

How Should We Address Teacher Standards in North Carolina?

The Network of Training and Technical Assistance Programs (NATTAP) held a significant first annual conference in the last week of September, 2007, involving over 1400 participants. This confusingly-titled organization represents an important effort to bring together experts in education of individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Their objectives are to review current models of systems, best practice in research and intervention use and methods of capacity building. This organization, affiliated with and sponsored by the Autism Society of America, represents a remarkable network of educators dedicated to identifying what works in educating students with an autism spectrum disorder.

One outcome of the conference was a draft of National Teacher Standards for teachers of students with ASD. The draft was made available to conference participants for review and critique. It is worth noting that the Council for Exceptional Children is now reviewing the draft. Among its existing resources, CEC has lists of “core competencies” for entry level special education teachers. These are broken down by disability category and are available to members at <http://www.cec.sped.org>. The complete document regarding these core competencies is titled What Every Special Educator Must Know: Ethics, Standards, & Guidelines for Special Educators.

The draft of National Teacher Standards for Autism Spectrum Disorders, according to Dr. Brenda Smith Myles, represents a more thorough and specialized set of proficiencies. Whereas the CEC document is for ‘entry-level teachers,’ this draft is an effort at setting standards for teachers with experience.

On first review, this set of National Teacher Standards is disarmingly thorough. The seven page draft provides 30 goals for teacher quality with related objectives. It represents **a set of career goals for educators**, not necessarily a set of skills that our teachers may have after 2-3 years of teaching experience. Rather it represents a framework for teacher excellence and, in some cases, looks to be a set of resources and abilities that an entire school system should address and not just with one teacher. At a time that we face a crisis in hiring qualified teachers, the gap between this description of excellence and the pool of candidates for teaching positions is problematic. The ‘entry level’ competencies in What Every Special Educator Must Know is already a challenge to effect at the local level, considering lateral entry teachers and the objectives of our institutes of higher education in preparing teachers.

Tiers of Excellence:

Do we need to break this down into tiers of performance? Can we create subsets of skills that would be attainable for teachers in shorter time periods? Setting the bar at a high level is necessary but setting it too high could be discouraging. If we create levels of proficiency, will this help us support teachers in skill development?

Which are Teacher Goals and Which are System Goals?:

There are several goals that point to the responsibilities of the local educational administration and program specialists who support the teachers in the classroom. Do our teachers need to be experts on legal issues, on diagnosis, on a broad base of current research and publications, and on training paraprofessionals? How do we break this down to encourage knowledge while not overwhelming the teacher?

Consistency of Framework:

Whereas the 'entry-level' competencies are set up on a framework of 10 standards, the ASD standards are broken down into 5 categories. Then there is the issue of how school-based administration evaluates teachers of students with autism spectrum disorders. Is it reasonable to expect a principal to review the CEC standards and the national standards while using a very specific teacher evaluation instrument supplied to him or her by the school system? And be aware that the teacher performance plan that the principal uses may be based on a different set of categories that resemble this framework but not precisely.

Training of School-Based Administration:

Some of our truly invested teachers will go to every training opportunity that they can. Others will not. Performance plans are required in teaching. Do our principals know what quality in these goals looks like? Do our principals recognize concrete features of excellence and specific precise areas of need? Can they point to where training is necessary and make it a part of the teacher's performance plan? Simply put, we need to make the standards accessible to school-based administration. We need to identify what deficits look like, identify the training opportunities that will address the deficits, and support our principals to encourage and require proficiency. Tying these standards and the solutions to existing performance plans is necessary.

Proposal for North Carolina:

We need a broad group of experts- university experts, teachers, administrators, and parents, to start with these National Standards, to review efforts by other states (there are many working on this), and to develop a 'teacher-friendly' set of tiered standards based on existing performance models in North Carolina. On the one hand, we need to address base level standards (support our lateral entry teachers) and expert standards (our career teachers). Do we create levels within the performance indicators? This requires state level involvement as well as local experts.

If you are interested in this project or have suggestions, please send comments to John B Thomas at the Autism Society of North Carolina (jthomas@autismsociety-nc.org).