

Federation for Children with Special Needs Conference

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On Saturday, March 1st, Stephanie Lee was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Federation for Children with Special Needs. Stephanie Lee is the Assistant Secretary for Special Education for the United States. She spoke about IDEA 97 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), which is the law governing education for students with disabilities, and NCLB (No Child Left Behind), which is the Bush administration's blueprint for improving educational outcomes.

Many O'Hearn parents attended the conference. Ms. Lee emphasized two important implications from the federal laws of IDEA97 and NCLD that affect all public schools across the country:

1 – There is no separate special education curriculum. Students with disabilities, regardless of placement, should be participating in the same general education curriculum mandated by states and local districts. Overall, we at the O'Hearn are doing exemplary work at including students with disabilities in the general education curriculum.

All students with disabilities participate in readers and writers workshop during the literacy block. When not participating in mini-lessons or large-group sharing, students with disabilities are receiving individual and small group instruction from special education teachers and therapists, as well as from general education teachers. All students participate in math investigations. Some students with more significant cognitive delays also receive more instruction in functional skills and participate in activities such as the Baking Café and the School Store. In both literacy and math, as well as in all other subject areas, students with disabilities receive supports, accommodations, or modifications around the general curriculum as stipulated in their IEP's (Individual Educational Program).

2 – There is no separate accountability system. Students with disabilities regardless of placement participate in the same general assessment and accountability systems mandated by states and local districts.

Although we at the O'Hearn are doing a good job in preparing students with disabilities for their assessments, the accountability systems for both individual students and the school as a whole are problematic.

Most students with disabilities take the same assessments as their non-disabled peers, as mandated by the state and local districts. In Boston, these students take the same MCAS test and the same reading, writing, and math tests that are designated by the School Department. These students are entitled to certain accommodations as outlined by federal and state guidelines. The teachers, parents and others determine whether or not accommodations are used, and how they are used for testing at the student's IEP meetings. These students are held to the same promotion and graduation requirements,

and their scores are included in calculations to determine the school's overall performance.

Some students with significant cognitive delays take alternate assessments. These assessments test students in the same general content areas but, usually at much lower skill levels. At the O'Hearn, these students do participate in alternate MCAS assessments and alternate reading, writing, and math tests. IEP teams, according to federal and state guidelines, also determine whether or not students with significant cognitive delays participate, or how they participate, in alternate assessments.

Parents of students with significant cognitive delays expressed strong concerns over the accountability systems currently in place for their children. Report cards, particularly those developed electronically, often either grade students with significant cognitive delays as "failures" or they do not indicate their alternate goals and progress. District assessments, particularly those monitored on computer systems, often do not provide options to indicate alternate scores. Almost none of the students with significant cognitive delays who take alternate MCAS exams will ever, under current guidelines, qualify for high school diplomas. And schools that have relatively large numbers of students with significant cognitive delays, like the O'Hearn, will most probably be labeled as "low performing" schools.

Stephanie Lee acknowledged the concerns over accountability and students with significant cognitive delays. She reminded attendees of the conference that there would be changes to certain provisions in the IDEA legislation and she encouraged both parents and professionals to make their voices heard during the period for public comments.