

Special Education Issues in CMSI Revisited

A Report for the CPS Office of Mathematics and Science
Prepared by the PRAIRIE Group, UIC College of Education

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Background

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2005 along with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 require that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum; this databrief provides an example of children with disabilities in regular and special education settings and their abilities to access the CMSI. Children receiving special education services may be educated in general education or special education settings. Regardless of the setting, children with disabilities require access to the same general curriculum as their non-disabled peers. For math and science, if the general curriculum classes utilize the Chicago Math and Science Initiative (CMSI) supported curricula, children with disabilities must also be able to access these curricula. The April 6, 2006 Special Education Databrief from the UIC PRAIRIE Group to the CPS Office of Math and Science (OMS) outlined the needs of students with disabilities to have full access to the CMSI as their peers in general education. In that report we noted a few of the barriers these students faced: lack of CMSI materials, absence of in-classrooms support for themselves and/or their teachers, and lack of CMSI curricula professional development for their teachers.

Since the April 6, 2006 Special Education Databrief, OMS has developed professional development for special education teachers to enable them to use the CMSI materials in their classrooms. This databrief examines this professional development and illustrates changes since 2006 along with ongoing barriers for students with disabilities to participate fully in the CMSI.

Methods

This databrief is based on data from various sources:

- One observation (6 hours) of a special education professional development session
- Three interviews with OMS leaders
- Eight observations of grade level meetings where special education was either on the formal agenda or came up as an issue teachers were facing.

Findings

This databrief covers three findings: (1) the qualities of special education CMSI professional development (2) the levels of support regular education teachers receive to help them use CMSI curricula with their special needs students and (3) the levels of communication between the Office of Specialized Services (OSS) and the Office of Math and Science (OMS).

1. The Special Education Professional Development Workshops

As outlined in the April 6, 2006 Special Education Databrief, special education and regular education teachers alike expressed a need for special education professional development using the CMSI curricula. Perhaps most obvious, special education teachers expressed the need for specifically “tailored” professional development on how to use the CMSI materials in their classrooms. As expressed by one teacher in the 2006 databrief:

The issue I have with all workshops is that they never take into account special ed. ...When it comes to special ed, ...they need to give us options...I’ve found with a lot of workshops, if it’s not a special ed. workshop, then it’s not tailored to special ed. It’s left to me to go back and tailor everything. And that’s hard. If it’s not tailored to special ed, ...it’s kind of a waste of my time, because I can’t do it (2004).

In response to the obvious need for special education professional development in tandem with the legal requirement to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum, the OMS created and provided special education professional development using the CMSI curricula beginning in fall of 2006.

Through limited data collection (informal conversations with professional development facilitators, teachers and OMS staff-people along with observation of one special education professional development session), we find evidence that the special education professional development seems to fill a void by providing special education teachers the needed support and guidance to use the CMSI materials in their classrooms. For example, the special education professional development leaders provided concrete and actionable answers to the problems plaguing special education teachers (including those problems outlined in the April 2006 Special Education Databrief). For instance, below are a few of the interchanges observed at the professional development session:

The regular education teachers in my school have the CMSI materials and I do not. What should I do?” (Special Education Professional Development Leader Response: Go to your principal, and if that does not work file a grievance as this is differential treatment).

My students use the manipulatives as missiles or put them in their mouths. What should I do?” (Special Education Professional Development Leader Response: They will learn to use the manipulatives. Keep trying. Tell them these are learning tools and not toys. If they use them as missiles, take them away. But keep trying. Eventually, they will get it).

From the limited data on Special Education Professional Development, it seems that these sessions are providing support to special education teachers to enable them to use the CMSI curricula in their classes.

Discussion questions:

What is the overarching vision for special education professional development? Will the special education professional development continue in the future? What changes will be made to it, if any?

What is the sequencing of professional development for special education teachers? After attending the special education professional development, will they have an “experienced user” professional development to attend? Is there a specialized track for them to become professional development leaders?

2. Regular Education Teachers and their Students with Special Needs

While the special education teachers now have the opportunity to receive professional development geared towards the use of the CMSI materials with their students, regular education teachers continue to report a need for more support and guidance to use the CMSI materials with their mainstreamed students with special needs. In addition, regular education teachers report problems with the special education system that lie outside the realm of the OMS but affect the implementation of the CMSI within the classrooms. For example, the following conversation during a grade level meeting illustrates a few barriers:

Teacher A: I have too many students with special needs in my classroom – about 16.

Teacher B: So do I... I asked the inclusion facilitator for the IEPs of my students, but all I got was a list of my special ed students.

Case Manager: Well, it is her responsibility to get those IEPs to teachers, but it might take a while.

At another grade level meeting, similar problems arose in using the CMSI materials in regular education classrooms with students with special needs without the necessary support:

Teacher A: I need help with students who have outbursts. I don't know how to accommodate them. I don't have any of my students' IEPs, either.

Other Teachers: Neither do we.

Teacher B: Some of these students need different environments. I am all for mainstreaming but some students are...

Two teachers: Disruptive...

Teacher C: I don't know how to do the math games with them.

Teacher D: If you had the IEPs, you would know what to do because the IEPs have modifications in them.

In neither of these situations were the issues teachers were facing resolved. School leadership present at the meetings did not seem to be strong advocates for helping teachers solve the

problems regarding gaining access to students' IEPs nor did teachers think of utilizing OMS supports such as calling a Facilitator or suggesting they might attend CMSI curricular PD for special education teachers. These regular education teachers continue to face obstacles in implementing the CMSI curricula in their classrooms with their students with special needs. The data from these grade level meetings confirms findings from the CMSI Professional Development for Elementary School Staff of May 2006, Chicago Teachers Project Everyday Math Leadership Training Project of June 2007, and the Chicago Teachers Project Everyday Math Leadership Training Project of June 2006, that regular education teachers need support to differentiate the CMSI curricula for their students with special needs. While some of their problems lie outside the realm of control of OMS (such as the assurance that teachers will receive IEPs in a timely fashion), these issues do impact the implementation of the CMSI.

Discussion questions:

What support do regular education teachers need to make sure that their students with disabilities are accessing the general curriculum? How can OMS ensure that these students and their teacher have the appropriate support to implement and benefit from the CMSI?

Some of the problems facing regular education teachers are not endemic to the OMS (or other curricular areas for that matter) but rather to the special education system. However, these problems permeate the implementation and subsequent impact of the CMSI upon students with special needs. How can the OMS (and other curricular areas) work with the Office for Specialized Services to help ensure regular education teachers no longer face these barriers and can implement the CMSI (or other curricular programs) in their classrooms?

How might regular education CMSI PD be infused with suggestions for how to modify curricula to meet the needs of special needs students if in fact this observed trend of mainstreaming to regular education continues?

What can teachers do to ensure they have the proper in-school support to provide an appropriate education to all students in the classroom at the same time? What can teachers do to make sure they receive IEP's in a timely fashion so as to adjust their teaching to the needs and abilities of students?

3. Communication between the Office of Math and Science and the Office of Specialized Services

The ongoing need for support and guidance for regular and special education teachers alike demonstrates a need for greater communication and action on behalf of district leaders, including OMS. Throughout interviews with leaders in OMS, it is clear that there is still no communication between the Office of Math and Science and the Office of Specialized Services. For example, as stated by one OMS leader:

The Facilitators on staff work closely with the people who they have identified as leaders in special ed. I don't think we have laid a very good connection with the special ed. department because we tend to think it is content focused. So we have not put ourselves

in the position in which we are willing to listen to someone else. Special ed is separate from math and science thinking. I have had no conversation with whoever is the head of the special ed. department because she is not really sure how this science thing works. But I know this is something, if we are going to actually be serious about it and meet the needs of these special education teachers, that we have to start doing that and connecting with the department who are the specialists in this. I know nothing about special ed. kids.

“Without talking to the Office of Specialized Services, how can the CMSI scale up?” This question was asked by another OMS leader who, looking to the future, questioned where to go next with special education and the CMSI:

And the special ed. we are working on right now, but we need to know what to do next. Where do we go with it? We draw the focus away from the materials and the support through the area as we see more schools...We can't continue to provide this kind of support to even more schools.

Dialogue between these two departments seems to be necessary as OMS and district leaders look to the scale-up of the CMSI. By working together, these two departments may be able to strategize what support both regular education and special education teachers need to ensure that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum including CMSI materials.

Discussion questions:

When can the OMS and OSS leaders meet to discuss how to best serve children with disabilities in CPS? Who should be at the table? What issues should be discussed?

How often should meetings with OMS and OSS take place? How will this partnership work to improve the access of children with disabilities to the general curriculum? Should other curricula departments be included in these meetings?