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Record

330

File Number

10297

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Title: Focus on California Research Institute (CRI)

Original source: Strategies Volume 3 Number 4

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/01/92

Publisher Info: -

### Abstract

Presents the results of five years of research in to the placement of children with disabilities into regular schools. The findings are very strongly in support of the positive outcomes of integration. Amongst other findings was a significant one which suggested that parents rate the severity of their child's disability higher when they are in a segregated setting. **Keyword: Inclusion**

# Focus on California Research Institute (CRI)

## Five Years Later: A Project Officer's Perspective on the Research Institute on the Integration and Placement of Students with Severe Disabilities

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It is difficult to believe that the five year project period of the research institute on the placement and integration of children with severe disabilities housed at the California Research Institute (CRI) ends on September, 30, 1992. Since 1989, I have had the good fortune of serving as CRI's Project Officer and have had numerous opportunities to work with CRI and Statewide Systems Change personnel, as well as students, parents, professionals and community members from around the country who are committed to promoting positive outcomes and inclusive lifestyles for all students. Three crowded file drawers in my office are ample testimony to the fact that CRI has generated a high volume of research and technical assistance activity as well as a lot of paper during the past five years! The purpose of this brief article is to share the Federal rationale for the research institute and highlight some accomplishments.

### *Rationale for the Research Institute*

Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education between the academic years 1976-77 and 1986-87 indicated a consistent reliance on segregated facilities for the school placement of students with disabilities (*Eleventh Annual Report to Congress, 1989*). However, there was also high variation in placement patterns across the states which led the Federal government to question (a) whether factors other than the type and severity of disability contributed to school placement decisions, and (b) why some states appeared to be

more successful than others in providing special education and related services in integrated school settings. The report also suggested that, "attributing meaning to the degree of variability across States may be more a matter of values than empirical analysis" (*Eleventh Annual Report to Congress, 1989, p. 29*).

To address these complex issues, the Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) developed a research institute priority combining research and technical assistance activities. The priority was designed to fund a five-year research institute to (a) investigate school placement patterns for children and youth with severe disabilities to determine factors that contribute to integrated school placement, (b) conduct research on promising practices in integrated settings, and (c) provide technical assistance to Statewide Systems Change projects. CRI received the award and became a major component of a Federal strategy to ensure efficient knowledge utilisation by quickly turning research into practice by developing, validating, disseminating, and providing technical assistance to install state-of-the-art practices for students with severe disabilities across the nation. Concurrently the Statewide Systems Change priority lengthened the project period from three to five years to better promote the movement of students with severe disabilities from segregated to integrated school campuses; the first wave of these state capacity-building projects were intended to run concurrently with CRI. Since FY 1987, sixteen states have received Systems Change awards, are in

varying stages of implementation, and have established collaborative relationships with CRI.

### *Five Years Later*

Five years of CRI efforts have produced a valuable contribution to the research literature concerning the school integration of students with severe disabilities. CRI obtained state data on numbers and placement information and used large sample survey methodology to examine (a) school placement patterns, (b) factors associated with integrated educational programs, and (c) educational practices in integrated settings associated with the highest student achievement, positive peer attitudes, and family expectations. Survey variables included student, family, teacher, instructional, administrative, governance, and community characteristics. Results confirmed that a large percentage of students with severe disabilities continue to attend segregated school settings and formed the foundation for three theoretical predictive models of integration: (a) advocacy; (b) sociometric status; and (c) program/facilities characteristics. Most compelling to me was the finding that parents' rating of severity of disability had a strong association with integrated placement; parents rated their children in integrated programs as being less severely disabled than did parents of children attending segregated programs. However, analysis of the validity of this perception revealed there was *no difference in severity* of disability among the children served in segregated and integrated settings! Other factors associated with integrated school placement which have proven of keen interest to individuals seeking such programs are (a) the degree the IEP addressed integrated placement and activities, and (b) teacher advocacy for integration, as well as family and teacher rating of administrator advocacy. The finding that child participation in integrated settings and activities was the indicator most strongly linked to positive students outcomes, peer attitudes, and parental expectations has generated a high degree of interest in the field (*Education Daily, 1992: Viadero, 1992*). The implications of these findings are of vital importance to policy

makers, program implementers, as well as professional preservice and inservice training programs. These findings also highlight the significance of establishing trusting, collaborative parent-professional relationships.

CRI is currently focusing on the evaluation of full inclusion versus special class models of integration, as well as analysing the effectiveness of a variety of instructional strategies implemented within full inclusion settings. CRI's knowledge utilisation component continues to bridge the gap between research and practice through a whole host of dissemination and technical assistance activities directed toward systems improvement and capacity-building at the state and local level. CRI's activities have provided a comprehensive picture of integration practices occurring across the United States and have shaped as well as reflected program shifts in the fields. The simultaneous expansion of the knowledge and experiential base of student, parent, and professional networks committed to integrated school programs has produced increased momentum for change from segregation to integration and inclusive service delivery for students with severe disabilities. Five years of CRI activities have firmly convinced me that those who say that integration won't work, haven't tried.

### *References*

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