restrictive environment, due to the dedication of the entire staff and their commitment to best practice. The program holds the following tenets of inclusion:

- *Access* to all activities.
- *Participation* with adjustments to maximize engagement.
- *Support* for children *and* teachers through collaboration and training.

The program’s inclusionary practices are extraordinary and are based on the following features:

1. *Well-constructed learning environments that are responsive to the interests and needs of young children:*
 - Distinct interest areas marked by simple signs

- Accessible shelves filled with interesting and authentic materials labeled in a variety of ways
- Sensory options in each center for children traveling through the sensory-motor stage of development
- A barrier-free classroom footprint so all children, including those with adaptive equipment and mobility aids, have access to materials
- Cozy corners for respite from overload or perhaps just a comfy place to work alone quietly
- Adaptive seating and strategic placement of visual supports
- Absence of clutter (randomly placed materials can interfere with a child’s goal-directed behavior)

2. *Presence of active participatory learning:*

- *Materials:* Abundant supplies of age-appropriate materials that are open ended and appeal to the senses.
- *Manipulation:* Opportunities for children to handle, examine, combine, and transform materials and ideas. Special equipment and modification of materials are made available as a support.
- *Choice:* Opportunities for children to choose materials, play partners, and activities, based on their own interest and initiative. This fosters children’s decision making and problem solving.
- *Child language and thought:* Opportunities for children to describe what they are doing and understanding. Children communicate verbally and nonverbally. They modify their thinking to incorporate new ideas. Adults validate communication and provide augmentative communication options as indicated.
- *Adult scaffolding:* Adult support is used to gently extend each child’s current level of thinking and understanding. Adults follow children’s interest, playing as a

partner and intentionally incorporating content that heightens learning.

Responsive teachers of children with exceptional needs recognize how to keep learning active with simple tasks and activities. They strive to teach the children functional skills so they can engage with the environment, gain independence, and acquire the skills needed to communicate and socialize.

The savvy teacher task-analyzes the steps of frequent routines and guides the children in learning those steps by using visual supports and mini-picture schedules when needed.

3. *Effective orchestration of the daily routine and routines within routines.* The natural place to begin is the daily routine. Teachers know that a consistent schedule provides comfort to children. They know the value of having a visual representation of the daily schedule; for example, if there is a change to the daily routine, it can be shown in a way that children can see and understand. It is also important to give attention to transitions. Children often have difficulty

with transitions, but they can manage such changes more easily if they know they are coming. Warnings are given before a daily routine element comes to a close. After an activity, children participate in cleanup to provide a natural “end” to the activity. The amount of time that children are waiting for the next activity to start is reduced when transitions are planned and engaging.

Recognizing routines within routines and setting clear expectations can support the children in becoming independent. Multiple routines occur daily in the classroom — for example, at mealtimes, when getting ready to go outside, when washing hands, or when brushing teeth. The savvy teacher task-analyzes the steps of frequent routines and guides the children in learning those steps by using visual supports and mini-picture schedules when needed. For example, the steps of *How to pump paint* into a cup may be posted with representative icons in the art area. Or perhaps a picture sequence of the steps of the arrival routine is placed by the cubbies. Pictured sequences come and go as the children acquire the skills.

4. *Participation in the development of functional goals for Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs).* The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 says that a child’s IEP must

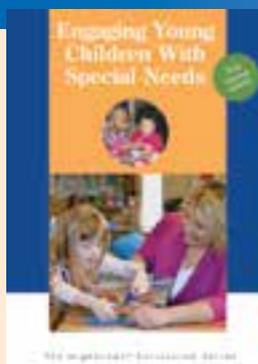
include a statement of measureable goals that “enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum.” Therefore, every child must have the opportunity to *access* and *participate* in classroom activities, and they must be provided with the necessary *supports* to experience the HighScope Curriculum.

Children with disabilities who are included in typically developing preschool programs have IEPs that are developed by an IEP team. The goal of an IEP is to support the child in functioning in the classroom. By writing functional goals, the teacher puts the focus on promoting the child’s success in everyday activities. The child will have more opportunities to learn and practice a skill if it is necessary for the child to navigate the daily routine. Typical preschool functional goals encourage engagement, independence, and socialization. For example:

- *Engagement:* Samantha will choose an activity during work time and work on it for at least five minutes.
- *Independence:* Carmen will unzip her coat and hang it up daily.
- *Socialization:* Dominick will sustain a reciprocal play interaction for five minutes, demonstrating two exchanges with a peer (exchanging a toy, sharing a toy, commenting on an action).

Family members play an important role as part of the IEP team as they work together with teachers to determine the skills and abilities their child will need to participate in the routines and activities of the home environment, the school, and the community.

5. *Use of embedded intervention.* Embedded intervention is an approach for addressing the individualized goals of the children with disabilities in their natural environments. If those goals and objectives are func-



Engaging Young Children With Special Needs DVD

Learn how HighScope’s active learning model provides inclusive experiences for children with or without disabilities, allowing all children to succeed. See page 35 for additional details. P1424 \$95.00

tional, it is easier to provide the child with learning opportunities in the context of the daily routine (see above). The teacher follows these steps: 1) creates a structured learning environment; 2) catches the child engaged in an activity that interests him or her; 3) approaches the child and supports/extends his or her engagement; 4) works on concept/skill development; 5) supports the child by commenting on what he or she has accomplished. The adult-

child interactions are genuine and authentic; the learning experience is meaningful because it is relevant to the child's interests.

Parents are partners in their child's education and frequently participate in the classroom.

6. *Strong presence of family involvement.* Parents are partners in their child's education and frequently participate in the classroom. The teachers provide workshops for the parents based on their interests and questions, and formal parent conferences are held three times per year to review their child's progress.

Keansburg preschool's functional goals encourage engagement, independence, and socialization.

The Keansburg Staff — A Committed Team

The passion and commitment of the Keansburg staff has made all the difference in creating a high-quality preschool program. To illustrate what I mean by passion and commitment, picture this: 250 anxious preschoolers sit on the floor in an auditorium as Cinderella runs down the aisle, followed by the charming prince and the ugly stepsisters. Giggles from the young audience are accentuated by enthusiastic pointing. Teachers clad in crayon costumes depicting the characters in the familiar children's picture book *The Day the Crayons Quit*, by Drew Daywalt, join the procession, while young voices exclaim, "That's my teacher!"; "There's Mrs. DeRock-er!"; and "Hi, Mr. John."

The aforementioned scenario took place at the annual "Big Show" that the Keansburg preschool staff puts on for their young learners. That tremendous staff continues to be dedicated to the children in the community. Those same staff members rarely leave the district because they are committed to providing the children with a rich, meaningful early childhood experience. Their passion is clear — you can see it, you can feel it; they simply represent the best of the best. The children of Keansburg receive an exceptional education because of a group of people who care deeply; and it *is* always about the people, right?



For a look at HighScope in action in the Keansburg School District, see the HighScope DVD *Engaging Young Children With Special Needs*, written and directed by Amy Goerl.

7. Ongoing assessment and collaboration: Daily team planning is an essential component of the HighScope Curriculum. In inclusive classrooms, specialists such as a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, a special education teacher and perhaps even a behavior specialist sometimes work alongside teachers in the classroom. Although they may not be present for team planning every day, the specialists meet regularly with teachers to monitor child progress. Together, the members of this extended classroom team develop targeted, child-centered objectives and strategies, try them out in the classroom, and evaluate their success.

Support services provided to the child by these specialists are integrated; the therapists join the children in the midst of the daily routine and assist them in achieving the objectives specified in the IEP. Through this practice, all professionals in the classroom can share knowledge. For example, the teacher learns about grasp patterns (e.g., the stages of a child's learning to hold a crayon) from the occupational therapist while the therapist learns developmentally appropriate ways to provide the child with opportunities to practice



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more mature grasp patterns in authentic learning situations.

Authentic assessment of children helps teachers see how each child is developing across domains. Objective observations and child portfolios provide teachers with valuable and practical information for understanding and planning for the developmental needs of each child. In the HighScope classroom, the *Child Observation Record (COR, or COR Advantage)* provides the targets for child development in each domain. In an inclusive classroom, other assessment tools often inform the teacher and therapists on achievement of the goals and objectives delineated in the IEP.

With all of the ingredients of active participatory learning in place, together

with the passion and dedication of committed teachers and staff members, all the children of Keansburg receive an exceptional education! ■

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