

HANG IN THERE

TOPICS

Accommodations: teacher support; special education referrals
Behavior: behavior management strategies

SCENARIO

As a teaching coach for probationary teachers, Nancy's job is to support and assist new teachers in their first two years. She becomes concerned when one of her promising young teachers, frustrated by severe behavior problems in her classroom, confides that she is thinking about quitting.

Nancy was more than a little concerned. She had just finished her meeting with Allison, a second-year teacher. During their visit, Allison had expressed considerable frustration about what was happening in her class. She had even indicated that she was considering quitting: that's how difficult her situation had become.

Nancy, a job coach for novice teachers, has the responsibility of making sure all teachers are highly qualified as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act and of helping new teachers reach permanent status in the district school system. Permanent status was granted after two years of teaching at the discretion of the district. Teacher coach positions had recently been created to improve the system for granting permanent status. In this capacity, Nancy was assigned a number of teachers who were in their first or second year. She guided, assisted, supported, and evaluated them during their probationary period. Some needed more support than others, but most of her charges were ultimately granted permanent status.

Nancy had concerns that Johnson Elementary would continue to be penalized for being a low achieving school. This was due in part to the high rate of teacher attrition at Johnson Elementary and, although district administrators denied it, Johnson was often the school to which teachers who had not been successful at other schools were assigned. In Nancy's opinion, the school had two groups of teachers: those who were there to stay, but often had weak or poor teaching skills, and those who stayed for a year or two then transferred to other schools.

Allison Stevens exemplified the second group. She was a well-trained teacher with good instincts in the classroom. She had graduated from the state university two years ago with excellent credentials and a professional confidence that was rare in a young teacher. Last year at Johnson, she had shown her skills in the classroom and her third-grade class ran smoothly.

Nancy was impressed with Allison's sensitivity to the physical needs of the more active and energetic children in her class. She allowed them to take short exercise breaks (referred to as brain-gym) every so often to "reenergize their brains," and she taught from different centers around the classroom to allow the children some seating flexibility. She was good at modeling and doing guided practice and she often allowed students to work with partners to help them stay on task and avoid frustration. Nancy could tell that Allison knew what she was doing and was enjoying the experience.

Unfortunately, this year Allison had been assigned to a fifth-grade class and she was struggling with discipline problems in her classroom as well as a broad range of academic and social abilities. A handful of students in her class were so unruly that Allison rarely got through a lesson undisturbed. In Nancy's observations of Allison, there were many notes about students who were off task, disrespectful, defiant, and disruptive.

Allison had inherited a number of students from one of the fourth-grade teachers Nancy considered to be "weak." The students were simply not prepared for fifth-grade work. In addition to being significantly behind in math and language arts, many students from his class were unaccustomed to both classroom structure and concrete academic expectations.

Nancy hated the possibility of a really good teacher becoming discouraged and leaving the profession. It distressed her to see this happening to Allison now. She was trying to give Allison as much support as possible but things were going from bad to worse. Nancy worried that Allison's discouragement in dealing with the disruptive students in her room was becoming problematic.

In desperation, Allison had referred ten students for special education evaluation because she thought that they may be students with emotional or behavioral disorders or desperately in need of academic assistance. In discussing her actions with Nancy, Allison had confided, "The principal told us we were referring too many kids to special education. He said it didn't look good. He also said the special education program is already too large in our district, but I'm persisting anyway because the children need the help. It doesn't do much good, though. Even the ones I referred to the psychologist months ago still haven't been tested!"

Nancy responded, "So, we have to think about what you do in the meantime...yes?"

Allison countered, "Yes, but these kids need help and I don't feel like I am able to give them that help! I had a course in special ed, but I am not prepared for all these problems. Sometimes I feel like I have a special ed class, but it's just not called that!"

Nancy responded, "Well, let's think what a special ed teacher might do with these students."

"I give them verbal warnings, then timeouts where I move their desks to an isolated place. Sometimes that helps but if they don't shape up, I have to send them to the office," Allison replied. "I have thirty-two children in this room and I don't know what more I can do. I really think that some of these kids need to be in special education. How can I teach the rest of the students if I'm constantly dealing with them? Some of them are so socially and academically delayed that I am really having trouble juggling it all. I expected them to be tested and placed in special classes by now. I just can't figure out how to engage all of them at once so I can teach the entire class. I really don't know how much more I can take. Some days I don't even want to get up and come to school."

"Allison, I know you are frustrated but please, just hang in there. Special education isn't necessarily the best solution for all of these students' problems. I'll help you develop some different strategies for dealing with their behaviors within this classroom so you can teach," Nancy reassured her. "Don't give up because I know we can get through this."

As Nancy headed towards the visitor's parking lot she wondered, "Now what should I do? What's going wrong in that classroom? How can I help?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is motivating the thoughts/actions of each of the characters? Discuss the issues of teacher frustration.
2. Discuss the importance of providing support for beginning teachers.
3. Why do you think Allison believes that many of her students need to be referred to special education?
4. What other options, besides special education, should Allison consider for helping these students? Discuss learning strategies Allison could use with those students who are struggling academically.
5. Discuss classroom behavior management approaches.

**HANG IN THERE
CASE BASED ACTIVITY**★ **WHAT A STAR SHEET IS...**

A STAR (S**T**ategies And Resources) Sheet provides you with a description of a well-researched strategy that can help you solve the case studies in this unit.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Issues that lead to teacher frustration (lack of support, isolation, behavior management issues, overcrowded classrooms, school climate, differences in academic abilities, engaging all students)
- Types of support and how to provide support for beginning teachers
- Strategies regular education teachers should employ before making a special education referral
- When to refer a child for special education services
- Approaches to classroom behavior management

WHAT THE RESEARCH AND RESOURCES SAY...

- Poor working conditions is one of the main reasons beginning teachers leave (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).
- Teacher isolation within the school frequently leads to stress and burnout (DePaul, 2000).
- Recommendations made for supporting teachers include developing responsive induction programs for beginning teachers and increasing administrative support (Billingsley, 2002).
- Approximately one-third of beginning special education teachers do not find formal mentoring programs helpful. Instead beginning teachers need and want systematic and responsive induction programs that are flexible enough to meet their needs. In addition, beginning teachers need support in the form of having necessary teaching materials and manageable caseloads and non-teaching duties. Another important form of support to beginning special education teachers is that of administrators making teachers feel a part of the school and understanding what they do (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004).
- Three types of formal support programs identified to help beginning teachers are teacher induction programs, teacher mentoring, and school-university collaboration models (Brewster & Railsback, 2001).
- Hands-on assistance from veteran teachers is critical for new teachers (DePaul, 2000).
- For more information on teacher support, visit the IRIS Module: Supporting Beginning Special Educators (<http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/beginteach/chalcycle.htm> 2).
- Some classroom management interventions that should be looked at prior to special education referral include classroom rules, reinforcement plans, the physical setting, instructional delivery methods, and the daily schedule (Murdick & Petch-Hogan, 1996).
- Referrals for special education services should not be made until teachers and family have tried various interventions and accommodations in the general education setting. If these interventions and accommodations do not resolve the academic and/or behavior concerns then a referral should be made (Smith, 2004).
- Important factors to consider when developing classroom behavior management plans are to align classroom systems with school-wide systems, explicitly teach expectations, and establish classroom rules based on school-wide expectations. Other important components of behavior management plans include using extrinsic contingencies, using both individual and group contingencies, and using a comprehensive behavior management plan as opposed to using only certain components (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions. (n.d.).

- For more information on teacher support, visit the IRIS Modules: Who's in charge?: Developing a comprehensive behavior management system (<http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/parmod/chalcycle.htm>) and You're in charge! Developing your own comprehensive behavior management plan (<http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/par2/chalcycle.htm>).

KEEP IN MIND...

- Not all classroom behavior management plans work for all students. Some students require individual plans.
- Not all students with academic or behavior problems need to be referred to special education.
- Consider other resources in the school to help with behavior and academic problems (e.g., other teachers, coaches, librarian, custodian)

RESOURCES

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