



**State of New Jersey**  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
**STATE SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL**  
**P.O. BOX 500**  
**TRENTON, NEW JERSEY 08625-0500**

**JON L. CORZINE**  
GOVERNOR

**LUCILLE E. DAVY**  
COMMISSIONER

November 10, 2006

Lucille E. Davy, Commissioner  
Office of the State Board of Education  
New Jersey Department of Education  
P.O. Box 500  
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

Dear Commissioner Davy:

The State Special Education Advisory Council is charged, by state and federal law, to advise the Commissioner of Education on issues regarding the education of students with disabilities. With this responsibility in mind, the Council wishes to offer recommendations on several key topics in special education. These recommendations represent the work of SSEAC's standing committees for the 2005-2006 session: Parent-Professional Collaboration, Transition, and Instructional Practices and Assessment. The Council appreciates the consideration that both you and the State Board of Education have given our comments in the past. We represent a diverse group of special education stakeholders: parents, individuals with disabilities, directors of special services, public and private school administrators, agency representatives, and resource representatives from the Departments of Health & Senior Services, Human Services, Labor and the Juvenile Justice Commission. As such, we hope you will once again give our recommendations your consideration.

The Parent-Professional Collaboration Committee has focused its discussions on ways to improve collaboration between parents and school districts and to promote effective parent advisory groups (which are now mandated by NJAC, Chapter 14-1.2). The Committee believes that both parents and educators should be empowered to create advisory groups that go beyond the letter of the law and achieve a true spirit of collaboration between parties. In this way, parents and district personnel can collaboratively work together in the best interest of children with disabilities and their educational, social and emotional needs.

**As a result of the Committee's input, the Council recommends that the State Department of Education mandate training in the following areas:**

- **IDEA – Parents and districts must have an understanding of the law and FAPE**
- **Sensitivity training for both parents and district personnel to help build an understanding of the issues facing both**
- **Collaborative training that includes not only workshops, but also provides practical answers and support to parents and districts on an ongoing basis**

**The Council further recommends that the State Department of Education provide incentives for parents and districts to work together. Incentives, for example, might be:**

- **Grants to help build positive programs that reward collaborative efforts between districts and parents and ultimately provide benefits to children**
- **“Best Practices” awards to districts and parent groups that do create collaborative environments**

The Transition Committee has focused its discussions on ways to improve opportunities for students with disabilities to successfully transition from an educational setting to the community they will live in once their education is complete.

**As a result of the Committee’s input, the Council recommends that more focus be given to the teaching of social and interpersonal skills.** While these are often referred to as “soft skills”, they are, in fact, critically important to the success of individuals with disabilities. In June 2006, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report entitled *Summary of a GAO Conference: Helping California Youth with Disabilities Transition to Work or Postsecondary Education*. The following is an excerpt from that report:

“In addition to discussing vocational skills, panelists said that students with disabilities need more training in life skills, such as self-advocacy and interpersonal communication, to help them pursue postsecondary education, secure employment, or obtain necessary services as adults. . . Further, the panelists said that employers sought out employees with life skills or soft skills, such as willingness to learn and to work hard and appropriate behavior.”

The recognition of the value of teaching interpersonal skills is currently reflected in New Jersey’s Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS), especially in the Career Education and Consumer, Family and Life Skills standards. For example, Standard 9.1 for Grade 8 includes: “Describe and demonstrate appropriate work habits and interpersonal skills needed to obtain and retain employment” and Standard 9.2 for Grade 12 includes “Model interpersonal and effective conflict resolution skills.”

While we commend the inclusion of interpersonal skills in NJCCCS, we are concerned that these skills receive very little attention in the day-to-day lives of most students with disabilities. “Soft skills” are often perceived as being less important, even though those who live and work with individuals with disabilities believe emphatically that the opposite is true. Families, employers, and other members of the community tell us that these skills are, in fact, the foundation for a healthy, productive adult life and the key to full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in their communities.

**To address this issue, we recommend that:**

- **A campaign be initiated to raise awareness among educators throughout the state of the importance of social/interpersonal skills instruction, perhaps similar to what is being done with respect to Character Education. Focused instruction in social/interpersonal skills would benefit all students, general and special education alike.**
- **It would also be helpful to find out which school districts are doing an effective job of teaching interpersonal skills and share that information with other districts that may be struggling with how to do this well.**
- **Schools should be encouraged to make use of existing curricula and programs that were created explicitly for this purpose.**

The Instructional Practices and Assessment Committee has focused its discussions on how best to disseminate information on research-based techniques and practices so that all districts may have easy access to this information.

**As a result of the Committee's input, the Council recommends that the state Department of Education develop and maintain a website page that is dedicated to research-based practices (e.g., reading programs, math strategies, etc.) which have been demonstrated to be effective for students with disabilities. In light of NCLB, many districts are currently looking for these resources.** The Department has an opportunity to take the lead in providing access to this information for educators and service providers. Links could be provided to the many useful websites that are already being maintained by universities, other states and the federal government. It would also be beneficial to develop a database or e-library that would allow districts to share information about research-based practices and programs that they are successfully using so that other districts may consider their implementation.

The State Special Education Advisory Council appreciates in advance your consideration of our recommendations and looks forward to your response. We would also welcome any opportunity to speak with or meet with you to discuss any of these issues.

Educationally yours,

Dr. Sharon L. Maricle  
Chairperson

C: Roberta Wohle