

# Universal Education: Principles and Practices for Advancing Achievement of Students with Disabilities

by

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project is fundamentally focused on change processes in district-level education systems that lead to improved achievement for students with disabilities. Many districts around the state of Ohio have struggled to reach high levels of proficiency among students with disabilities, but a small percentage achieved steady improvement between 2004 and 2008. The Universal Education Project was designed to identify district-level strategies and practices among these schools that led to consistent improvement in math and reading proficiency test scores for students with identified disabilities. Because every district participating in this study described the importance of breaking down barriers between special and regular education, this report is titled *Universal Education* in an effort to unify two previously separate cultures into a single, high-impact education for all students.

In order to identify districts with consistent and pronounced gains over all four testing years, proficiency test scores across grade levels were aggregated for math and reading within each district across the state. Districts that produced at least a 10% increase in both math and reading scores between 2004-05 and 2007-08 were included. The 10% improvement threshold was selected in particular because it enabled inclusion of districts of varying enrollment sizes and because it reflected the achievements of a small portion—approximately 5%—of the state's 614 districts. In addition, inclusion of districts with varying achievement gains helped illustrate a continuum of practices leading to improvement. Across all participating districts, reading gains ranged from 10.4% to 43.54% while math gains ranged from 12.28% to 50.49%.

Using the 10% selection criterion, 30 districts were identified for participation. Of the 30 districts invited to participate in the analysis, 27 agreed to participate in telephone interviews (see page 8 for a list of participating districts). Approximately 22% of participating districts enrolled fewer than 1,500 students, 48% enrolled between 1,501 and 5,999 students and the remaining 30% enrolled 6,000 students or more. In most cases, districts' ability to make changes and the magnitude of changes in students' achievement varied according to district size. For example, smaller districts were more likely to describe widespread personalized education plans whereas larger districts were more likely to describe broad programs aimed at bringing up achievement.

Identified district superintendents and additional district staff of their selection were invited to participate in semi-structured telephone interviews conducted by project leaders with expertise in special education. Interviews were structured according to five over-arching areas of interest, including leadership, instruction, curricular alignment with state standards, assessment and professional development practices. These five areas were selected in particular because they reflect major areas of administrative responsibility in which district leaders might focus change efforts. In addition, participants were asked to provide their own ideas about how and why their students with disabilities were able to improve and whether there may be other important areas to consider beyond the five addressed in the interview. Findings are organized according to the areas most emphasized by interviewees, which include leadership, universal access to core curricula, data-driven decision making, and strategic collaboration.

## **MAJOR FINDINGS**

Participating districts' responses to these interview items were collected through interview notes and then analyzed for commonalities among strategies or practices. Four common strategies emerged from the analysis. First, districts consistently identified leadership as an impetus for changes in their special education practices. Second, district paradigms shifted away from the special education/regular education dichotomy and transformed into a commitment to universal education for all students through equal access to core curricula. Third, districts recognized the critical importance of employing data to measure their challenges and successes and to ensure every child was learning. Finally, participating districts developed a variety of forms of strategic collaboration—most commonly among administrators, regular education teachers and special education teachers. Each of these common strategies is further described according to the specific ideas presented by participating districts.

### ***Leadership***

Leadership practices across participating districts shared in common two key qualities. First, change leaders emerged at various levels in teaching and administration. For example, those driving change were most often superintendents, but also included middle school principals and elementary school teacher data teams. Furthermore, change initiated at the district level was also led by building principals and teachers. Second, faculty and staff throughout the district were receptive to change leadership. When promising practices or innovative organizational structures emerged, all staff were committed to pursuing those practices and structures because they shared a commitment to student learning and a sense of trust in their colleagues. Although these qualities ultimately characterized most districts achieving notable advancements in special education student achievement, they were not organic and required concerted effort and/or strategic change management. Approximately 85% of participating districts described district-level culture shifts. Examples of focused change include the following:

- Philosophical shift from a special education/regular education dichotomy to a universal education paradigm
- Adoption of a belief structure in which all students have the potential to learn and should be educated with the goal of proficiency in core content
- Shift from teacher accountability for student learning to shared leadership and collective ownership for student learning among administrators, teachers, support staff, and students
- Shift from managing according to ways funds are distributed to maximizing opportunities for all students regardless of accommodation needs
- Gradual dismantling of 'separate but equal' approach and work toward development of full inclusion models
- Implemented intervention strategies and /or programs to meet the needs of all students
- Shared leadership among all levels of the education system and layers of personal responsibility for student achievement among students, teachers, building administration and district administration

### ***Universal Access to Core Curricula***

When participant districts began to review available disaggregated data regarding their student populations, almost all of them recognized a marked distinction between regular education and special education student achievement. In virtually all cases, these distinctions resulted from inequitable access to the general curriculum. Growing directly out of paradigmatic shifts away from separate educational experiences for students with divergent needs, curriculum and instructional practices were changed to ensure all students gained equal access.

These changes were characterized by:

- Common professional development on core content for all teaching and coaching staff such that special educators became both content and pedagogy specialists
- Physically moving students onto common campuses (across grade-levels and among students with and without disabilities)
- Supporting classroom teachers to meet the needs of students, including coaching on literacy strategies and interventions
- Realignment of district administration to reflect the unification of regular education and special education curriculum
- Increased communication of district expectations for high levels of achievement among all students
- Standardization of curriculum and textbook adoption practices for all students, common evaluation processes, and regular opportunities to practice high-stakes assessments
- Co-teaching among special and general education specialists, team-teaching, and strategic coaching
- Increased adoption of assistive technology designed to meet the needs of students across ability levels
- Accountability shared among all teaching staff for high levels of proficiency among all students, regardless of ability

### ***Data-Driven Decision-Making***

Participating districts employed a variety of forms of data in a broad array of decisions. Whereas most districts collected but did not strategically employ data prior to their decision to shift special education strategies and practices, all districts adopted new forms of data collection and analysis in an effort to improve. District-level leadership promoted the collection of meaningful data but also supported analyses that enabled such data to be employed at the district, building and classroom levels. These procedures included:

- Promotion of a culture of openness and commitment to improvement rather than punitive punishment for identifying failures
- Thorough training for administrators and teachers in the effective collection, management and use of data
- Regular and ubiquitous use of data to inform instruction and assessment practices as a part of the district, school and classroom cultures
- New data management systems and appropriate training in data entry, analysis and reporting for teachers, administrators and support staff
- Comparative analysis among disaggregated student groups that enabled identification of demographic-level issues in instructional practices and/or assessments
- Data retreats and common meeting time for all faculty and staff to collaboratively employ data in decision-making processes
- Communication of student-level data to students in ways that enabled students to monitor their progress and promote development of personal achievement goals
- Student-level classroom intervention procedures are based upon on-going collection of student-level data
- Ongoing monitoring of data-driven decisions including data notebooks, classroom observation procedures and third-party implementation monitoring technology and regular communication of

- the findings from monitoring data back to classroom teachers in order to drive continued, rigorous implementation
- Use of data to identify necessary professional development for all instructional staff

### ***Strategic Collaboration***

Collaborative structures served as an underlying mechanism of systemic change and strategic use of data in most participant districts. Teaming among grade or subject area teachers grew into a standard practice in many buildings as a result of shifting district priorities. Increased communication with key administrative staff around curricula and assessment characterized those teams. Furthermore, development of these collaborative teams constituted added layers of leadership that supported administrative efforts to drive cultural changes and develop district-wide accountability models. Strategies for increasing collaboration included:

- Support for horizontal and vertical teaming to engage in collaborative data analysis and instructional practice, including shared planning time and development of norms of data use
- Collaborative processes across grades, subjects, buildings and district administration
- Use of administrative and peer monitoring techniques, co-teaching, and coaching to support continuous improvement of instructional practices and maintain common understanding of and fidelity to curricula
- Intervention and enrichment practices for students that grow out of collaborative structures

### ***Key Practices from Model Districts***

Five districts with the highest gains in math and reading proficiency achievement participated in a second round of interviews focused on more detailed explanations of key practices they employed in order to improve education for all students. In addition, one district was interviewed as a district that has shown continuous gains, but from an above average baseline. These districts articulated seven specific practices at the district level that supported culture change in every building and ultimately organized and mobilized universal education. Each practice is described below according to ways its implementation was described among second-round interview districts.

#### ***Start with a Plan***

Develop a district-wide plan for improvement, but begin with flexibility in mind and engage building leaders in the discussion. Although district leadership may guide the overall change process, input from building leadership helps keep the plan grounded in reality and ensures buy-in from the bottom of the educational structure to the top. Participating districts described a highly collaborative planning process.

#### ***Pursue Universal Education***

When students with disabilities are indistinguishable from students without disabilities and intervention specialists are indistinguishable from content or grade-level specialists, education is universal. Distinct cultures around expectations for students and teachers depending upon categories such as 'special' and 'regular' divides resources and needlessly differentiates curricula. Pursuing universal education and holding all teachers, specialists and coaches accountable for all students helps pool resources, increases the potential of collaboration and enables all staff to support intervention and enrichment for students regardless of whether students have identified disabilities.

### ***Empower Principals***

After a collaboratively developed plan is in place, empower principals to act as representatives of the district. Enable building leaders to make key decisions consistent with the district-wide plan and hold them accountable for the learning of all students. Principals in participating districts acknowledged they experienced increases in oversight and accountability, but also appreciated increased direct support from the central office. The improved relationship helped building leaders feel they were part of a district-wide team and that their purposeful efforts contributed to tangible improvement. Empowered principals also took ownership for every student's learning and employed practices such as peer monitoring or student data notebooks to ensure all teachers worked towards a common goal using key strategies from the district plan.

### ***Schedule for Success***

Increase opportunities for co-teaching among grade-level or content experts and intervention specialists. Allow for adequate time to focus on core curricula and reduce or eliminate pull-out interventions during core content time. In several cases, districts block-scheduled core courses and provided additional time with teachers and specialists *on the same day* in which students needed further support. Such a schedule may require revisions to the school day at the district level and permission from parents for students to miss elective class time. In addition to daily schedules that meet students' needs, schedule adequate time for teachers to collaborate with each other. Support collaborative teaming by ensuring teachers (including specialists and coaches) are able to meet regularly to address students' needs as they arise.

### ***Collect Meaningful Data***

Effectively identifying, collecting, and analyzing findings and implementing solutions are crafts to be developed and constantly improved upon. Participating districts stressed the importance of consistently pursuing more effective ways of using data to impact student learning and suggested needs may vary depending upon grade levels and content areas. However, data must meet two essential criteria. First, it must be connected with students' comprehension and mastery. Second, it must be collected at a time when teachers can use it to adjust their teaching or identify weaknesses that must be addressed. All five districts described efforts to implement collaboratively developed common formative assessments designed to ensure comparable data is regularly collected by all collaborative team members. Other examples of data collection included quarterly or unit-based assessment used to inform future improvements in pedagogy and identify necessary professional development.

### ***Maximize Potential of Teaming***

Although teams were often in place before participating districts began to focus efforts on providing all students with access to core curricula, the culture of separation frequently resulted in distinct teaming configurations for students with identified disabilities and those without. In order to maximize the potential for teaming, districts ensured teachers in common grade levels or content areas had time to meet weekly or monthly to discuss their teaching practices, review student data and collaboratively devise solutions. They further ensured all teachers, specialists and, where possible, coaches involved in teaching the students in focus at team meetings were present to participate in the collaborative process. As noted, the open flow of responsibility and access to teaching is a hallmark of universal education. Effective teaming therefore requires that all individuals associated with the educational process are able to work collegially and collaboratively together.

### ***Involve Stakeholders***

Participating districts cited challenges communicating their goals and the purposes of changes in practice to members of their communities—both internal and external to the teaching and administrative staff. In order to overcome these challenges, they recommended engaging stakeholders early in the change process. By enabling those with dissenting voices to articulate concerns early, district leaders believed they could have developed more productive relationships with key stakeholders and mitigated later challenges. In addition, they are currently using feedback from these stakeholders to make important changes to their practice. Identifying such changes early may have enabled them to develop a stronger program as they began the process of pursuing universal education.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Participating districts shared in common a shift in culture or paradigm that seemed to arise from awareness of disparities among student groups. The widespread availability of disaggregated data has the potential to initiate similar processes in other districts around the state. However, the availability of data was a necessary but insufficient factor in the participant districts' decision to shift their strategies and practices in order to improve achievement for students with disabilities. A second necessary condition was strong leadership with an unwavering commitment to all students. Thus, the primary implication of this report is that district-level leaders must not only have access to meaningful data, but must also be challenged to promote a paradigm in which all students must be held to the same high expectations and all educational staff members are accountable.

Ohio's Statewide System of Support (SSOS) can support the ongoing development of more effective special education practices by providing assistance to districts regarding ways to effectively collect, manage and use data, and ways to translate data into meaningful changes in classroom instruction. Use of data was an essential component of participating districts' increasing achievement, yet nearly all districts described challenges with data management and use of data to make decisions that support student learning. Additional research should be conducted to determine which non-monetary resources might be provided across levels of the SSOS. Approximately one third of participating districts occasionally used consulting services from Educational Service Centers (ESC) or State Support Teams (SST), but evidence did not indicate similar services were offered by counterpart entities in various regions.

Districts will also benefit from assistance identifying ways to embrace a culture of collaboration within their organizations that begin at the district level and funnel through buildings into students' educational experiences. A common practice among participating districts, collaboration from grade-level to administration enabled more effective dissemination of core curriculum to students with disabilities. This practice cannot be emulated without first developing a culture of trust among staff and a common commitment to putting aside personal proclivities in order to make the best possible decisions for students. Sharing working practices through collaborative models also shows promise. Several districts described collaborations outside their districts, including working with other, more successful districts, partnering for professional development and collaborating with area colleges and universities. Findings from this study also represent a model of success that should be shared with districts across the state.

The state education agency, including the Office for Exceptional Children, can help drive continued improvement by challenging districts to pursue best practices for all students. Districts have many

opportunities for improvement, but those participating in this study often required some impetus for change. The SEA can both challenge productive change and support those changes through programming and other efforts. Furthermore, teachers must be empowered to serve as key decision-makers through the use of the data they collect and collaboratively analyze and implement. Teachers may lack access to relevant research focused on educational improvement or skills to effectively translate their own data into meaningful instructional changes. Promoting teacher identity as one in which teachers are experts, scholars and professionals may serve to underscore the importance of engaging with data and pursuing necessary training to ensure they are truly meeting the needs of all students.

Finally, this study revealed disparity in use of educational technology among districts. Whereas some districts strategically implemented technological tools that clearly drove up students' achievement, others faced financial impediments or lacked sufficient staff to research and implement such technologies. Providing greater access to information regarding accommodative technologies and, if possible, greater access to the technologies themselves will undoubtedly increase the available solutions districts may seek to pursue to support equitable access to the general curriculum for all students.

### **Origins**

This study was commissioned by the Center for School Improvement, in cooperation with the Office for Exceptional Children, at the Ohio Department of Education as part of its ongoing efforts to build a strong statewide system of support through the Ohio Improvement Process. More information regarding the Center and its work to support district-wide improvement work can be found at:

<http://education.ohio.gov/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=590&ContentID=61276&Content=61875>.

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