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High School Reform: Integration of Special Education

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Evidence suggests that students throughout the nation are not being adequately prepared for post-secondary life and that students with disabilities face even greater post-school challenges (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). In response to such evidence, many states and localities are initiating high school reform activities and, in recognition of the particular challenges faced by students with disabilities, some are including special education in their reforms. For the purposes of this document, high school reform refers to any strategies (e.g., policies and practices) used to ensure successful post-school outcomes for all who complete school.

This document describes high school reform in three states and efforts to include special education in the high school reform process at both state and local levels. Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) conducted this analysis as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

HIGH SCHOOL REFORM AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

During the past five years, extensive work has been done in the area of high school reform. Little has been done, however, to explicitly address issues related to the inclusion of special education in high school reform efforts. Exceptions include the following:

- *The International Center for Leadership in Education* is a private, not-for-profit organization that, among other things, provides consulting services to states and localities engaged in high school reform activities. The Center also houses a Special Education Institute that offers state- and local-level assistance geared toward improving practices and policies for serving students with disabilities.¹

¹ For more information on the International Center for Leadership in Education, go to www.leadered.com.

- *The National High School Center* provides resources and expertise on high school improvement issues for the Regional Comprehensive Centers, helping them build state-level capacity to implement the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) relating to high schools. The Center is administered by the American Institutes for Research through a grant by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and OSEP.²
- *The National Community of Practice in Support of Transition* is sponsored by the IDEA Partnership at NASDSE and works to improve interagency transition initiatives for secondary students with disabilities while also addressing high school reform issues.³

METHODS

Project Forum developed two interview protocols—one for state education agency (SEA) staff and one for building-level representatives—in collaboration with Larry Gloeckler of the International Center for Leadership in Education. Interviews were conducted during May and June of 2007 with interviewees from *Iowa, Michigan and Nevada* for a total of six interviews. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti, a software program designed for use with qualitative data. Results are reported in the following three sections of this document—state-level efforts; local-level efforts; and barriers and recommendations generated by both state- and local-level interviewees.

FINDINGS

State Level Efforts

Background

SEA-level interviewees reported that high school reform efforts originated between three and five years ago. Although all stressed that state-level high school reform efforts are “ongoing,” the interviewee from *Michigan* noted that the first stage of its reform is complete (i.e., necessary policy foundations have been laid) and that only the process of implementation remained. High school reform efforts are overseen by a variety of offices, including the Bureau of Curriculum and Instruction in *Iowa*; the Superintendent's office and the Special Education/School Improvement Office in *Nevada*; and the Superintendent's Office with additional help from Career and Technical Education, School Improvement (Title I, Curriculum and Instruction) and Special Education in *Michigan*.

Reasons for initiating high school reform efforts at the state level included the following:

² For more information on the National High School Center, go to www.betterhighschools.org.

³ For more information on the National Community of Practice in Support of Transition, go to <http://www.ideapartnership.org/work4.cfm?communityid=4>.

- *Iowa*—Several education taskforces identified high school reform as a priority and the state legislature recently passed a law that encourages schools (including high schools) to participate voluntarily in a model core curriculum.
- *Michigan*—Approximately five years ago, the governor appointed a commission to examine secondary school outcomes and then asked the state superintendent of public instruction to move ahead on the commission’s recommendations. The superintendent convened a taskforce that submitted more detailed recommendations to the state board of education, which then submitted the recommendations to the state legislature. The legislature subsequently adopted high school redesign legislation that includes rigorous requirements for a diploma. Personal curriculum modifications are available for students with individualized education programs (IEPs).
- *Nevada*—Approximately 10 years ago, the SEA was restructured to include all special populations (e.g., special education, Title I and Title III) within a single office. Three years ago, the state legislature passed a law requiring the SEA to produce a state improvement plan that would also address goals for improving secondary education. As a part of overall school reform, the governor and state deputy superintendent of public instruction attended the National Governor’s Association (NGA) high school summit and applied for and received NGA funding for state-level high school reform.

All three SEAs reported including special education within high school reform efforts “from the very beginning” and that the involvement of special education was originally initiated by representatives from both general and special education (i.e., the decision was mutual). Interviewees stressed that the primary reason for including special education in high school reform efforts was to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, achieve academically and receive appropriate preparation for post-secondary life.

Strategies for Including Special Education in High School Reform Efforts

Integrated Professional Development Activities: All three states interviewed described integrated professional development activities as a major way in which special education is included in high school reform efforts. One of the primary ways in which SEAs “enforce” integration is by requiring building-level team attendance that includes both general and special education staff. For example: *Iowa* has hosted three high school summits that approximately 90% of high schools have attended. Summits are co-sponsored by the International Center for Leadership in Education, include keynote presentations by high school reform experts and highlight successful high school programs throughout the nation. The summits emphasize the importance of focusing on improving services for special education and at-risk high school students. Forty high schools throughout *Iowa* also receive mini-grants from the SEA providing professional development for staff relating to high school reform (e.g., assistance with implementing the model core curriculum). *Michigan* has also hosted two high school summits in collaboration with the International Center, one in an urban area and one in a rural/suburban area.

Integrated Taskforces and Workgroups Interviewees from all three states reported that special education representatives were included as members of state-level taskforces and/or workgroups relating to high school reform. For example, in *Iowa*, special education representatives participate in the high school summit planning group and contribute to meetings relating to the state's model core curriculum. *Michigan* special education representatives help develop guidance for use of personal curriculum modifications and in *Nevada* special education representatives are members of the steering committee for the NGA grant.

Instructional Practices that Support Special Education Students All three states promote instructional practices that support *all* students, including special education students. For instance:

- *Iowa* promotes collaborative teaching via a state-wide conference that requires high schools to bring teams that include general and special education staff, as well as administrators. *Iowa* also promotes differentiated instruction and trains all staff at the building level.
- *Nevada* provides statewide training in a consultative instructional model. The SEA has trained 14 of its 17 local education agencies (LEAs) on how to use this model and has funded, via the NGA grant, 28 building-level sites (including a high school) to pilot the model.
- *Michigan* emphasizes differentiated instruction as well as universal design.

Although interviewees from all three states emphasized that inclusion of students with disabilities was a goal of their high school reform efforts, only *Iowa* reported that high school reform efforts have actually succeeded in increasing the number of inclusive placements.

Clear Expectations Interviewees from all three states stressed that the SEA communicates clear expectations to LEA-level administrators that they are responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities are also included in high school reform efforts. For example, *Michigan* high school legislation explicitly addresses the inclusion of students with disabilities into high school reform efforts, as do a number of policy guidance documents.

Data Collection and Assessment Measures All three states include data collection and assessment measures for all students, including those with disabilities, as part of high school reform efforts. *Iowa*, for example, not only gathers and disaggregates information on the academic achievement of students with disabilities, but also includes students with disabilities in the state's post-secondary outcomes survey.

Financial Resources

Interviewees listed a variety of financial resources used to support the integration of special education into state-wide high school reform efforts, including money provided via the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B set-aside; the state legislature; and grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Wallace Foundation, and NGA.

Local-Level Efforts

Background

Project Forum also interviewed individuals involved with three local high school reform initiatives. Each of these interviewees stressed that there was no specific point in time at which high school reform began, but rather that high school reform was an ongoing process. Interviewees from *Iowa* mentioned, however, that 2006 was the first year in which special education was explicitly incorporated into high school reform efforts. Interviewees from *Michigan* described their district-level reform efforts as being in the initial stages, and interviewees from *Nevada* reported having solidified their plans (e.g., developed measurable goals and objectives) within the past few years.

Interviewees provided a variety of explanations for how and why high school reform efforts were originally initiated:

- *Iowa*—The principal organized a committee approximately seven years ago to examine high school reform efforts taking place around the country. Furthermore, when school improvement plans were first required by the state, implementation studies were conducted at four high schools throughout the state and his high school was one of these. Being a part of the study helped staff think about how to improve instruction/achievement via staff development.
- *Michigan*—Interviewees reported that the state’s new graduation requirements have had an enormous impact on their high school reform efforts, as well as the new grade-level content standards for math, language arts, science and social studies. A third impetus was the fact that the district sponsors a number of special education programs (to which other districts frequently send their students with severe disabilities) and is consequently more at risk than other districts for failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP).
- *Nevada*—High school reform was initiated in response to the fact that the school was labeled “in need of improvement” under NCLB.

In terms of including special education in the high school reform process, interviewees alluded primarily to the need to make AYP for *all* students, including those with disabilities. Others mentioned the need to improve post-secondary outcomes; the fact that including special education is simply the “right thing to do”; or the fact that school administrators had a background in special education (and were therefore more sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities).

Strategies for Including Special Education in High School Reform Efforts

Integrated Professional Development Activities Interviewees from all three localities reported that both special and general education staff are included in professional development activities relating to high school reform. For example:

- *Iowa*—Interviewees from the high school reported that, as a demonstration site, the school holds a collaborative meeting each day—mentored by an outside expert—that includes instructional coaches from each discipline including special education. The school is also entitled to receive consultative support from the International Center and will be presenting at the Model Schools Conference this summer.
- *Michigan*—In response to the state’s overhaul of curriculum standards, interviewees described extensive staff training at the local level, of both special and general education teachers, on the subject of curriculum alignment and development. High school teams have also met with middle school teams to ensure continuity for grades 6-12 in language arts, math, science and social studies.
- *Nevada*—For one period each day, instructional coaches in the areas of English, math, science, social studies and special education meet in their specific groups daily and receive mentoring from staff provided by the International Center. In addition to this, professional learning communities for each discipline meet weekly and special education teachers—in addition to participating in a special education learning community—are expected to attend their discipline-specific learning community meeting as well (e.g., the special education science resource teacher meets with the general science teachers).

Integrated Taskforces and Workgroups Interviewees from all three localities reported including both general and special education teachers in high school reform-related taskforces and workgroups. In addition to groups specifically focused on high school reform, interviewees from *Michigan* reported that an integrated taskforce is currently focusing on the redesign of special education programs, including those in local high schools, to help them become more integrated into general education programs. Also, the high school in *Iowa* is undergoing a comprehensive renovation and discussions about building redesign have always included representatives from special education.

Instructional Practices that Support Special Education Students Interviewees from all three localities employ a variety of instructional practices that support high school students. For example, the *Iowa* high school emphasizes both co-teaching and differentiated instruction. The *Nevada* high school pilot site uses “smaller learning communities” that break the high school into smaller subcommunities and create a more personalized learning experience that is particularly beneficial to special education students. The *Nevada* high school pilot site, which models coteaching in several of its classrooms, was also selected as a demonstration site for other schools in the district. Interviewees from each of the three localities reported that they promote inclusive placements whenever possible.

Clear Expectations Interviewees from localities reported that the message that “all teachers are responsible for *all* students” is consistently communicated during LEA- and/or school-level professional development activities. The interviewees from *Michigan* also noted that the LEA is currently working to develop guidelines for the redesign of content standards that emphasize the integration of special and general education programs.

Data Collection and Assessment Measures In addition to collecting and disaggregating data for students with disabilities as required by NCLB, some interviewees described more targeted data collection and analysis. For example, the interviewee from *Iowa* conducts standardized assessments of 9th and 10th graders twice a year in order to guide instruction. These assessments were originally used only with special education students, but are now used with all students. The interviewees from *Michigan* reported assessing parent involvement, as well as reviewing the permanent records of struggling students.

Financial Resources

Interviewees described using a combination of state and local funds, as well as private grants, to support high school reform efforts. The interviewee from *Iowa* stressed the importance of setting aside local-level funds for professional development activities pertaining to high school reform. The interviewees from *Michigan* noted that their schools received no funding specifically for integrating special education into high school reform efforts, but were able to restructure the use of existing IDEA Part B discretionary funds to cover some of these costs. Interviewees from *Nevada* reported that their school received a number of grants in support of high school reform, as well as receiving fiscal support from the legislature for implementing their school improvement plan.

Barriers and Recommendations

Barriers

Interviewees described several barriers to including special education within state- and local-level high school reform efforts, including the following:

- the challenge of securing staff buy-in, particularly at the LEA and/or building level (e.g., lack of willingness to adopt new instructional strategies or to accept responsibility for *all* students’ academic outcomes);
- low expectations for students with disabilities;
- over-emphasis on secondary transition goals which sometimes leads to neglect of basic academic skills; and
- lack of money and staff dedicated to high school reform at the SEA and LEA level.

Recommendations

Interviewees generated a number of policy recommendations for states and localities beginning to initiate high school reform efforts, including the following:

- Secure staff buy-in by (1) using student outcome data to drive decision-making and (2) mandating that building-level teams attending state-sponsored professional development activities include representatives of both general and special education, as well as LEA- and building-level administrators.
- Provide guidance documents for LEAs that emphasize the importance of reform efforts including students both with and without disabilities.
- Consider passing legislation in support of high school reform efforts.
- Create an infrastructure that does not allow special programs to operate in silos (e.g., include special education and school improvement in the same SEA unit).
- Promote instructional models that have been proven to benefit *all* students.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although interviewees did not describe many *specific* strategies for incorporating special education into high school reform efforts, they agreed that including special education in the decision making process was critical and reported that inclusion of all students and staff—at both state and local levels—had become “automatic.” Interviewees reported that the inclusion of students with disabilities into high school reform efforts ultimately benefited *all* students (e.g., by raising expectations as well as assessment scores).

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