

"Ownership of All Students": Linking Successful Inclusion and Positive School Climate

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Introduction:

Inclusion, as a philosophy and a practice, remains a complex and meaningful construct in schools. Philosophically and pragmatically, inclusion has numerous meanings depending on whose perspective is asked; nevertheless, its implementation, in whatever form taken, is being watched more closely than ever (Solis et al., 2012). In Delaware, the Access to the General Education (AGEC) Committee serves as a stakeholder group providing feedback on Indicators 3 and 5 of the State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report for the Delaware Department of Education (DEDOE). Members are stakeholders from throughout Delaware, including state-, district- and school-level staff from the Delaware public school system, as well as parents and representatives from numerous disability-related agencies within Delaware.

In 2011, DEDOE and the AGEC began a multi-year initiative to: 1) determine what elements of inclusive practices are most important to the academic achievement of students with IEPs within inclusive classrooms in Delaware and 2) develop an interview protocol to use to identify those practices across schools demonstrating the highest levels of success in both the inclusion and achievement of students with IEPs. Data used to select successful schools to participate in the study included the percentage of students with IEPs in Placement A (80% or more of their day is in the general education setting) and state test scores for those students in placement A. In total, 10 schools were identified for this study - 5 elementary, 3 middle, and 2 high schools.

In 2013-2014 interviews were conducted with personnel who were actively engaged in those inclusion efforts at each school. This poster outlines the findings from 69 interviews conducted across 9 schools over the course of this initiative.

Objectives:

The purpose of this poster presentation is two-fold:

1. Share ground-level recommendations and practices related to increasing the inclusion of students with IEPs in the general education setting while increasing the academic performance of those students at the elementary and secondary level.
2. Highlight recommendations and practices that indicate an important relationship between school climate and successful inclusion.

Discussion:

Through the collaborative structure of this study, a diverse group of stakeholders were able to conceptualize, refine and implement a study that yielded valuable and pragmatic information that school communities can use to better understand how school climate and successful inclusionary practices are linked. In the end, this study resulted in 69 interviews, across 9 schools. The interview protocol covered the following six aspects of inclusion programming:

- 1) **educators' global understandings/philosophy of inclusion,**
- 2) **successful inclusive instructional practices,**
- 3) **productive collaboration among school members,**
- 4) **effective scheduling practices ,**
- 5) **useful materials & resources, and**
- 6) **access and utilization of professional development.**

Study results share similarities to findings found in other, larger multi-steps investigations of successful inclusion programs (Farrell et al., 2007; McLeskey et al., 2012). For the interviewees, school climate seems to play an important role in successful inclusion. A shared mindset regarding inclusion, along with specific inclusion-related practices, including data-based decision-making and hands-on administrative support, appear to have facilitated these schools' inclusion success.

Findings:

Instruction

| Elementary | | Secondary |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Common Core: The Common Core is deliberately embedded in the curriculum for all students.</p> <p>Data: There are numerous systems in place to help teachers monitor all students' skills including those before, during, and after intervention.</p> <p>Small Groups: Teachers are using these in numerous ways</p> | <p>Data: Teachers continually using formative and summative data for instructional decision-making.</p> <p>Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): PLCs are being used to help teachers adjust their instruction to meet student needs and to help maintain fidelity to the Common Core.</p> <p>Small Groups: Flexible groups are used to meet the needs of all students.</p> <p>Walk-Throughs: Administrators look at the instructional components teachers are using.</p> | <p>Learning Focus Strategies: LFS was consistent across secondary schools</p> <p>Prescriptive reading instruction: Made time in the schedule for prescriptive reading instruction</p> <p>Rigor: Start and end with rigor, differentiate in the middle</p> <p>Accountability: You are accountable to all students and all students can learn.</p> |

Global Understanding and Philosophy

| Elementary | | Secondary |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Sense of Community: There is a strong sense of community within the school.</p> <p>Collaboration: Collaboration is expected - everyone works together (teachers & administration).</p> <p>Curriculum accessible to all: All students are taught to grade level curriculum and all teachers have grade level materials</p> <p>Unique Student Needs: Educators respond to the unique learning needs of all students.</p> | <p>Administrative Support: Administration is active in leading inclusion efforts and building a culture of inclusion.</p> <p>Expectations for Students: All teachers have high expectations for all students.</p> <p>Shared Responsibility: All teachers work with and care for all students. "Our Kids" – not yours or mine.</p> | <p>Administrative Support: Non-evaluative feedback through walk-throughs.</p> <p>Relationship-building: with students is important. Sense of Professional Responsibility to Students</p> |

Collaboration

Elementary

Peer Support:

Teachers view each other as resources for support, problem solving and personal growth. Teachers provide feedback to one another.

PLCs: PLCs provide the time and space for a lot of collaboration between teachers (e.g., data gathering, data analysis and reviewing lessons).

Relationship-building: Co-teaching and other collaborative relationships within the schools are considered important and are given support, namely time.

Special education staff: Special education staff attend grade-level PLCs regularly and sometimes present or coordinate special education-related discussions at PLCs.

Variety: Various models of inclusion used – consultation, co-teaching, etc.

Secondary

Planning in Multiple Ways: Schools used vertical and horizontal planning time to shape instruction.

Cross-curricular conversations: Schools used these so teachers understood what others were doing and how.

Team Monitoring: Administration monitors teams carefully and they reconfigure teams as needed.

Schedule

Elementary

Teacher Needs: The schedule provides valuable PLC time for teachers and time for special education staff to visit classrooms to provide support.

Assigning Students to Teachers: Scheduling tries to reflect the instructional needs of students first.

Team Approach: The scheduling process is collaborative between administration and staff.

Secondary

Priority Scheduling: Special education students are hand-scheduled, before the rest of the student body. The school schedule is built around the instruction needs of the students with disabilities first.

Incoming Students Had Purposeful Transitioning: Purposeful discussions for students transitioning into and between secondary schools.

Materials/Resources

Elementary

District Funds: The district is where the schools are finding funds for helpful instructional and assessment-related resources.

Paraeducators: These staff members are being used to support instructional objectives for all students, not just individual ones.

Shared Resources: The school makes instructional supports available to any/all students who need them.

Technology: Teachers used technology at these schools; however, the teachers reported that technology at these schools was typical to other schools.

Secondary

Ready Formative Assessments: Teachers felt they benefit from having access to multiple formative assessments that provide them with ongoing data about students.

Professional Development

Elementary

Applicable to All Students: Teachers are receiving PD to promote the achievement of all students.

PLC Time: Teachers viewed PLC as valuable professional development time. School staff provide professional development (PD) related to their area of expertise through their PLCs at school.

District Support: Teachers are receiving a majority of their professional development from district PD initiatives.

Secondary

Peers as Resources: Teachers use each other as resources for inclusion and instruction.

Identifying PD Needs: PD was administrators and teacher-identified (example: *"Do you have the perfect marriage?" – in-house PD that emphasize an equal partnership and investment of time and expertise in a co-taught class*)

Mindsets

Staff in these schools shared a vision of inclusion, namely high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities. This was evidenced by consistent language among staff per school related to inclusion-related educational policies and/or school-wide mottos

- “Think of them as 'our' kids instead of 'your kids and my kids.’”
ES General Education Teacher
- “I just feel that we are so lucky in this district because we have the means and *HUGE* support from the district office.”
HS General Education Teacher
- School’s motto: No Excuses, Just Results - “Everyone can achieve, everyone can grow. Let’s find a way to make it happen.”
MS Administrator
- “So I just feel that there’s this whole sense of inclusion across the school.”
ES Reading Specialist
- “Inclusion is not a special education thing.”
HS Special Education Coordinator

Positive School Climate

Relationships within these schools seem to matter to staff, as does the sense of belonging among staff, all students including those with disabilities, and families. Their school-wide inclusion practices seem to promote positive student-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, teacher-administration, and school-home relationships.

- All students and staff should be treated equally to create a positive working environment – it “is necessary for success”.
HS Special Education Teacher
- “Definitely our school is family-oriented...we try to include the actual family as much as possible.”
ES Dual Certified Teacher
- “Inclusion encourages a sense of belonging and acceptance from peers; it allows them the opportunity of making

mistakes and turning failures into success, building self-confidence, especially when with general education peers who do the same.”

MS General Education Teacher

Practices

Teachers and administrators shared that certain practices engendered their school-wide inclusion success. These included: data-based decision-making, careful and collaborative scheduling, inclusion-related PLC discussions, administrative leadership related to inclusion practices, and the availability of meaningful Tier 2 programming.

- “I honestly think we really got the teachers looking at the data” and that told them that “[students with disabilities] can learn, they are not no-students and they don’t want to isolate them.”

HS Administrator

- “The good thing about [our administrator] is that he is not afraid to make a change [in co-teaching teams] when he thinks it’s good for kids.”

MS Special Education Coordinator

- “Every students should be fully immersed” - this philosophy is shared with teachers through regular meetings, collaboration, and team discussions.

ES Special Education Teacher

Limitations

The data collected during the interviews are self-reports from a small sample of convenience (Battaglia, 2008) of educators in one state and do not include any triangulating outside observations (McLeskey et al., 2014), so the results cannot be generalized to all schools or inclusive initiatives. Nevertheless, this study provides valuable perspectives for consideration when crafting future initiatives and/or professional development related to inclusion at the elementary and secondary level.