

Special Education Needs Policy

Cornerstone Learning Community

I. Introduction

Cornerstone Learning Community has a long-standing commitment to serving a diverse student body, including students with special learning needs. Our role as educators is to consider a student's needs from a "whole child" perspective – believing that every student can learn. It is our job to nurture each student by understanding his or her unique profile of skills and talents and fostering the creative thinking and learning required for success in a global community. We strive to provide all Cornerstone students in the IB Middle Years Program (MYP) with the resources, guidance, and support needed to achieve their best academically, socially, and personally.

II. Definitions

- A. Special Learning Needs – students who show a need for additional support or a student whose profile demands challenge beyond the general curriculum. Cornerstone teachers understand that individual student needs and abilities exist along a continuum, including students with learning disabilities as well as students classified as gifted and talented.
- B. Inclusion – the physical, social, and instructional inclusion of students with a range of abilities and needs as full participants in the MYP with access to all components therein.
- C. Differentiation – meeting individual student needs through the modification of the written, taught, and assessed curriculum.
- D. Individual Education Plan (IEP) – document written to address learning needs that are outside the general grade level curriculum. The IEP is a form of communication between student, family, and school with agreed upon goals, priorities, services and supports.
- E. 504 Accommodation Plan (504 Plan) – document written to elucidate the accommodations and supports needed for a student with an identified disability. The 504 Plan is a form of communication between student, family and school.

III. Teaching Ideals

- A. Cornerstone teachers know that all students can learn. We recognize the school's responsibility in respecting and nurturing the integrity of the Whole Child.
- B. Including students with special needs requires the fostering of compassion and caring among students and teachers. It also requires prioritizing the creation of a safe and respectful learning environment.

- B. All teachers are responsible for having a working knowledge of the identified special needs present in their student groups and for serving those students directly through differentiation, collaboration with Support Services staff and consultation with community resource personnel.
- C. Students are expected to take an active role in their learning and to be able to reflect on their learning strengths and relative weaknesses.
- D. An individual student's education program is a partnership between the student, parent(s)/guardian(s), and the school. Families will communicate with teachers and staff concerning their child's needs. They will provide documentation, voice concerns, and clarify steps needed to ensure that their child's needs are met.

IV. Support Services Interface

A. Obligations toward serving students with special learning needs

Cornerstone's Admissions Committee works diligently to evaluate individual student needs when a family applies. With only one class per grade in a small school, it is critical to not overload any one class or the school as a whole with more needs than can be adequately served by our regular education and Support Services staff. When a student with special needs is accepted, we work proactively with parents to plan the supports and accommodations needed. IEP and 504 Plan documents are used to help teachers understand the student's specific needs, level of functioning and goals. Support Services staff work collaboratively with the MYP teachers to find avenues for success. Occasionally, we will have a student whose special needs are not known to us until middle school. In that case, teachers, staff, and parents work closely to understand the student's needs and to adapt the curriculum to what is in the student's best interest for learning and long term success.

B. Admissions Policies

Cornerstone's Admissions Committee gives every application careful consideration. The application asks for information concerning previous testing, identification of special needs, behavior problems, and health issues. When a student with an identified special need applies, the application goes to the Support Services Coordinator to determine whether the student's needs could be served at our school. If the answer is yes, then the Admissions Committee looks at the type of needs, and supports presented, and determines whether the particular class or grade level already has students with special needs. In addition, the Admissions Committee weighs the total Support Services caseload for the school. Acceptance is offered only after the Admissions Committee is assured that the student's needs could be well served at Cornerstone and that planning and coordinating services does not overburden any one teacher, class, or the Support Services staff.

C. Financial implications

Tutoring services in reading, writing, and mathematics are offered by Cornerstone's Support Services staff. In addition, students can receive assistance with organizational strategies, planning, and completion of large projects. With the Support Services Coordinator being an ESE teacher who has access to outside providers, we can set up therapy for students with language learning impairments and provide support with socio-emotional difficulties, including autism spectrum disorder.

For students receiving services at school, tutoring and therapies are charged as additional fees. Some of the services are provided during the school day and some are offered before and after school. Several students receiving services have state-based scholarships or scholarships based on financial need. However, most scholarships do not completely cover the cost of tuition plus services. Families are asked to make up the difference. In most cases, the students receiving services would qualify for services in the public schools, but families chose the private school setting as a better fit and with more individualized services.

Student tutoring and therapy fees help off-set some of the cost of having a Support Services department. The rest comes from the general revenue fund. Support Services staff serve the whole school, and not just the MYP. Cornerstone's Board of Trustees and Director understand that it often costs more to serve students with special needs. They also understand that the benefits extend to the rest of the school staff and student body through better instruction by teachers, availability of resources to differentiate instruction, and professional consultations from the Support Services staff.

D. Identification

Currently our Support Services department consists of a Support Services Coordinator who is a certified ESE and General Education teacher endorsed in Reading Interventions and ESOL. She has almost ten years of experience serving students with specific learning disabilities, behavioral/emotional issues, social communication disorders, medical conditions, mental health issues, and second language barriers. The Coordinator tutors students, advocates for students in all grades, and manages the Support Services teacher who is quite familiar with CLC's curriculum, resources, expectations, and approach. Currently the Support Services teacher is a certified educator who provides tutoring in reading, math, and mindfulness as well as teaches a middle school math class.

Identification of students with special needs happens in the MYP when parents provide a history and documentation of such. For students not already identified, we rely on several standardized assessments which can happen in-house (achievement tests, speech and language diagnostic tools, and writing diagnostic tools). When a more comprehensive assessment is needed, we turn to community providers (physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health counselors). Decisions related to the provision of services are made by families and Support Services staff together.

E. Documentation

When a student could benefit from tutoring in the form of additional instruction provided in a small group or one-on-one setting, a Cornerstone-specific IEP Summary is written. When a student has an identified disability that impacts school performance and needs accommodations, an IEP or 504 Plan are written. Both documents are created in collaboration with teachers, parents, and Support Services staff.

Student records related to Support Services are kept confidential. Parents are given the right to decide the information they want included in their child's permanent record.

Record-keeping and the sharing of information follow HIPPA guidelines.

F. Staff Development and Collaboration

The Support Services Coordinator is a member of the middle school team and participates in MYP program planning meetings and coordination meetings as often as possible. MYP meetings are separated into two distinct goals: 1) understanding individual student needs; and 2) cross-disciplinary collaboration. The Support Services Coordinator takes an active role in helping teachers understand individual students – providing history, etiology, community resources, and common interventions as the situations require. The procedure that is followed includes:

- understanding the student's difficulties by describing problem situations
- comparing student performance across classes and contexts
- reviewing known history
- posing questions for parents/guardians, if more information is needed
- planning for further information-gathering through a parent conference, in-house assessment, observation and data collection, or trial accommodations

Often the Support Services Coordinator will take the lead when the student reviewed by the team has an identified special need or one is suspected. If the student's struggles are subject-specific or relate to family circumstances or habits, the middle school team leader or other teacher might take the lead in following up with the student and family.

The Support Services team participates in professional development opportunities offered locally, within the state, and nationally. In the past three years we have attended workshops on sensory processing, autism spectrum disorders, DSM V, social thinking, the Orton-Gillingham reading

instruction, math instruction, handwriting instruction, attention deficit disorder, and executive functioning.

The Support Services Coordinator has facilitated workshops for teachers at Cornerstone including one in August 2018 on instructing and understanding students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In the past, middle school teachers have also joined in self-study of topics related to teaching students with special needs including lesson study and differentiated instruction.

G. Special Needs Policy & IB expectations – MYP Connections

Cornerstone's MYP is inclusive – all middle school students participate. Teachers differentiate instruction, adapt assessments as needed, provide support for self-reflection and consider the process of learning as well as the products for students with special needs. When a student's special needs are in the area of language – meaning their disability affects the use of their native language (English) – we sometimes have to prioritize English language learning to the exclusion of second language acquisition. Students who do not participate in our Spanish program receive tutoring and/or speech-language therapy instead. The additional instructional time benefits the student's full participation and growth in all other academic courses.

The Support Services staff, help teachers and students involved in field trips and service learning projects by guiding teacher to adjust expectations for students who have physical, learning, or behavioral differences. Teachers also focus on setting goals with students for the experience. Together Support Services staff and teachers anticipate potential challenges for off campus activities and proactively implement strategies for dealing with them.

V. Review of Needs and Practices

Cornerstone Learning Community has significant resources and support for students with special needs, especially considering our small school size. Much of the credit goes to our supportive administration. The value placed on learning diversity has been translated into adequate funding for Support Services personnel, on-going professional development in this area, and careful consideration of applicants to the school so that we are not “overloaded” with more need than we can adequately serve.

MYP teachers too deserve credit for the ways they carefully consider individual student needs each day. Ongoing efforts to improve the supports offered to students and the capacity of MYP teachers to serve them is focused on three areas below.

A. Assessing students with special needs

Teachers often struggle to adequately assess students with special needs. Though a student might participate successfully in class discussions and projects, the very same student may struggle with demonstrating his or her thinking in writing or by answering test questions. In fact, many of the students with special needs at Cornerstone have learning disabilities that affect their performance –

their ability to *show* what they know – more than their ability to learn or assimilate the information or concepts.

MYP teachers are challenged to create learning situations that offer multiple methods of assessment. They are also challenged to teach in ways that build student opportunities to link spoken language to written communication.

B. Scaffolding instruction and tasks to build on what students know and can do

Standardized test scores and information about a student from previous grades help MYP teachers find a “starting place” with individual students. IEPs and 504 Plans also provide information about supports and accommodations that are critical for a student’s access to the curriculum and success in fulfilling class expectations. Scaffolding instruction within daily class sessions and across units can be difficult with the range of learners present in our middle school classes.

C. Providing ongoing support for differentiated instruction

Identifying the broad concepts or skills that can be differentiated within units of study tests teacher thinking and planning. For teachers to truly offer different degrees of complexity within assignments or class periods relies on allowing different things to happen in the classroom at the same time. Teachers need strong routines for handling time, attention, space, and materials so that their teaching role can change depending on student needs and configurations.

Complex assignments can overwhelm students with special needs even when the topic is meaningful and the student is motivated by a personal connection. Breaking assignments down into manageable parts with structured instructions can be invaluable to students with organizational challenges, comprehension difficulties, or written language deficits.

Ultimately it is the teacher’s ability to respond to students with special needs that demonstrates the way students should respect and respond to each other. A teacher’s stance – seeing all students as learners and inquirers – is reflected in the strategies she can employ and the expanse of her reach in building her global classroom community.