Supporting High Quality Itinerant Early Childhood Special Education Services in Ohio

Overview

Over the past 10 years, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of young children with disabilities served in community-based programs such as Head Start, private or public preschools, or childcare centers (US Report to Congress, 2003). For preschool children, inclusion in community-based programs must be a service delivery option offered by a local education agency in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the requirement to provide those services in the least restrictive environment. In Ohio, itinerant early childhood special educators (IECSE) serve children with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) whose primary placement is a community-based setting. Itinerant ECSE teachers serve children through scheduled visits to community-based settings. Review of ODE data indicates that most children receiving IECSE services are visited once a week for about one hour per visit (Dinnebeil, McInerney, Roth, & Ramaswamy, 2001).

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) is committed to ensuring that all children, regardless of ability, enter kindergarten prepared to be academically successful. In addition, ODE is committed to supporting inclusive community-based educational programs for all young children with special needs, where consistent with the IEP. To that end, ODE endorses consideration of consultative models of itinerant early childhood special education (ECSE) service delivery that includes constituents involved in supporting the education and development of the child. This constituency group includes early childhood education professionals, members of the child's family, community-based program administrators and LEA administrators who directly affect the education and development of children.

Ohio operating standard 3301-51-09 (G) (2) (a) (2002) mandates that children receive at least 4 hours of itinerant service each month. Standard 3301-51-09 (D) (2) says itinerant ECSE services are defined as direct and indirect instruction, including "large-group, small-group, individual instruction and/or parent and teacher training and consultation." Standard 3301-51-09 (D)(3) (b) states that early childhood intervention specialists "support regular education teachers in serving and/or consulting about children with and without disabilities so that the regular education personnel, in partnership with the special education service providers, can implement the child's IEP in the least restrictive environment."

However, examination of IECSE service delivery in Ohio indicates that itinerant ECSE teachers rarely engage in consultation. Most of their time is spent providing small group or individualized instruction to children (Dinnebeil et al., 2001), regardless of the needs of the children. Since learning occurs within a range of contexts, opportunities for effective intervention may not occur during the itinerant's visit. In a consultative model, however, itinerant ECSE teachers provide assistance and support to other adults in the learning environment who will work with the child in the absence of the itinerant teacher. As a result, children are afforded more learning opportunities for effective intervention during the majority of the week when the itinerant teacher is not there.

Foundations of a Consultative Approach

A consultative approach to itinerant ECSE service delivery is based on sound principles of special education including distributed practice, naturalistic intervention strategies and behavioral consultation. The efficacy of distributed practice suggests that instruction is most effective when opportunities to acquire and practice skills occur across the day rather than 'massed practice' (Wolery, Ault, & Doyle, 1992). Naturalistic intervention strategies support embedding learning opportunities in routines and activities that are familiar to children and that interest them (Hemmeter, 2000; Rule, Losardo, Dinnebeil & Rowland, 1998). Naturalistic instruction (e.g., strategies such as time delay, incidental teaching, and mand-model) not only facilitates learning, but also promotes generalization of knowledge and skills that help children engage their typically developing peers in natural settings (Wolery, 2000). The use of behavioral consultation is well established in the fields of special education and school psychology (Gresham & Kendell, 1987; Noell, Witt, Gilbertson, Ranier, & Freeland, 1997; Sheridan, Welch, & Orme, 1996). Behavioral consultation is effective when it is a collaborative, problem-centered process that includes sequential stages of entry, problem identification, planning, intervention, and evaluation (Friend & Cook, 2000; Buysse et al., 1994; Wesley, Buysse, & Skinner, 2001).

The success of a consultative approach to itinerant ECSE service delivery is based on 'partnership' between the itinerant ECSE teacher and general ECE teachers, a high quality early childhood environment, administrative support, community support, and appropriately prepared and licensed itinerant ECSE teachers. The focus of this itinerant ECSE teacher partnership shifts from interacting primarily with a child to interaction with general ECE teachers and related constituents. Within a consultative approach, the itinerant ECSE teacher would engage in IEP-centered discussions with her partner, teach skills to her partner through modeling or demonstration and serve as a resource professional. In a consultative model, the itinerant ECSE teacher can support the preschool teacher in improving the learning environment for the child with an IEP. Administrative and community support can be provided, such as substitute assistance in the ECE classroom so that the ECE teacher is able to meet with the itinerant ECSE teacher without distraction. Support also may be provided in the form of additional classroom equipment, materials, or supplies or even a significant change in the structure of the learning environment.

Requisite Knowledge and Skills for Itinerant ECSE Teachers

In order to be effective, itinerant ECSE teachers must have prerequisite knowledge and skills related to (a) principles of early childhood special education and specialized instruction, (b) child development, (c) early childhood curriculum and assessment, (d) consultation and coaching strategies, and (e) operating models of community-based early childhood programs. Community-based ECE teachers who 'partner' with itinerant ECSE professionals must be committed to the education of young children with disabilities and also must be responsive to support from their itinerant partners. General ECE teachers who assume the responsibility for the education of *all* children in their classroom welcome assistance and support from their itinerant ECSE partners to effectively address IEP-based interventions throughout the day.

Persons serving as itinerant ECSE professionals should have sufficient experience in early childhood classrooms in order to be a credible consultant. Given the requisite knowledge

and skills these individuals must possess, LEAs and community-based programs must hire itinerant ECSE professionals who are fully licensed or credentialed in the area of early childhood special education. In Ohio, appropriate credentials include the Early Childhood Intervention Specialist license, the Early Education of the Handicapped endorsement or the Preschool Special Needs endorsement. The itinerant ECSE professional must have the consultation skills necessary to work effectively with related services professionals and constituents. Effective itinerant ECSE teachers are critical thinkers and effective problem-solvers. Effective itinerant ECSE teachers also must understand the importance of intentional practice and engage in activities specific to IEP priorities. For example, they must modify their actions or activities during a visit to meet the needs of the child, teacher or other adult with whom they are working. They do not embrace a "one size fits all" approach to itinerant ECSE service delivery.

The consultative itinerant ECSE service delivery model will efficiently and effectively address the IEP-based needs of young children with disabilities. However, a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all individuals involved in a consultative relationship is essential. As a result, formal policies that outline the roles and responsibilities of each individual involved in a consultative approach should be developed and promulgated.

Collaboration Between LEAs and Community-Based Programs

Ohio's vision for high quality, inclusive early childhood services presumes that early childhood systems will work together to promote effective practices. Implementation of an itinerant ECSE model is one way that LEAs can partner with their community-based colleagues to expand the range of LRE options for young children with disabilities as well as to enhance the overall quality of inclusive ECE environments. The public and private sector must work together to advocate for higher quality ECE programs across Ohio.

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