

Raising Student Achievement for Students with Disabilities: Characteristics of Successful Districts

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Driven by Federal Changes

Influenced by the publication of *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1984 (National Commission on Excellence in Education) and more recently with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind Act, and the Race to the Top initiative, the federal government has been attempting to raise the academic achievement of students in the United States. These movements, and others, have attempted to decrease the achievement gap between various groups of students while holding schools accountable, promoting the creation of rigorous standards, and encouraging the use of research-based programs. While the push from the U.S. Department of Education has been to find ways to address this problem, overall the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers has continued to grow nationally.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has held states accountable through the annual state determination process for meeting procedural requirements, often called compliance, under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Although these compliance indicators remain an important piece of accountability evidence, alone they are not sufficient. Over the last couple of years, OSEP has reexamined this practice in an effort to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities and has developed a new accountability framework for states known as Results-Driven Accountability (RDA).

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said, “Every child, regardless of income, race, background, or disability can succeed if provided the opportunity to learn. . . . We know that when students with disabilities are held to high expectations and have access to the general curriculum in the regular classroom, they excel. We must be honest about student performance, so that we can give all students the supports and services they need to succeed.”

Compliance Necessary, but Not Sufficient

Over the years, Exceptional Student Services (ESS) has worked actively with districts and charters, also called local education agencies (LEAs), to meet Arizona’s compliance indicator goals as set forth by OSEP. Although the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers in math and reading proficiency has decreased in Arizona, the gap between their proficiency rates is still too large. In order to understand where we needed to focus our attention as a state, we had to first understand the proficiency levels of our students with disabilities.

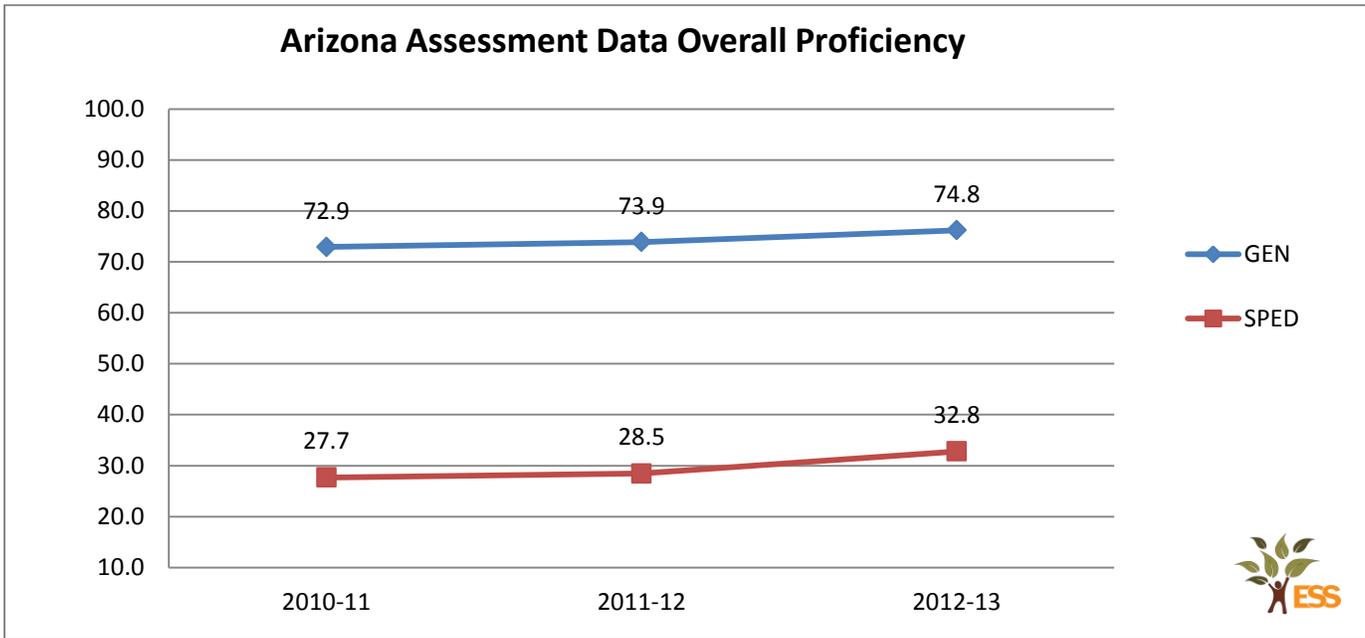


Figure 1. All Grades Mathematics and Reading Proficiency

Digging into the Data

As seen in Figure 1, there is a continuing gap between the academic proficiency of Arizona students with disabilities and their general education peers. Although many Arizona LEAs have struggled to reach proficiency with this population of students, some LEAs have done much better. In deciding how to best assist low-performing LEAs, we decided to look at those districts and charters that seemed to be outside the norm and had found the key to success. It was our hope that if we could find trends among our high performers, perhaps these trends could be replicated within our lower-performing LEAs to raise student achievement for all students with disabilities.

To get a good picture of which LEAs demonstrated continual academic successes for students with disabilities, we pulled and analyzed three years of Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) data on each district and charter. A one-way ANOVA was run with correction to determine that statistical differences existed and LEAs that were significantly higher performing were selected. In order to be selected as a high performer, an LEA needed a substantially higher proficiency rate for its students with disabilities than that of the state average (see Figure 2). Overall, when averaged, high performing sites had 30% higher proficiency rates for students with disabilities than the state average for students with disabilities. Sites were required to have a good cross-sampling of disability categories; those schools that only served one primary disability category were eliminated. LEAs with a small testing pool (less than 10 students) and those that did not have three years of strong data were not included in the high performing group.

Top performing LEAs were divided into four groups:

- those that tested less than 100 students with disabilities annually on AIMS were considered small districts and charters,

- those with more than 100 but less than 300 students with disabilities tested were considered medium,
- those with 300–1,000 students with disabilities tested were considered large, and
- those testing over 1,000 students with disabilities were considered extra-large.

The top performers in each of these four categories were selected in a mix of both charter schools and districts. In narrowing the list further, we looked at geographic information, picking high performers in both rural and urban areas across the state. Finally, before the list of high performers was finalized, school records were checked to make sure that there were no complaints or allegations of testing misconduct filed against any of these districts or charters.

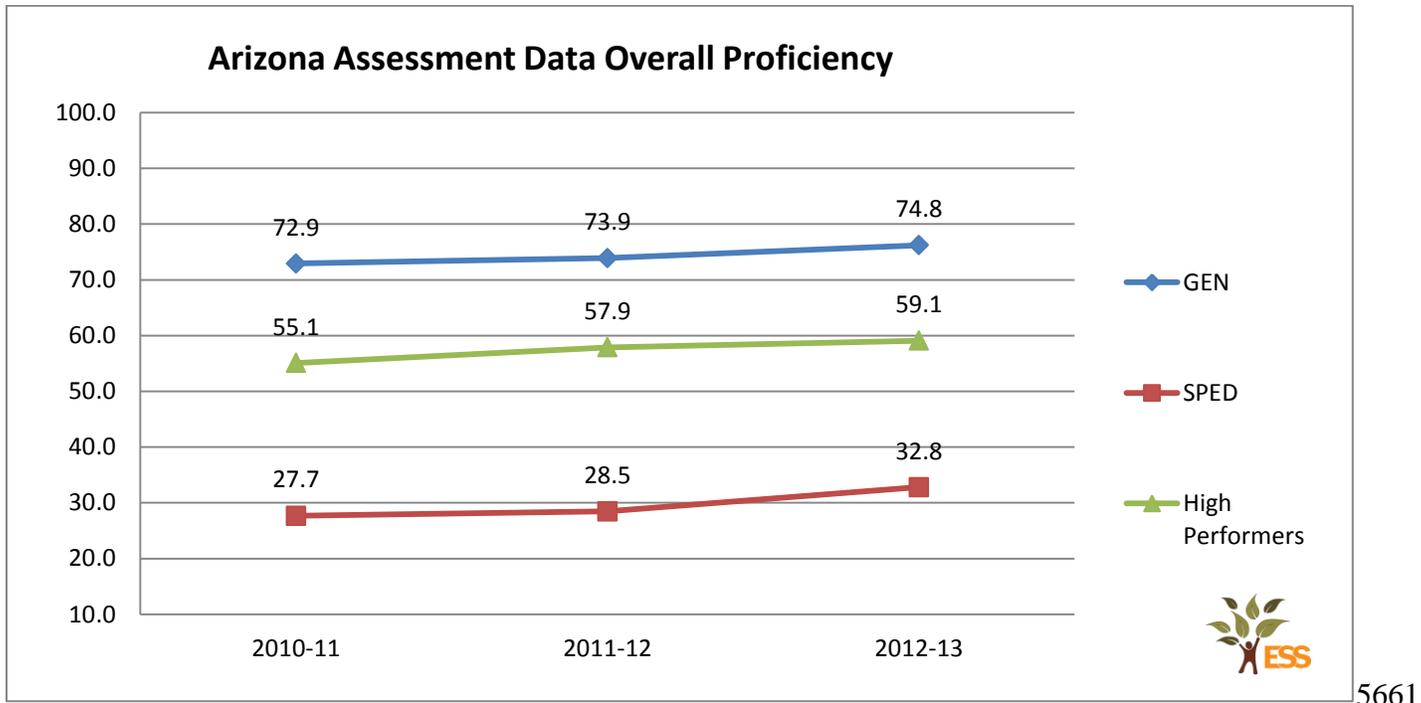


Figure 2. All Grades Math and Reading with High Performers

Sites selected included urban Phoenix and Tucson LEAs and extremely rural sites. More than one third of the sites selected were identified as serving a population of students of whom more than 50% qualified for free and reduced lunch. More than one-third of the sites chosen were identified as Title I schools.

In order to delve into what was making these sites such high performers, visits were conducted to interview each LEA leadership team. Each site was asked to assemble a team, which would include those who were responsible for making the educational decisions within their district or charter. Most teams included the superintendent or charter holder, the curriculum director, the special education director, building principals, and instructional coaches. Teams also included any other members that the LEA felt were vital in making educational decisions. Members of the Arizona Department of Education’s (ADE) Exceptional Student Services leadership team made in-person visits and met with LEAs’ leadership teams to ask a series of questions developed by ADE to investigate the LEAs’ performance factors. The questions were sent to the charters and districts ahead of time with instructions that these questions were intended to be discussion starting points.

Participants would be encouraged to discuss factors outside of the given questions if they felt that the questions did not address their whole success story.

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about your school's or district's mission and vision for education. How does this relate to your students' progress on AIMS?
2. What does it mean to be a leader in your school or district? What responsibilities, expectations, and resources are involved in the role of leadership?
3. Talk about your use of data. What systems are in place to collect and evaluate data (computer software used, collection manuals employed, data quality guidelines, etc.)?
4. How do you make decisions about placing students in different classroom environments? Discuss your culture of inclusion and how it affects your placements of special education students.
5. Explain the various roles of stakeholders both inside and outside the school that may be factors in your success (special education director, administrators, outside agencies, staff, parents, etc.). Are there programs outside the sponsorship of your school that contribute to academic improvement?
6. What instructional supports are in place to improve instruction, strengthen curriculum, reinforce student learning, and encourage professional collaboration (grade-level meetings, professional learning communities, professional development, pre-service training, after-school tutoring programs, etc.)? How are instructional decisions made?
7. Discuss your current use of educational funding to support students with disabilities. What additional grants or resources other than basic entitlement grants are also used?

During a six-week period, all of the sites selected were visited, and the data from those visits were collected and reviewed. We found that although these sites varied in student populations and even in the types of educational approaches (i.e., some were Montessori schools, some were "back to basics," some were traditional districts, and a few were science and math magnet schools), there were clearly identifiable trends within these highly performing LEAs as a group.

After analysis, identifiable trends were grouped into six categories:

1. A culture of high expectations for ALL students and a student-first mentality
2. Highly effective teaching strategies in the general education classroom
3. Frequent data collection for use in decision making
4. The use of data analysis to provide interventions and enrichment
5. Core instruction in the general education classroom as much as possible
6. Effective leadership

A Culture of High Expectations for ALL Students and a Student-First Mentality

A common theme across each charter and district visited was a student-first mentality and the belief that all children, with the right support from teachers, can achieve academically. School leaders, general education teachers, special education teachers, and other staff spoke of “our kids,” not “their kids,” when discussing high expectations for students with disabilities. This collegial team mentality created a strong system of supports between general education and special education teachers, and this support left little room for excuses for teachers not prepared to instruct children assigned to their classrooms; students first was an accepted and nonnegotiable construct. Principals had significant involvement in keeping the focus on the child, and they supported teachers with professional development and other resources needed for teachers to be successful. Special education was seen as a service children receive, not a place they go or a label identifying them. This theme of educators holding high expectations for themselves and taking responsibility for student performance can be identified in many studies regarding effective learning systems (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, Weil, Hallinger, & Mitman, 1982, Blackburn & Armstrong, 2011, Williams & Williams, 2014).

This theme of high expectations for all students is validated in other research, most recently in John Hattie’s meta-analysis, which ranked various influences according to their effect sizes. Hattie studied six areas that contribute to learning: the student, the home, the school, the curricula, the teacher, and teaching and learning approaches. His research showed that developing high expectations for each student had an effect size of 1.44, and developing high expectations for teachers had an effect size of .43. As he states in his book *Visible Learning for Teachers*, “making the learning intentions and success criteria transparent, having high, but appropriate, expectations, and providing feedback at the appropriate levels is critical to building confidence in taking on challenging tasks” (Hattie, 2012).

This research is not new. In the book *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (1979), researchers concluded that “schools that foster high self-esteem and that promote social and scholastic success reduce the likelihood of emotional and behavioral disturbance” (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979). Even as early as 1948, researchers discussed the concept of “self-fulfilling prophecy” in which the opportunities presented to a certain group of people will dictate the achievements the group produces (Merton, 1948). Also called the Pygmalion effect, this phenomenon shows that “one’s expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that confirm those expectations” (Tauber, 1998).

In the visited districts, time was provided for collaboration between general and special education teachers. How and when the time was set aside was different at each charter and district. In some, professional learning communities (PLCs) were the mechanism used; in others, common planning time was scheduled. Most importantly, the school leaders understood that collaboration takes time, and teachers were provided time within the school day or week to meet and discuss student achievement. Whenever barriers or successes occurred, this partnership between general education and special education teachers occurred organically, with constant, spontaneous meetings taking place as needed outside scheduled collaboration time. Studies on teacher collaboration have shown that schools have higher achievement in reading and mathematics when higher levels of teacher collaboration occur (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007).

With the student-first mentality as a foundational belief, decisions about an individual student's least restrictive environment (LRE) placement began with consideration of full inclusion in the general education classroom, with the accommodations and/or modifications necessary. Only when data showed that this placement was not in the best interest of the child did the IEP team carefully and methodically look at the continuum of placements available, always ensuring that the student was spending as much productive time in the general education setting as possible. Research, and legal mandates, supports this inclusive decision-making process. Studies have shown that in many cases, separate classrooms and separation of students with disabilities from their nondisabled peers does not increase student gains (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Sailor, 2002). Other studies show that including students with disabilities in the general education classroom does not disturb the learning gains of nondisabled peers (York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, & Caughey, 1992).

In line with the student-first belief, schools in the study created or changed their campuses programs and supports based on the needs of the students that were being served. Students were not expected to fit into programs that were already in place. According to the location and needs of students, districts and charters ensured that proper services were available. In larger districts, this meant changing the location of certain programs throughout the district to better meet the needs of the children being served.

High-performing LEAs also adopted hiring practices that identified individuals who supported the philosophy of the school. Those who could not adhere to the quest for high expectations and who did not put the needs of children before the needs of adults were asked or directed to find other employment.

Highly Effective Teaching Strategies in the General Education Classroom

Because the majority of Arizona students with disabilities spend at least 80% of the time in the general education classroom, instruction in the general education classroom must be effective and based on research. Although the teaching styles and curricula varied immensely in the districts and charters we visited, spanning traditional direct instruction models to Montessori exploration curricula, a common theme was an emphasis on "hands-on" instruction (i.e., the use of manipulatives, assistive technology, learning centers, and other modes of learning that differentiated instruction and engaged learners in the educational experience). Instruction was intentional and purposeful, with lesson plans and activities written in advance and based on data that could continually advance students to mastery of concepts and skills taught. Students were not just "receiving" an education; they were actively pursuing and participating in it. The act of ensuring students are engaged and active in learning is a widely established and researched best practice. (Kuh, 2001; Marzano, 2003; Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Standards-based grade-level instruction with modifications and accommodations as needed was provided in each classroom, but was continuously linked to the rigor and content described in the grade-level standards. Class time was considered sacred, with minimal disruptions occurring when class was in session. This class time continuity was established and supported school-wide by having no announcements over the intercom once class had started, applying effective bell work to maximize learning occurring in the time provided, and/or limiting school assemblies during core instruction time. This practice is reinforced by research suggesting that the quality of instruction is equally as important as the quantity of time spent learning (Silva, 2007). Pull-out for related services also did not take place during core instruction or for the entirety of core instruction.

All staff were considered valued members of the school team and were supported as such. To ensure that all staff understood what was expected to occur in classrooms, school leaders provided planned and specific professional development for all staff, including paraprofessionals.

Frequent Data Collection for Use in Decision Making

Within the LEAs visited, data-based decision making was essential to the success of all students. Continually using data allowed staff to monitor student progress, and flexibly group students accordingly, depending on student strengths and weaknesses. These groupings of all students (both with and without IEPs) could constantly change, depending on the data, so that each child could get the supports needed to master content and move on to new learning.

This use of data to create groupings, although not called response to intervention (RTI) or multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) in all districts and charters visited, did contain several key tenets stated in research as effective in RTI systems. This structure of beginning with a solid system of instruction and a validated curriculum to meet the needs of the majority (80% or more) of students is the backbone of RTI. The first tier of instruction, Tier I, comprises three elements: a core curriculum based on validated research; screening and benchmarking assessments; and ongoing professional development for teachers to ensure they are delivering quality instruction (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007). Each district or charter visited had a system or “safety net” in place for students identified as not meeting standards/expectations in Tier I instruction, as well as a system to track student progress.

In general, the majority of districts and charters visited provided quarterly benchmark testing for all students, which varied depending on the different school year schedules. Progress monitoring occurred more frequently (approximately every two weeks) for struggling students or students with disabilities. Assessment for learning, also called formative assessment, formally and informally occurred within classrooms, and teachers built opportunities for students to respond and produce within the classroom, allowing teachers to continually monitor students’ content mastery. Other data sources, including observational data, were used to understand where each student was performing and how teams could spotlight strengths and support weaknesses.

The use of formative assessment provides a “steady stream of data about how learning is progressing while it is in the process of developing” (Heritage & Chang, 2012). Formative assessment during instruction assists teachers in supporting student learning by checking for progress, detecting learning gains, checking for misconceptions, and finally using this data to adapt instruction (Gallagher & Worth, 2008).

As stated in research discussing data quality (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006), the data collected met certain criteria. First, data was accessible and timely for those who used the results. Second, the data was reliable. Third, there was motivation to use the data to improve student performance. Lastly, educators were supported in data use. Sites visited provided time for data collection and analysis, professional development on how to use data, and a data system with filtering capabilities to assist educators in making data-based decisions.

The Use of Data Analysis to Provide Interventions and Enrichment

Each district or charter visited had some mechanism or time for ability-based groupings in order for students to reach mastery in reading and mathematics. This varied from system to system. In some cases, it was a time of

day during which students were regrouped based on data and sent to different teachers depending on the intervention/enrichment activity; in some situations, time was built into the lesson plan and the teacher and co-teacher, or teacher and paraprofessional, worked with students in the same classroom. This could be in small groups, one-on-one, or in other arrangements based on the student data (formative and summative) for that lesson. These intervention and enrichment opportunities were targeted toward specific skills needed to master a lesson or based on individual needs for learning, not just on participation in the activity.

Each LEA visited had established tutoring opportunities for students—one or more after-school, before-school, or mid-day tutoring times for students who needed more assistance. In some cases, all teachers were expected to come in early, stay late, or tutor during their prep time one day a week to assist students; and in other cases, grants, like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, paid for the additional staff needed. These after-school, before-school, or midday opportunities tied directly to the grade-level curriculum being taught in classrooms.

There is a strong correlation between interventions and student success. For example, providing intensive, systematic reading instruction in small groups has been supported by strong levels of evidence from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES, 2009). Other research on interventions, specifically for students with learning disabilities, has found the following teaching practices to be effective (the list below only mentions a few):

- Combining direct instruction (i.e., teacher-directed instruction and discussion) with strategy instruction, such as study skills instruction, note-taking strategies, self-questioning strategies, self-monitoring, and summarization (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 1999; Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Graetz, 2010)
- Using small interactive groups of five or fewer students (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 1999)
- Applying structured questioning and directed responses (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 1999)
- Employing mnemonic instruction (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Graetz, 2010)
- Using concept diagrams, concept comparison routines, and other graphic organizers (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Graetz, 2010)
- Using repeated reading to increase oral reading fluency (McCormick, 2003)

It is important not to forget the role of enrichment in this finding. It is as crucial to create activities for students who understand the content (including those with disabilities) to further explore the subject as it is to create interventions for those who do not. Examples include the following enrichment activities:

- Learning centers with more challenging activities, like applying the learning to a different environment (Stepanek, 1999)
- STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and cultural activities
- Academic competitions and clubs
- Community partnerships and internships
- Expanded school day with “0 hour” activities (before or after the regular school day)

Core Instruction in the General Education Classroom as Much as Possible

At each high performing district and charter visited, LEAs attempted to ensure that all students received their core instruction in the general education classroom. Any deviation from this was based on strong data and decided by the IEP team. Special education supports consisted of more “push-in” services, with the special education teacher joining the general education classroom, than “pull-out” services, with the child being removed from the class to receive special education services.

In most cases, when pull-out services did occur, they were strategically scheduled. Strategic scheduling meant that to the maximum extent possible, services did not occur during core instruction. Interference with core instruction was considered harmful and kept to a minimum. Students were sent immediately back to the general education classroom when the special education services for that lesson were no longer needed. This practice supported the emphasis on sacred learning time using highly effective teaching strategies because it ensured that students receiving services encountered as few distractions as possible when teaching and learning were taking place. Any pull-out services were aligned to skills needed to support the learning and high expectations of grade-level content being taught in the general education classroom.

To allow special education teachers more time in classrooms, some districts and charters creatively scheduled and reassigned job responsibilities to cope with compliance aspects of special education. In two cases, the special education directors personally took on additional paperwork as part of their job duties. In other cases, staff were repurposed or hired to assist with the paperwork, or the periodic review of requested paperwork.

For students with disabilities to achieve in the general education environment, certain structural/procedural accommodations need to be made. To create an environment that works for all students as well as the teacher, research suggests the following:

- Differentiate instruction by using flexible grouping, varying learning-style preferences and student choices, and creating alternative activities and assessments (Tomlinson, 2001).
- Use universal design for learning (UDL) when planning instruction. This includes multiple ways students can view the content, express the content, and engage in the content (CAST, 2004).
- Create student-centered collaboration time between general education teachers, special education teachers, and related services personnel (Ferguson, Ralph, & Katul, 1996).
- Use effective teaching practices in both general education and special education settings.

Although current research has shown that the addition of students with disabilities in the general education classroom is a win-win situation for all involved (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Downing, 2008; Teigland, 2009), other studies have found inconclusive results causing some experts in the field to remain divided over the issue of placement for students with special needs (e.g., Kavale, 2002; Villa & Thousand, 2003). Research has not shown that the addition of peers with disabilities in a classroom has a negative effect on the learning of nondisabled students (Odom, Deklyen, & Jenkins, 1984). Research also fails to provide evidence that exclusion from the general education classroom is beneficial to students with disabilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Sailor, 2002).

The issue of inclusion remains a significant trend in special education. In the Arizona LEAs visited, tactically placing students with disabilities in the general education classrooms with support (e.g., co-teaching, accommodations, modifications) was found to have positive effects on student outcomes.

Effective Leadership

The LEA leaders (i.e., superintendents, principals, special education directors, and lead teachers) were essential in ensuring all the foundational beliefs that are a part of the performance-improvement trends were taking place. In most cases, the principals were “in the trenches,” visiting classrooms regularly and participating in the data meetings regarding all students, including those with disabilities.

Often, the school’s leadership was consistent, with many leaders remaining at the district or school for years, and many promotions and hirings coming from within the system. The tone and expectation set by the leaders included the mantra of “these are all our students.” Most leaders indicated that their position was more than a job; it was also a passion, with some work weeks regularly taking 60 or more hours of their time.

Many locations embraced shared leadership, in which the superintendents and principals systematically shared responsibility with the entire staff, and the role of the leader was to stay focused on academic achievement and remove any barriers preventing staff from achieving these goals.

Various research studies on effective leadership support all that we observed in these visits. Some examples from other studies of traits found in effective leaders are given below:

- A strong leader shapes a vision of academic success for all students, creates a climate hospitable to education, cultivates leadership in others, improves instruction, and manages people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013).
- An educational leader has consistent high expectations, constantly demonstrates that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement, focuses relentlessly on improving teaching and learning, is an expert at assessment and the tracking progress, is highly inclusive, and develops individual students through promoting rich opportunities for learning both within and outside the classroom (Morrison, 2013).

Other Factors

Although not prevalent enough among these schools to be considered trends, other factors that may have contributed to success in many of the districts and charters were discussed during our visits. These include:

- High retention rates for staff
- Positive school climate in which teachers feel supported
- Quality parent involvement

Arizona’s Initiatives to Align with the Six Identifiable Trends

As a result of Results-Driven Accountability, ADE’s ESS leadership team is analyzing its current practices and questioning its alignment to help LEAs build their capacity to implement the six identifiable trends. ESS is committed to providing a comprehensive system of supports that builds the capacity of LEAs to improve outcomes; and as such, have analyzed the current ESS infrastructure to identify the supports that currently align

to the six trends. In addition, ESS has identified current supports that do not align with the six trends and are reconsidering the necessity of each. Through the analysis process, they will reorganize and repurpose resources to align with the six identifiable trends.

In addition, Arizona has already changed its monitoring system to a data analysis model. The monitoring system has moved away from straight procedural compliance to a balanced approach of oversight. The new system includes both procedural compliance and an emphasized focus on how to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The new monitoring system, based on a data analysis framework, helps LEAs analyze their data to discover root causes of large gaps in achievement between students with disabilities and their general education peers. The activities of the monitoring system result in an action plan that LEAs will develop and implement to make systemic changes. Procedural compliance is used as a data point but isn't the main focus of monitoring. LEAs will be coached in reviewing IEPs to assure that student supports are individualized and targeted based on data.

Arizona will be moving to a coaching model in building capacity in LEAs. Studies have shown that coaching for results helps build capacity and sustainability (Joyce & Showers, 2002). The vision for ADE's wrap-around support is to guide LEAs in building their own capacity; capacity for internal supervision of procedural compliance and for providing professional development for their staff. Coaching will be a key component in the way ESS works with LEAs.

Collaboration within the Arizona Department of Education

The ADE as a whole is committed to collaboration both within internal divisions and outside ADE with LEAs. One of the agency's goals is to lessen the burden of work in the field. This involves more communication within the agency. The agency will be working to coordinate visits to schools by building upon the work other departments are doing. In addition, providing meetings during which all stakeholders in the agency come together to plan for the school will provide for a more collaborative experience for LEAs. ADE ESS will expand and strengthen current collaborative efforts and partnerships to develop frameworks and procedures that bring other ADE divisions (e.g., Title I, School Improvement, English Language Acquisition) together to support system change within LEAs.

The conversations with the high performing LEAs were a key component of the changes within ADE. Through the visits, not only were the six trends identified, but so was a commitment from Arizona LEAs to work with the agency and other LEAs throughout the state. Overall, Arizona is working in partnership with LEAs to improve results for students. Arizona is coming together to realize that it is not just an LEA's or a state department's problem; it is a statewide student problem that we all want to improve.

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