Assessment of Inclusive Practices

How do you look for effective inclusion of students with disabilities across the school system?

BY KURT A. SCHNEIDER, MARY MORGAN RYAN AND KRISTEN NINNI

Historically, elementary and secondary education has grouped students based on ability, identified needs, language or student behavior. This led to educational practices that support separateness.

In school systems nationwide, including those located in the suburbs of Chicago where we lead an educational cooperative, we have constructed a normed group of students whom we label “general education students.” Non-general education students usually are those who do not meet the criteria of academic, language, physical, emotional, social or behavioral success of the normed or dominant group.

Of the 36,205 students in 62 schools in our cooperative’s member districts, 13.3 percent have individualized education plans and receive ser-
**Actions That Moved Us Closer to Inclusion**  
**BY KATE E. CAVANAUGH**

Over the past year, I have served as a principal of a 330-student, K-4 elementary school after working for five years as a district-level administrator to support my suburban Chicago district as we moved to fully include students with disabilities in their neighborhood schools with their same-age peers.

Today, 93 percent of the students with individual education plans at my school spend more than 80 percent of their time in the least restrictive environment.

As I reflect on this progress and consider where we started, I see four key actions that significantly impacted our move into inclusive practices.

**A Clear Vision**

First, our superintendent set a vision for the district that all students would be educated in their neighborhood school to learn alongside their same-age peers in general education. This seems so fitting, but it is not an easy goal to attain. What I learned is that the work is about changing hearts and minds first; the changing practices follow. It all must start with a clear vision at the top along with district-level support.

Once the superintendent’s vision was made clear through consistent messaging to all stakeholders, including the board of education and community members, my role as director of special education at the time was to support the district’s four principals with follow-through at the school level. The support was provided through intentional professional learning with our district instructional leadership team, and ongoing meetings with the principals and outside consultants.

Second, a shift in our staffing model supported the work of inclusion. At the start, we hired more special education teachers to align with every grade level in the elementary schools. This provided a true partnership among the members of grade-level teams and created opportunities for co-teaching and greater support in general education.

Inspired by the research of Michael F. Giangreco, a special education researcher at the University of Vermont, we created a more consistent staffing plan based on overall student enrollment instead of the number of students with disabilities who need one-on-one support from teaching assistants. We focused on using resources differently and uniquely. For example, we looked at all the adult supports that we flexibly move in and out of classrooms and how can we apply the resources more effectively.

**Staff Skill Building**

The third key action that impacted the progress of inclusive practices in our district was the purposeful professional learning and coaching provided to all stakeholders. One of the barriers was teachers not feeling they had the skills and strategies to support all students, especially those with complex needs. Thus, it was imperative we provided professional learning to expand their skills and increase their self-efficacy.

Job-embedded professional development was provided by our educational cooperative through ongoing coaching to help teachers generalize the skills they have learned. Early on, we connected with an expert in the field, Carol Quirk of the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, who forever changed my educational philosophy and trajectory. I thought inclusion was about being in the same place with one another, but I now understand that it is much more than that. To truly be included, each person must feel a genuine sense of belonging and meaning-

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vices under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004.

**Getting Started**

To know whether your school system is perpetuating practices associated with segregation and marginalization, you must understand your district’s equity data and instructional service delivery across all student groups. For the students with disabilities group, disaggregate that data even further based on the eligibility areas associated with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (e.g., autism, cognitive/intellectual or emotional/behavioral disabilities).

In our case, a beginning step was a “profile meeting” with each of the 18 school districts in our suburban cooperative to discuss their local data across student groups. We reviewed that information in conjunction with regional trends and state averages. At annual profile meetings, we focus on reviewing data from each district’s state report card and federal indicator data and discuss member districts’ strategic initiatives and goals for the coming year. This information is integrated into existing plans and builds the partnerships to co-create inclusive environments.

TrueNorth Educational Cooperative 804, in partnership with our member districts, is working to ensure learners of all backgrounds, especially those with disabilities and complex needs, have equitable access to meaningful educational experiences. With that foundation, students can truly live, work and play within their communities.

While equity work in education is challenging, we are proud to share that such work has resulted in a seven-year positive trend across all member districts. Today, 73 percent of students with IEPs in early childhood through age 22 — up from 62 percent in 2016 — spend more than 80 percent of their school day with their nondisabled peers.
If the goal of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 is to close academic gaps, then increasing access to learning opportunities with rigorous core instruction must occur for all students.

**Delivery Models**

When examining equity data, we discuss the instructional models in each content area to better understand if those instructional models adopt a program model or an integrated model, an important distinction.

The features of a program delivery model, as defined by Colleen Capper and Elise Frattura in their book *Meeting the Needs of Students of ALL Abilities: How Leaders Go Beyond Inclusion*, include:

- routinely separating students from their peers during core teaching and learning;
- designating students as in need of special services at proportions that exceed natural proportions in classrooms;
- fragmenting students’ daily schedules by moving them from location to location to receive services;
- isolating teachers who serve students with disabilities through scheduling and physical location, which inhibits the sharing of instructional expertise;
- overlooking the individual needs of students with disabilities; and
- regularly requiring students with the most complex needs to attend specific school programs segregated from peers for the majority of their day or in other schools altogether.

As a result of this model, learners are labeled by the specific program they attend (such as

As principal of an elementary school in Lake Forest, Ill., Kate Cavanaugh has reconfigured staffing to better support learning needs of children with disabilities.

need consistent planning time with all staff who support students in their classroom in order to meet their needs. This has to be built into the master schedule before the year begins.

Seven years into our inclusive practices work, things are not perfect. Some of the biggest challenges we face are supporting students with significant social, emotional and behavioral challenges and being responsive with professional learning and coaching as students’ needs and staff change from year to year. However, I have learned that when we know better, we do better. We continue to learn and grow as a district. We see examples every day of students having a true sense of belonging in the community.

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special education students) or by the intervention they receive (such as Tier 3 students). These programs typically are run outside of the general education environment. Students are tracked and marginalized for large portions of their school day and rarely participate in educational experiences that provide access to the core curriculum.

By contrast, integrated comprehensive service delivery models ensure meaningful access to the core curriculum and educational experiences with peers. In their book, Capper and Frattura report that delivering services in this manner raises the capacity of educators to accommodate student differences in a manner that minimizes student isolation and fragmentation.

An integrated approach not only is supported by educational research across various equity scholars but also is one of the four pillars of opportunity included in ESSA. This overarching law encompasses all learners and is meant to ensure every student has a quality education and that schools are held accountable for their students’ academic achievement.

This idea is further reinforced by IDEA for students with disabilities. Since its inception in 1975, this federal mandate has stated that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their nondisabled peers in their least restrictive environment, in their home districts, schools and classrooms to the greatest extent appropriate.

In the work taking place within our cooperative and among our suburban school districts, the most common integrated service model practices include planning instruction for the full range of learners within every classroom and grade; eliminating classrooms and schools established to exclusively serve labeled students; building upon culturally relevant curriculum based on universal access; sharing expertise across roles and with job-alike colleagues; and proactively supporting students based on identified strengths and needs.

**Equity Assessments**

For a school district, launching an equity audit may lead to inclusive educational practices. Regularly examining your data for inequities and proportional representation reveals whether a school and district is truly inclusive.

In his 2021 book *Stuck Improving: Racial Equity and School Leadership*, Decoteau Irby puts forward the idea that schools are built around the typical general education student. The system must be retrofitted for students who learn differently. As a result, these students often are not successful, perpetuating the perception that diverse learners cannot achieve academically.

When examining disaggregated data, student groupings ought to be proportional to their representation in the population, without overrepresentation in a specific education category. For example, to identify achievement and opportunity gaps you must examine school- and district-level state assessment data across all content areas for students by race/ethnicity, English language
learning, disability and income status.

Graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment and completion rates and discipline data are equity indicators that reveal systemwide inclusive instructional practices in schools.

TrueNorth worked with member districts to develop and conduct a self-assessment tool and process. This reviews quantitative data from state reporting, an equity audit based on the Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity framework, a rapid improvement practices rubric from The Center for School Turnaround and Improvement, as well as qualitative classroom observations and educator interviews.

The mixed method review prompted some school districts to strengthen existing strategic plan goals, not create additional goals and plans. Other districts hired consultants to conduct evaluative audits that found gaps in achievement and access to rigorous core instruction.

Placement Data

The intentionality and spirit of IDEA has been clear for nearly 50 years that students, regardless of their disabilities, should attend school in their home district, in their home school, in a home-room class with their peers to the greatest extent appropriate. Our implementation largely has fallen short.

School district leaders must analyze educational placement data to understand the least restrictive environment, which sheds light on a district’s inclusivity. Known as Indicator 5 under IDEA, the LRE is broken down into categories based on the time students spend in the general education classroom as follows:

- 80 percent or more of the day (least restrictive);
- 40-79 percent of the day;
- less than 40 percent of the day; and
- separate schools, residential facilities or home-bound/hospital placements (most restrictive).

Tracking least restrictive environment data involves measuring the percentage of students with disabilities in each of the LRE categories. Identifying and monitoring strategic goals around placement will assist learning outcomes.

Examining Beliefs

Finally, looking critically at the attitudes and beliefs of school district staff helps to assess comfort and capacity with respect to equitable practices across different learners.

One such tool, the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education’s Inclusive Education Staff Survey, is designed to help school districts identify the support needed to increase the delivery of special education services within general education settings. Supporting inclusive practices requires establishing shared beliefs, identifying and addressing staff concerns, building staff capacity and providing necessary support for implementation.

Believing all educators want to do what is right and good for students and understanding comfort levels and support needs to be successful will lead to the development of inclusive school districts.

Promoting Inclusion with Professional Learning

Our educational cooperative arranged for national expertise to educate administrative staff and school board members in the 18 member school districts on educational practices, federal laws and federal funding and human resource practices aligned with improving student achievement systematically.

This learning occurred through board workshops and administrative academies and retreats. In turn, representatives of these groups have participated in the Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity Institute, the national TASH conference and the annual National School Boards Association Equity Symposium and Advocacy Institute in Washington, D.C.

These are some of the professional resources our cooperative and school districts have used when pursuing inclusive practices for serving students with disabilities:

- **Center for School Turnaround and Improvement** ([https://csti.wested.org](https://csti.wested.org)). This center, part of WestEd, promotes use of research-informed solutions that support systemic improvement for all schools.
- **Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity** ([www.icsequity.org](http://www.icsequity.org)). ICS takes a systems approach to eliminate inequities.
- **Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education** ([www.mcie.org](http://www.mcie.org)). MCIE envisions a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities.
- **TASH** ([www.tash.org](http://www.tash.org)). TASH is an organization focused on disability advocacy.

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