

Access and Inclusion 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 and every student by understanding their 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 they need to achieve their best academically, socially, and personally. Cornerstone follows an inclusion model based on a student's needs and includes a combination of push-in and pull-out services.

II. Definitions

- A. Special Learning Needs – student needs for additional support or additional 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. Student Education Plan (SEP) – document written to address learning needs that are outside the general grade-level curriculum. The SEP is a form of communication between student, family, and school with agreed upon goals, priorities, services, and supports. This document is the equivalent to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that would be implemented in a public school setting.
- E. Accommodation Plan – document written to elucidate the accommodations and supports needed for a student with an identified disability. The Accommodation Plan is a form of communication between student, family, and school. This is the equivalent to a 504 Accommodation Plan that would be implemented in a public school setting.

III. Teaching Ideals

- A. Cornerstone teachers know that all students can learn. The school recognizes their responsibility in respecting and nurturing the integrity of the Whole Child.

- B. Teachers foster compassion among students and uphold this value among faculty and staff.
Cornerstone teachers strive to maintain a safe and respectful learning environment. These practices support the access and inclusion of students across the continuum of need and ability.
- B. All teachers maintain a working knowledge of the identified special needs present in their student groups. They are responsible for serving those students directly through differentiation, collaboration with Student Services staff, and consultation with community resource personnel.
- C. Students are expected to take an active role in their learning and to reflect on their learning strengths and areas for growth .
- D. An individual student’s education program is a partnership between the student, parent(s)/guardian(s), and the school. Families communicate with teachers and staff concerning their child’s needs. They voice concerns, provide documentation, and clarify steps needed to ensure that their child’s needs are met.

IV. Student 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 avoid overloading any one class or the school as a whole with more needs than can be adequately served by our regular education and Student Services staff. When a student with special needs is accepted, the school works proactively with parents to plan the supports and accommodations needed. SEP and Accommodation Plan documents are used to help teachers understand the student’s specific needs, level of functioning, and goals. Student Services staff work collaboratively with the MYP teachers to find avenues for success. Occasionally, a student’s 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 adapt the curriculum to best support the student’s learning and long-term success.

B. Admissions Policies

Cornerstone’s Admissions Committee gives every application careful consideration. The application includes questions about previous testing, identification of special needs, behavior concerns, and health. When a student with an identified special need applies, the Student Services Director reviews the application to determine whether our school is equipped to meet the student’s particular type of need. If the answer is yes, then the Admissions Committee considers the applicant’s needs and the corresponding supports; the committee determines whether the applicant’s class or grade level is already serving with special needs. In addition, the Admissions Committee weighs the total Student 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 Student Services staff.

C. Financial implications

Targeted interventions in reading, writing, and mathematics are offered by Cornerstone's Student Services staff. In addition, students can receive assistance with organizational strategies, planning, and completion of large projects. Students may also receive support with social-emotional learning, emotional regulation, and through the use of other therapeutic interventions.

For students receiving services at school, tutoring and therapies are charged as additional fees. Services are provided during the school day and are carefully considered in scheduling to lessen the impact on a student's day and overall well-being. 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 Student Services department. The rest comes from the general revenue fund. Student 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 Student Services staff.

D. Identification

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

E. Documentation

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

Student records related to Student 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 FERPA guidelines.

F. Staff Development and Collaboration

The Student Services Director 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 Student Services Director 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 Student Services Director 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 Student Services team participates in professional development opportunities offered locally, within the state, and nationally. In the past the team has attended workshops on learning and the brain, sensory processing, autism spectrum disorders, social thinking, the Orton-Gillingham reading instruction, math instruction, handwriting instruction, attention deficit disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and executive functioning.

The Student Services Director has facilitated workshops for teachers at Cornerstone including one on Building a Trauma-Informed School. 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 diagnosed special needs are in the area of language – meaning their disability affects the use of their native language (English) – their English language learning is prioritized 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 Student Services staff help teachers and students involved in field trips and service learning projects by guiding teachers to adjust expectations for students who have physical, learning, or behavioral differences. Teachers also focus on setting goals with students for the experience. Together Student 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 Student Services personnel, on-going professional development in this area, and careful consideration of applicants so that the school is not "overloaded" with more need than can adequately be served.

MYP teachers too deserve credit for the ways they carefully consider individual student needs each day. Ongoing efforts to improve the support 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 are tasked with identifying and responding to each student's learning profile. 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. SEPs and Accommodation 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 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 they can employ and the expanse of their reach in building a global classroom community.