



Effective Preassessment Team Procedures:

Making the Process Work for Teachers and Students

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Preassessment procedures were mandated in the majority of states nearly two decades ago as a gatekeeping system for special education. These building teams were given the charge of providing technical assistance to general educators who had children in their classrooms who were not meeting learning and behavioral expectations. When implemented effectively, these building teams provide consultation and collaboration to teachers to meet the needs of children with learning and behavioral problems in both general and special education classrooms. In this article, suggestions are made for making preassessment teams an effective support system for all teachers.

Preassessment teams were originally conceptualized as a procedural safeguard for children and youth being considered for special education identification and placement (Pryzwansky & Rzepiski, 1983), that is, these teams were designed to provide assistance to general educators in reducing the number of inappropriate special education referrals while delineating interventions that allowed students to experience success in the general classroom (Graden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985). These teams varied in name (e.g., multidisciplinary teams, teacher assistance teams, child study teams, prereferral teams); however, they served a common function: to provide assistance and support to teachers who taught nonidentified students with behavior and learning problems in general education settings. Recently, preassessment teams have evolved to focus on more active collaboration and problem solving among within-building personnel (Chalfant & Van Dusen Pysh, 1989; Ormsbee, Myles, & Simpson, 1999). In this regard, "assist" refers to team activities designed to facilitate staff cooperation and coordinate educators' efforts to develop functional interventions for students experiencing educational problems, as well as to reduce special education referrals and placements. Although similar to original preassessment team activities, current preassessment teams' collaborative focus purportedly makes them a unique entity.

Whereas limited research has been conducted on the function and effectiveness of preassessment teams, existing data indicate that they can be successful in meeting both teachers' and students' needs (Harrington & Gibson, 1986; Myles, Simpson, & Ormsbee, 1996; Ormsbee et al., 1999). In a state survey, Harrington and Gibson asked elementary and secondary general educators to report their perceptions of preassessment. More than two thirds of respondents indicated that preassessment teams helped them clarify student problems and develop intervention strategies and that students benefited from this process. Myles and colleagues (1996) asked general and special educators to report their perceptions of preassessment team effectiveness in designing curricular, management, and environmental interventions for students exhibiting learning and behavioral problems. Overall, both general and special educators viewed preassessment teams as effective in designing modifications for students experiencing learning problems, but differences appeared when considering children with behavioral concerns. The teachers were not nearly as supportive of preassessment teams when asked about behavioral modifications for those students; nearly one half of respondents reported that management modifications were "ineffective."

For preassessment procedures to be an effective support mechanism, building teams should establish and maintain systematic procedures that include (a) collecting comprehensive information about the student, (b) docu-

menting the student's problem, (c) developing specific and detailed intervention plans, (d) identifying support personnel to help implement the intervention plan, and (e) establishing monitoring procedures. Each of these areas will be discussed in more detail below.

Collecting Comprehensive Information About the Student

Preassessment teams cannot provide relevant and effective collaborative support to teachers without detailed information regarding the student. Information collected and reviewed by the preassessment team should include, at a minimum, general educational history, current classroom performance, and office interactions. Much of this information can be obtained by reviewing the student's cumulative folder, which can provide information for the current and previous school years including group test scores, grades and promotion information, attendance reports, behavioral incidents, and general health information. All of this information provides the team with a more detailed description of the student that, when combined with the classroom teacher's current experiences with the child, helps to identify learning and behavioral patterns. For example, group test scores and quarterly and annual grades can serve to establish an achievement baseline for the student that can be compared both to the student's grade placement and to the student's own achievement growth line. Attendance reports establish if the child has been exposed to a consistent educational experience or has a history of transient school attendance or truancy that leads to underachievement.

For students who are brought before the preassessment team due to social, behavioral, or emotional concerns, information regarding referrals to the school counselor, in- or out-of-school suspensions, or even expulsions provide important details to a limited profile provided by one classroom teacher. Moreover, the student's general health should always be considered before pursuing other causal factors. Checking to make sure the student has good overall health, has passed hearing and vision screenings, and has maintained age-appropriate vaccinations should be a first step when attempting to identify any learning or behavioral concern for a child. All this preliminary information should be collected before the preassessment team meets and be presented to the team along with the classroom teacher's report. This can be accomplished through the use of a detailed form like the one provided in this article (see Figure 1). The completed form can be presented orally at the building meeting or photocopied and distributed to all team members prior to the scheduled meeting.

Student name _____ DOB _____ Grade _____

Health Information

•Hearing passed failed (date of test) _____
•Vision passed failed (date of test) _____
•General health status good poor _____

Attendance

_____ No. of schools

Attendance history

_____ Absences this year

_____ Absences last year

_____ Absences two years prior

Comments:

General Achievement Information

Group Test Scores

Name of Test: _____ Name of Test: _____ Name of Test: _____

Date of test: _____ Date of test: _____ Date of test: _____

Grade: _____ Grade: _____ Grade: _____

Scores: _____ Scores: _____ Scores: _____

Grades

GPA Current year:

1st Qtr _____

2nd Qtr _____

3rd Qtr _____

4th Qtr _____

GPA Previous year:

1st Qtr _____

2nd Qtr _____

3rd Qtr _____

4th Qtr _____

GPA 2 years prior:

1st Qtr _____

2nd Qtr _____

3rd Qtr _____

4th Qtr _____

Comments:

(figure continues)

Figure 1. Preassessment/prereferral comprehensive student information form.

Office Interactions

Current Year:

Behavior referrals: _____ No. Reasons: _____

Office Actions:

_____ Referral for School Counseling Services
_____ Parent Contacts
_____ No. of In-School Suspensions
_____ No. of Out-of-School Suspensions
_____ Expulsion

Comments

Previous Year:

Behavior referrals: _____ No. Reasons: _____

Office Actions:

_____ Referral for School Counseling Services
_____ Parent Contacts
_____ No. of In-School Suspensions
_____ No. of Out-of-School Suspensions
_____ Expulsion

Comments

Two Years Prior:

Behavior referrals: _____ No. Reasons: _____

Office Actions:

_____ Referral for School Counseling Services
_____ Parent Contacts
_____ No. of In-School Suspensions
_____ No. of Out-of-School Suspensions
_____ Expulsion

Comments

Documenting the Student's Problem

Often preassessment teams meet the classroom teacher and make informal suggestions for intervention based on the teacher's perceptions of the problem. Although the teacher is an important source of information, it is critical that objective data be collected about the student and the problem to help the team design an intervention that is appropriate and that will be most effective. To accomplish this in the most efficient fashion, a building team member should conduct preliminary observations of the student before the first team meeting. This preliminary data collection activity should entail multiple visits/collection points and employ an objective observational strategy. Data to be collected may include observational information of the student's learning behaviors, student work products, student interactions with peers and others, and so on. Data collected can be reported in conjunction with the comprehensive student information and teacher report to provide the team with a detailed picture of the student, objective data to support the teacher's concerns, and a baseline of information to use for comparison after an appropriate intervention has been implemented.

Developing Specific and Detailed Intervention Plans

When designing an effective intervention plan for the teacher to implement, it is important that it be specific and detailed. The team should provide, in writing, very exact procedures for the teacher to follow (see Figure 2 for Intervention Plan form). Far too often, teachers receive ambiguous suggestions that are destined to fail with students because the teacher may not fully understand the strategy or has misunderstood verbal instructions during the meeting. By designing a specific intervention plan, the team ensures that the intervention will be implemented appropriately, as it was designed. Furthermore, putting the intervention plan on paper forces the team to be specific about minute details that may not arise until the teacher is on his or her own. For instance, if the intervention is to provide intermittent social reinforcement when a student uses appropriate language, the team needs to define "intermittent," the type of social reinforcement to be given, how and when it is to be delivered, how long it should be tried, and so forth. Simply telling a teacher to start reinforcing a student for using nice words during reading group is not enough; in fact, more than likely, the teacher's response will be that he or she has already tried that and it hasn't worked. Thus, a detailed plan will help underscore for a teacher the importance of a systematic strategy, even if it is a simple one.

The evaluation procedures are an important part of the intervention plan that is often overlooked. How is the intervention plan evaluated for effectiveness? This should not be merely a recording of the classroom teacher's perceptions regarding changes in the student, but should be an objective strategy. The strategy should be detailed in the intervention plan, identifying the person who is responsible for implementing it. Details should include a description of the type of data collection to be used, the schedule for collecting data, the techniques for assessing the data collected, and the method of reporting the data. Finally, the team may wish to designate improvement benchmarks to serve as indicators that the intervention plan is working.

A copy of the plan should be provided to the student's parents. It is surprising how often parents are unaware that their child was referred to a preassessment team and that some organized efforts were made to help the student in the general classroom before considering special education assessment. Parents are an important factor in preassessment and should, at the very least, be informed of the meeting and the decisions made regarding their child.

Identifying Support Personnel to Help Implement the Intervention Plan

Preassessment teams can develop very effective intervention plans for students with difficulties; however, the success of those plans is ultimately in the hands of the classroom teacher. Even the most powerful instructional technique is only as good as the teacher who uses it, and if the teacher is not fully committed to the plan or does not perceive himself or herself as having the time, skills, and so on, the plan will not work. Thus, building-level teams are advised to provide support to the classroom teacher during implementation of the intervention plan.

A preassessment team member can be assigned to the classroom teacher to provide moral and technical support during the intervention plan. That person would check on the classroom teacher during the first few days of the plan to make sure that he or she is comfortable with the strategy, help develop any unique materials needed for the plan, encourage the teacher to follow the plan even when things go array, and troubleshoot any problems that may occur. In addition, this person would be responsible for conducting the evaluation of the intervention to determine objectively if the plan was effective.

Establishing Monitoring Procedures

Most state preassessment guidelines recommend at least 4 to 6 weeks of preassessment activities before consider-

Grade: _____

Teacher: _____

Intervention Goal What observable, measurable changes do we want to see in the student? _____ _____ _____		
Academic Modifications What strategy/method is to be used? How is it to be done? Where? When? Who will do it?	Details of Intervention Plan	Behavioral Strategies
Parent/Home Activities	Motivational/Incentives System	
Data Collection Activities How will effectiveness be assessed? _____ _____ _____ Who will collect the data? _____ _____ How often will data be collected? _____ _____	Follow Up Plans/Procedures How often will the team meet to monitor the plan? _____ _____ What is our criteria for success? _____ _____ Who will help the teacher implement the plan? _____ _____ _____	
General Comments		

Figure 2. Preassessment team intervention plan form.

ing other, more intrusive procedures. During this time, it is important that the preassessment team keep in close contact with classroom teacher. Weekly updates by the preassessment team member assigned to the classroom teacher can provide important monitoring of the procedures, as well as allow adjustments to be made to the intervention plan as needed. The classroom teacher should

visit with the team at least monthly to report how the intervention is working, if some procedures need modifications, and how the student is responding. At this time, intervention evaluation data should be reported to determine if the intervention is working to help the student succeed in the classroom (see Figure 3 for Preassessment Monitoring Report form).

Student: _____

Date of initial team referral: _____

Teacher: _____

Intervention Data			
Date	Data Report	Statement of Intervention Effectiveness	Suggested Changes to Plan

Figure 3. Preassessment monitoring form.

Formal monitoring should continue for at least 9 weeks. During this time, weekly monitoring reports from the preassessment team member, as well as monthly teacher and data collection reports should take place. All meeting discussions and data should be compiled and maintained for use when determining intervention plan effectiveness and if the child is eventually referred for special education

testing. In addition, the information should be shared with the student's parents, whether they are invited to attend preassessment team meetings or are informed by the classroom teacher.

Preassessment teams can provide critical support to classroom teachers who have students experiencing learning and behavioral problems. Such support should

be in the form of positive collaborative and consultative services and technical information. To be most effective, however, preassessment teams should use systematic procedures that ensure the collection of comprehensive and objective student information and the application of the most efficacious strategies. If building-level preassessment teams develop and follow systematic procedures, their teachers will be more likely to view the team as a helpful rather than a bureaucratic option. Most important of all, students will benefit from the power of a multidisciplinary, multitalented professional team of educators who are working together to help each child succeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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