



The Community School
of Bergen County

*For the child whose
potential exceeds performance*

PROFESSIONAL MONOGRAPH SERIES

THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL OF BERGEN COUNTY ■ MONOGRAPH NUMBER ELEVEN ■ JANUARY 2000

A Comprehensive Program for the Learning Disabled Child

by Isabel Shoukas, Principal, Lower School

Thirty years ago Dr. Beatrice Lieben designed the Community School to demonstrate how a strong academic program would successfully meet the remedial and developmental needs of the learning disabled child and to prove that many of the emotional and academic delays could be resolved within the school's therapeutic milieu. These principles provide the foundation of our work and remain as valid today as they were when conceived. We subscribe to this mission even as our program has changed and evolved over the years.

The curriculum at Community School is tailored to meet the individual needs and learning styles of our students. Remedial strategies are developed to accommodate goals and objectives in basic skills such as reading and writing.

Remedial services also include speech and language therapy and behavior management techniques. Our students are intellectually bright and need, in addition to remediation in basic skills, enriching instruction in the conventional school curriculum. Innovative methods are used to present stimulating, age-appropriate content and to provide challenge and encouragement.

To carry on this mission, the Community School offers a comprehensive program of instruction in the conventional content areas such as social studies, science and math and the special areas of art, physical education, computers, human values and drama. The ultimate goal of this part of the program is to enable every child to function successfully in these areas, in spite of his or her specific learning disabilities.

What is a comprehensive program for the learning disabled child? In a regular or conventional situation, a child experiencing reading difficulty may see a reading teacher for an hour a day, during which instruction is offered at an appropriate level of challenge. If the student is reading two years below grade level, the supplementary teacher will have selected a reading program at that grade level. However, when the child returns to the classroom he may, for example, find his class engaged in a current events lesson from a school publication written for the grade level of the class. The child is then expected to take part. If the classroom teacher is sensitive to the child's needs, she may refrain from calling on him to read aloud. However, he will most likely be expected to complete the exercises assigned to the entire class. The classroom teachers seldom differentiate work assignments in areas that are not specifically labeled "reading", and even the most conscientious classroom teacher will find it most difficult to differentiate all the content requirements for the delayed readers. Thus, a student may be given a reading text a year or two below the level of the class but will be expected to cope with a class newspaper, science or social studies text which may be two or more years above his achievement level.

At Community School the interrelationship between reading, other skills and subject matter is well understood, so that no child is ever expected to read or perform beyond his ability in any subject or skill area. Our goal is to present challenging, age-appropriate content in ways that foster learning and can, in fact, be mastered by our students.

Teachers interact with one another to achieve this goal. For example, the math teacher, in consultation with speech and language specialists, understands that the language in a math text may present an obstacle to children with

language deficits even though math computation skills may be good. Together they decide what materials and approach would be most suitable. The math program incorporates real world contexts, along with experiences to foster the development of mathematical language and concepts. Math is taught in small groups. Students are grouped according to level, instructional needs and learning style. Classrooms use a wide variety of materials that are uncluttered with clearly written directions, manipulatives, math games, challenge activities, and computer and calculator technology. Students are given the necessary time, continuity and repeated contact with important concepts and language in order to develop the ability to reason and communicate mathematically. The math program encourages the use of terminology, language and concepts. This is true in all subject areas. This interrelationship is essential to enable students to expand their abilities and apply the skills to tasks in their daily lives.

Science is taught through observation, discussion and experimentation. The science teacher avoids, as much as possible, the use of published textbooks to instruct. These series are used mainly as a resource for the teacher to present content similar to that presented in a standard elementary school. The students use a variety of materials, perform experiments, and then together as a group describe and discuss what they have discovered. When reading and writing activities are involved, the science teacher highlights the specialized vocabulary and may even read material to the group. When worksheets are prepared, the teacher keeps in mind the skill level of her group and requires little or no reading and writing beyond their ability level. Here again the process of intra-specialist interaction can be seen. Reading scores for the entire school are distributed to all the staff at the beginning of each new term. The science teacher has her list.

She also has access to the students' reading evaluations and prescriptions prepared by the learning specialists. Together with the learning specialist and reading teachers she examines and selects supplementary reading material which the students are able to manage. A library of science books has been collected with the principle of readability in mind.

The social studies program relies heavily on oral discussion, audio-visual aids, community resources and projects. Textbooks and written materials are in use but are carefully selected for readability. In introducing a social studies unit the teachers may, when appropriate, show a video or filmstrip to provide an overview of the unit. A time line will be constructed to help the students understand where the period of time they are studying fits chronologically. Thereafter a variety of resource and reading materials, at the appropriate level, will be used to develop and understand the concepts.

We recognize that our students often lack the ability to deal with abstract or symbolic material and may display serious directional confusion. Understanding geography, maps and globes are important areas of the social studies curriculum. Therefore, map activities are not only taught in social studies classes but are reinforced throughout the curriculum.

While subject content is important, we know that the development of research and reporting skills cannot be neglected. Content in social studies and science are at a challenging level, and students are encouraged to write research reports in these classes. The English teacher in consultation with the learning specialists will choose the appropriate level of research materials for each student. For the students to be successful in completing a report, they must be able to read the information inde-

pendently and then put it down in an organized way. This is one of the areas in which the computer class becomes an integral part of the program. The students are taught in computer class how to find information from various sources such as CD-ROMs and the internet and then, by using the word processing skills they have been taught, to integrate all this information into a cohesive research report.

The object of all curriculum development at Community School is to challenge the intellect of the students, offer a wide range of material and activities that are available in the educational mainstream and, at the same time, offer the remedial services that are needed for the students to reach their full potential. A trained, dedicated professional staff is the key to the success of our program. The teaching staff is comprised of teachers and subject area specialists, the majority of whom hold advanced degrees and multiple certifications. A majority of the staff members have spent many years at Community School and share their experience, talents and interests with other staff members. The interactions of teachers and specialists, along with the attention to curriculum, enable our students to function successfully, in spite of their specific learning disabilities.

The Professional Monograph Series
The Community School of Bergen County

Lower School

11 West Forest Avenue, Teaneck, NJ 07666
(201) 837-8070

E-mail: RitaRowan@communityschoolnj.org

High School

1135 Teaneck Road, Teaneck, NJ 07666
(201) 862-1796

E-mail: TobyBraunstein@communityschoolnj.org