

Supervising and Coaching Special Education Teachers

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Prior to pre-conferencing any teacher, it is important for me to already have questions prepared, knowing what it is I want to ask the teacher prior to observing. When preparing for a special education evaluation, I especially want to know as much about the needs of the students in the classroom and how the teacher plans for meeting these needs daily. Based on IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) we have a legal duty to our special education students to ensure they receive education and services tailored to their individual needs. As a result of pre-conferencing, it is hoped that both the teacher and I walk away knowing what is expected and how the process of observing and coaching works.

Lessons and Student Needs

When asking questions pertaining to student needs and their lessons, I would try to be as specific as possible to get a true glimpse of their classroom. One of the first things I would wonder is if the teacher is thoroughly knowledgeable of their students' individual needs, and what accommodations are required based on their IEPs. If there are students with specific disabilities, I would want to know during the pre-conference how the teacher plans activities to address standards with them as well. I would expect the teacher to tell me more information about their students and their IEPs. Hopefully, that teacher will have copies of their students' IEPs readily available, and I could simply copy them to refer to for this class.

As far as lesson objectives, I would of course want to review their lesson plan with them during the pre-conference, going over the activities planned and ensuring they relate to the standards that will be addressed. Depending on the experience or efficiency of the teacher, more guidance in this area may be needed.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is mandatory in a special education classroom, so I would certainly expect to see it. In the pre-conference, I would ask the teacher to tell me about their planned teaching strategies, and how they plan to differentiate instruction. One thing I would really want to do is give them an off-the wall scenario to think about, as unexpected circumstances can arise at any time in a special education classroom and the educators present must be prepared. For example, if one of the students begins to have a meltdown and begins throwing desks and damaging other classroom property, how to do ensure the safety of the other students? What is your emergency plan for when/if these types of incidents occur? During the post conference, I would ask the teacher to reflect and if there was anything they would do differently, what would it be?

Struggling Students

In my experience with identifying students, data collection is essential. To identify areas where students struggle, I would first ask the teacher what method of data do they use to base instruction, and how do they address any areas that need growth? If there are students performing above standard, how do you meet the needs of these students? I would hope their responses would point to a specific method of assessment, and that the teacher could readily show the data that correlates to the struggling students.

As it also relates to differentiating instruction, I would ask the teacher how they include technology in their instruction. Depending on the areas that the students struggle, there may be electronic or web-based resources to help aid with strengthening those skills. During our post-

conference, this is something that could be discussed, and either I could offer suggestions or we could come up with them collaboratively.

Prior Knowledge

Before assuming anything, I would want to ask the teacher about the objectives of the lesson, and what prior knowledge should their students have based on what they have done in their class this year. If it is a brand new unit and lesson, then I can expect students to have limited prior knowledge and the lesson to be introductory. Based on this response, I would then further ask how prior knowledge was determined- was it based on an assessment to show mastery of previous content? Or was it from a pre-assessment activity (such as a KWL chart)? Teachers need to know their students' level of prior knowledge, as their understanding of new content greatly depends on it.

Classroom Management

Good classroom management allows all other aspects of a classroom learning environment to flow smoothly. I would ask the teacher simple questions about their class routine and procedures, more specifically ones I might observe during the lesson. I would expect their responses to be centered around classroom expectations, student leadership roles, and planning for those “what-if” scenarios. I would ask the teacher if there are any special behavioral concerns that I should be aware of prior to observing, or if there is anything else the teacher would like for me to know during the pre-conference. Depending on these responses, the teacher may or may not need more guidance during the pre-conference. The effectiveness of their classroom management strategies can be reflected upon during the post-conference.