

# MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION

**DR. JOHN O'CONNOR**

*Over the next several issues, John O'Connor will be writing a series of articles on how special education leaders can effectively become champions of GREAT instruction to radically improve the achievement and performance of students with disabilities.*

In the field of special education, we have one defining question - How do we radically improve the achievement and performance of students with disabilities? At the risk of sounding arrogant, I know the answer. We must do one thing – provide GREAT instruction. In education, we have often said that there are no silver bullets. That is wrong. There is a silver bullet and it is found in great instruction. If we provide top notch, out of the park instruction every day during every period in every school, then our students with disabilities will make astonishing gains. Great instruction is the silver bullet. Whether a student is improving reading comprehension, increasing chemistry skills, learning appropriate behavior or solving applied math problems, great instruction is the answer. It takes vast dedication, extensive expertise and tireless effort. It is certainly not easy, but great instruction is undeniably the answer.

As special education leaders, our responsibilities can be overwhelming. We have to plan for student safety, develop IEPs, make eligibility determinations, collaborate with families, meet timelines, analyze data, establish classes, hire, evaluate and lead personnel, reduce disproportionality, and on and on. All of those activities are critically important, but those activities only set the stage. A perfect IEP that was developed in beautiful collaboration with parents and staff does not teach a child to read fluently or perform mathematics. That IEP is only the plan. It merely gets us started for our year's work. As educational leaders, we have to strive toward providing great instruction every day through every teacher in every school.

So what is great instruction? If you asked every teacher in your school system, how many answers would you get? I have asked that question to dozens of audiences and the mumbled answer always includes, "You would get a different answer from every teacher." We can certainly do better than that. After decades of research and experiences educating students with disabilities, we know a thing or two about providing effective instruction. Every professional should not have "their own" definition of great instruction.

At the end of the day, G.R.E.A.T. instruction is:

- **G**uided by the performance standards
- **R**igorous with research-based strategies

- **E**ngaging and exciting
- **A**ssessed continuously to guide instruction, and
- **T**ailored (differentiated) through flexible groups.

Fifteen years ago, if you asked most special education teachers what they teach their students with disabilities, most answers referred to "the goals and objectives on the IEP." The No Child Left Behind and IDEA legislation has taught us that students with disabilities should be pursuing the same performance standards as their non-disabled peers. Our experiences and research in special education teaches us that there are specific instructional practices that have a big impact on student achievement. Therefore, GREAT instruction must include an intersection and combination of teaching to the performance standards while providing effective pedagogy that addresses students' individual needs. That intersection of what we teach and how we teach must be motivating to students and inherently embedded in high expectations with needed differentiation.

In your position as a special education leader, how much of your time is devoted to leading GREAT instruction? Many times, our work days are monopolized by compliance activities and the "daily operations" that are needed to keep our school districts running smoothly. In fact, it is easy to go weeks and even months without truly investing in the improvement of instruction. As professionals, we have to share a relentless message that the factor that changes students' lives is the daily instruction that we as educators provide. But talk is cheap. We not only have to spread the message, we have to demonstrate by how we spend our time that improving instruction is our top priority. We are obligated to complete the compliance activities and the structures of daily operations, but we must also be the champions of GREAT instruction.

\*\*\*\*\*

*John O'Connor is the Executive Director for Special Services with the DeKalb County (Georgia) School System which includes roughly 8,400 students with disabilities and 9,500 English Learners. He is the author of three books including "Students with Disabilities Can Meet Accountability Standards" and is an active member of GCASE.*