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*Public schools across the United States and Canada serve more than 6 million youngsters with a variety of learning disabilities.*

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## WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION? EVERYTHING!

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, paired with the accountability expectations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), presents instructional challenges for every teacher I know.

Public schools across the United States and Canada serve more than 6 million youngsters with a variety of learning disabilities. The goal is to create instructional environments that challenge and support all of our students every day. However, even the most highly qualified teachers rarely have the expertise needed to determine when and how to modify state guidelines and classroom lessons for special education students.

It is essential that all teachers who serve students with disabilities be involved in discussions and decision making regarding the following:

- > **Curriculum adaptations.** Each special education student is provided with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The existing curriculum must be adapted to meet the specific instructional needs of IEPs. This means that the state's goals and the school district's curricular guidelines, textbooks, and supplementary materials must focus on the mathematics that all students need to know well at their level. Two important questions to consider are the following: What mathematics will be the foundation for an IEP and equip the child for further learning? How are special education teachers and mathematics teachers involved in adapting the curricular expectations? This must be a shared responsibility.
- > **Intervention.** We need to identify students before referrals, assessments, IEPs, and labeling, whenever possible. We also need to get away from the thinking that a child who is struggling needs "special" education, rather than appropriate intervention

assistance. Teachers need to offer appropriate intervention assistance to help individual students meet the school's or state's definition of proficiency in mathematics. Both teachers of mathematics and special education students should work together to decide what intervention efforts will be most effective. Some questions that must be considered in the development and maintenance of intervention programs are the following: What assessments will be used to identify students' instructional needs and monitor their progress? What level of intervention do the students need? Do they merely need some "catch up" time to learn something that they did not clearly understand the first time around, or do they need a significant amount of time and targeted instruction on one or many topics? Just as important as working together to plan intervention is connecting the intervention to the regular classroom and curriculum.

- > **Instruction.** What needs to be done in the classroom for students with disabilities? We must find effective ways to locate and use the talents and background that mathematics teachers and special education teachers bring to their classrooms. Some school districts have had success with a co-teaching model that involves both the mathematics teacher and the special education teacher working together in the same classroom. Of course, this means providing planning time as well as co-teaching time. The benefit is that these schools develop collaborative faculty teams that have a full understanding of mathematics and students' learning requirements and can meet IEP goals as well as the school's mathematical proficiency guidelines.

We must find ways to ensure that special education is collaborative and just what the name says—"special." Ω