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Superintendent Leadership: Promoting General and Special Education Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 focuses on the academic achievement of *all* students by looking at the academic achievement of subgroups of historically underperforming students, including students with disabilities. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 (IDEA 2004) further supports the goal of the ESEA that seeks “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach or exceed minimum proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (Sec. 1001, Part A, Title 1 of ESEA; 20 U.S.C. 6301).

The focus on achievement in NCLB and IDEA may have served as a catalyst for increased collaboration between general and special education (WestEd, 2004), which have historically operated as independent systems with separate funding streams, legal mandates and personnel. Some schools have implemented strategies such as standards-based individualized education programs (IEPs), co-teaching, teaming and professional development on differentiated instruction (WestEd, 2004) to increase collaboration and improve instruction.

The spotlight on local education agencies (LEAs) in their efforts to improve the performance of all students, including historically underperforming subgroups, has increased scrutiny on LEA leadership. Superintendents’ responsibilities have become more complex, stressful and challenging as they are required to navigate new federal and state requirements and meet accountability expectations all while answering to multiple, sometimes competing, constituencies. These changes occur at a time when more superintendents are retiring, job turnover is increasing and the candidate pool for experienced district administrators is shrinking (Waldman, 2007).

This document examines the role of the superintendent in promoting, developing and sustaining a culture of collaboration between general and special educators throughout the LEA. Selected superintendents were asked to describe their rationale for advancing a culture of collaboration, the strategies they implemented, the challenges they faced in doing so and their recommendations to other superintendents. Project Forum at the National Association

of State Directors (NASDSE) completed this document as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

METHODOLOGY

Project Forum requested and received nominations for superintendents from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), state administrators' associations and the IDEA Partnership. Criteria for selecting superintendents included being known by their colleagues as ones who have nurtured a collaborative environment between special and general education. The state directors of special education for the states of the recommended superintendents were also contacted to confirm that the selected participants possessed this quality. An effort was made to select superintendents from geographically and size-diverse LEAs. The interview questions were developed with input from IDEA Partnership staff.

Project Forum staff completed interviews with seven of the nominated superintendents: *Linda Clark, Meridian Joint District, Idaho; Randall Collins, Waterford Public Schools, Connecticut; Larry Crowder, Culbertson Public Schools, Montana; Edgar Hatrick, Loudoun County Public Schools, Virginia; Michael Johnson, Bexley City Schools, Ohio; Tom Lockyer, White River School District, Washington; and Virginia McElyea, Deer Valley Unified School District, Arizona*¹ Appendix A includes two tables describing the superintendents and their districts.

FINDINGS

Personal Beliefs

All of the participants indicated that their experiences, both professional and personal, helped to shape their beliefs about special education and the need for collaboration with general education. Four of the seven participants held special education positions at some point in their career (one concurrently with the superintendent position); however, none of the superintendents holds a degree in special education.

Dr. Collins (Waterford Public Schools, Connecticut) and Mr. Johnson (Bexley City Schools, Ohio) experienced the special education system as family members. Dr. Collins served as a district special education coordinator at the same time his cousin, who was born with spina bifida and identified as severely mentally retarded, was a student. This was during the initial implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA). Dr. Collins also discussed how his experiences growing up as a poor student in a one-room school house developed in him a sense of righteousness that those with less-than-favorable circumstances should have every fair chance of succeeding. He feels "quietly enraged when someone says [a person] can't do something because of a handicapping condition" because we have no way of knowing of what they are capable.

"Either you give [special education students] everything they need to succeed or you're going to tell the parents you won't try at all; that's the alternative. It's not acceptable."

--Randy Collins, Superintendent
Waterford Public Schools, CT

¹ Project Forum would like to thank all the superintendents and their staff who contributed their time to provide information and input for the development of this document.

Mr. Johnson's own daughter was diagnosed with a learning disability (LD) in an LEA in which he was superintendent. He found the special education system "bureaucratic, large [and] insensitive" at times. *Mr. Johnson* tries to be cognizant of parents' feelings and perspectives after experiencing the process himself as a parent. He also personally experienced failure as he struggled with literacy until the fifth grade. That experience, in part, has shaped his desire to help students with disabilities feel "normal" and experience successes through meaningful participation in the least restrictive environment.

After years of professional observation, *Mr. Crowder (Culbertson Public Schools, Montana)* has developed a belief that general education teachers typically have a difficult time meeting the needs of students with disabilities due to a lack of training and understanding of what special education teachers do. These observations have driven his goal of bringing special and general education together in a positive way that fosters the perception that special educators are a helpful resource. *Dr. Hatrick (Loudoun County Public Schools, Virginia)* observed during his years as a general educator that there were misunderstandings between his general and special educators about their roles. *Dr. McElyea (Deer Valley Unified School District, Arizona)* observed as a high school English teacher that students in self-contained classes did not have access to high-quality curricula and content instruction. These observations led *Mr. Crowder, Dr. Hatrick* and *Dr. McElyea* to develop a belief that combining the strengths of general and special educators through collaboration is best for students.

Focus on Improving All Students' Learning

All superintendents spoke strongly about their districts' commitment to and focus on raising the achievement of *all* students. They believe that this goal has helped to spur educators, both general and special, to take responsibility for all students' learning—a responsibility that necessitates collaboration.

"Traditionally we have delivered education at the lowest common denominator. [Now our] particular focus on attending to all students requires totally different instructional models."
 --Linda Clark, Superintendent
 Meridian Joint District, ID

Mr. Johnson stated that now "learning is [the] dependent variable, all other variables are independent; everything is focused on learning against standards." *Dr. Clark's (Meridian Joint District, Idaho)* focus on accelerated growth for students who are behind academically prompted a rejection of the "pull out" model where content instruction was replaced with instruction by a special educator. Now general educators collaborate closely with special educators to deliver individually responsive instruction that addresses students' skills gaps without sacrificing grade level content instruction. Many interviewees believe that the focus on results for all students helps educators engage in meaningful collaboration with the goal of improving the learning of all students.

Professional Development

"Working in teams makes sense; to work alone means you've left much of the knowledge base in the district out."
 --Tom Lockyer, Superintendent
 White River School District, WA

Superintendents identified various forms of professional development as the most prominent active 'strategy' for fostering and supporting collaboration among general and special educators because it is a vehicle for effecting and supporting change among staff by increasing skills and knowledge and fostering relationships and understanding.

In addition to developing teachers' skills in differentiated instruction and response to intervention (RTI), *Mr. Crowder* devotes a portion of all professional development time to a special education issue; his goal is to bridge understanding and develop positive attitudes towards special education among his general education staff. *Dr. Hatrick* also uses professional development time to develop relationships by providing training to general and special education teachers, administrators, specialists and service providers together—a strategy that *Dr. Clark*, *Mr. Crowder*, *Mr. Lockyer* (*White River School District, Washington*) and *Dr. McElyea* mentioned as well.

Dr. McElyea's district provided considerable interdisciplinary professional development on the concepts of instructional leadership, research findings of "what works in the classroom" for raising individual student achievement and co-teaching.² *Mr. Lockyer's* district has made a deep commitment to implement professional learning communities (PLCs) with high fidelity and has required a significant amount of training for staff using materials from *The Solution Tree* and *DuFour* (2004). See the next section for more information about PLCs.

Strategies that Support and Sustain Collaboration

Co-teaching

Dr. McElyea formed an interdisciplinary study group in her Arizona LEA to examine the research base for various instructional strategies and the group recommended a focus on co-teaching models.³ Her teachers now use co-teaching district-wide. Special education teachers spend the majority of their day in general education classrooms for the core subjects and sometimes for science and social studies. Some teams are co-instructors, and in other classrooms the general educator delivers the main content instruction while special educators work with small groups to support the instruction. *Dr. McElyea* emphasized that planning for co-teaching requires a great deal of collaboration. The implementation is varied and evolving as "teachers [become] comfortable with skills and the whole notion of co-teaching." *Dr. Collins* also mentioned co-teaching as a strategy used in his district.

Common Planning Time

All but one superintendent explicitly discussed the use of common planning time to support collaboration between general and special educators. Interviewees felt that providing a structure to support interdisciplinary common planning time at the building level is essential to communicating the importance of collaboration. Practically, common time provides general and special educators time in their workday to develop assessments, discuss individual student needs based on data and design high-quality instruction that is consistent across classrooms.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Mr. Lockyer spoke about his district's commitment to implementing PLCs over the past three years. He had an interdisciplinary team from each school attend an initial PLC workshop to be introduced to the concept; a sample of principals decided to pilot the

² *Dr. McElyea* used materials from *Marzano* for her district's professional development on instructional leadership (*Marzano, Gaddy, & Dean, 2000*) and *Murawski* for co-teaching (*Murawski, 2008*).

³ See *Cook and Friend* (1995) for information on co-teaching.

concept during the first year. *Mr. Lockyer* invited the school board to attend trainings on PLCs in order to best communicate the concept; this fostered a great deal of support from the board early in the process and reduced the need for him to 'sell' the changes to the board members. Staff members receive ongoing trainings and have even developed their own regional trainings for education professionals. The workshops that *Mr. Lockyer's* staff provides have enabled the district to raise enough revenue to continue funding their own continuing professional development, despite budget cuts. *Dr. Hatrick, Dr. Collins, and Dr. Clark* also use PLCs in their districts.

The foundational concepts of PLCs encompass the needs of all students, including those with disabilities, focus on results and require interdisciplinary collaboration to meet the needs of diverse learners. DuFour (2004) argues that in a typical school addressing what happens to students who aren't learning is left up to the discretion of individual teachers. In contrast, schools that implement the PLC model provide a response to failing students that is timely, systematic, school-wide and based on needed interventions rather than remediation.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

All the superintendents interviewed discussed how the RTI model has spurred, complemented or enhanced the districts' efforts to develop a culture of collaboration between general and special education. Superintendents characterized RTI as being helpful by providing a framework for collaboration and individualized interventions. *Mr. Crowder* said that RTI has helped change the conversation among general educators about the role of special education. *Dr. Hatrick* described RTI as having "collaboration built in." *Mr. Johnson* spoke about how the RTI process "has given us a vocabulary to use" for activities in which they were already engaged, such as interdisciplinary teams that meet to discuss and address the needs of individual students. *Dr. Clark* described RTI as a "framework for delivering instruction to insure academic success for all students."

Hiring

Five of the seven superintendents discussed how their hiring strategy was, at least in part, focused on furthering collaboration between general and special education. *Dr. McElyea* filled a vacant special education director position in her district as superintendent and deliberately chose a candidate for his experience and knowledge of inclusionary practices and co-teaching. *Dr. McElyea* felt that she had found in her new special education director a person who could operationalize the philosophy she held about the need for more collaboration between general and special educators. *Mr. Crowder* also hired his special education coordinator based on a desire to develop a more positive relationship between general and special education; the coordinator has been instrumental in changing the attitudes of general educators in a gentle and respectful way.

<p>"RTI is helping tremendously with changing the conversation among regular education teachers." --Larry Crowder, Superintendent Culbertson Public Schools, MT</p>

Dr. Hatrick makes hiring decisions with the culture of collaboration in mind and discusses both general and special education issues with all potential new employees regardless of the position for which they are applying. *Mr. Lockyer* and *Dr. McElyea* discussed how existing employees that were not on board with the expectations for collaboration and commitment to new instructional models were let go or 'counseled out of the district.'

District Organizational Structure

Two superintendents discussed how organizing the LEA's central office can influence collaboration. Before *Dr. Hatrick's* Loudoun County LEA grew to its current size, the special education office was housed within the department of instruction. This naturally fostered communication, cooperation and collaboration as well as a sense of responsibility for all students and curricula. Though they are in separate departments now, *Dr. Hatrick* maintains that sense of synergy with regular interdepartmental meetings. *Mr. Johnson* inherited the Bexley City LEA in which there was an office in the special education department that paralleled the general education curriculum and instruction department. One of his first acts as superintendent was to dismantle this organizational structure and combine the special education and curriculum and instruction departments. *Mr. Johnson* feels that this restructuring helped staff think differently to foster collaboration, collective responsibility and high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students.

Challenges

The superintendents most frequently mentioned as challenges:

- obtaining buy-in from multiple constituents;
- addressing resistance to change or negative attitudes among teachers; and
- negotiating workload issues to schedule common planning time.

Dr. Clark expressed frustration that they have not been able to come to an agreement with the teachers' union that allows for common collaboration time district-wide. They have recently created a solution by using classified personnel. *Dr. McElyea* also had to address workload issues with the teachers union.

Both *Mr. Crowder* and *Mr. Johnson* felt it was a challenge to change general educators' perceptions of special education and foster a sense that special educators are, as *Mr. Johnson* said, a "resource [from whom] we can obtain professional advice rather than a place where you send students for remedial instruction."

One way *Mr. Lockyer* and *Mr. Crowder* addressed the challenge of obtaining buy-in and addressing resistance was to provide time. *Mr. Lockyer* introduced the concepts and training on PLCs three years ago, but only in the last year has he required full implementation. He feels that the two years staff had to 'marinate' in the concepts solidified their support and commitment and fostered natural leaders in each building. *Mr. Crowder* began purposefully introducing the dialogue to foster understanding and collaboration between general and special educators five years ago. At first, teachers questioned why they had to discuss special education, but they have slowly come to expect

"Administrators need to make sure dialogue is happening rather than just saying here's something new you need to do."

--Larry Crowder, Superintendent
Culbertson Public Schools, MT

that these issues and students with disabilities are everyone's responsibility. Now, *Mr. Crowder* says, "nobody flinches" when special education topics are addressed.

Dr. Hatrick discussed resistance he met from teachers when first introducing inclusion opportunities in the mid-80s. In his case, the principals who bought into inclusion early were able to demonstrate positive outcomes. These positive results sold the more resistant principals and helped to ensure buy-in from more staff members. *Dr. Hatrick* cautions that

there will always be people who are not on board and even those who are committed to a particular model need to be continually trained and reinvigorated.

Dr. McElyea faced resistance when her district decided to implement co-teaching. *Dr. McElyea* lunched with board members to explain concepts and implementation issues, spent time at community and parent meetings and had information posted on the district's website. She also deployed her special education director to address teacher and parent concerns with meetings and open forums to discuss the changes. *Dr. McElyea* shared anecdotal observations of successes to sell the concept since it was too early to report achievement results.

Outcomes

Several superintendents reported anecdotal results that they felt, at least in part, stemmed from their districts' culture of collaboration between general and special education. *Dr. Clark* noted that more students identified with LD are being served in the general education classroom without needing pull-out services. *Mr. Crowder* noted the changes he has observed in his general education teachers' attitudes towards special education; the special education teacher is now seen as a valued and productive member of the staff.

Mr. Johnson noted that the special education subgroup has met adequate yearly progress (AYP) two consecutive years district-wide. He also has observed teachers moving more towards data related instructional decision making. *Dr. McElyea* reported that more students with disabilities in her district are exceeding expectations on the state's basic skills test.

Recommendations

The superintendents offered several recommendations for others wishing to address the need for collaboration between general and special education in their districts. The most often mentioned themes are summarized in the list below.

- Articulate clear and consistent goals and expectations.
- Provide extensive and ongoing professional development for all staff that supports the goals and expectations and fosters dialogue.
- Focus on meeting the needs of all students, regardless of label.
- Maintain a system that can manage student-level data.
- Use student-level data to analyze student needs, make instructional decisions and convince others of the value of collaboration.
- Be open and transparent about the data.
- Start small.
- Hire the right personnel to implement your vision and philosophy.
- Counsel out personnel who are not on board.
- Cultivate buy-in from all constituents.
- Maintain focus at the district level.
- Model the collaboration you wish to see at the building level.
- Organize and structure offices, personnel and schedules in ways that systemically support and sustain collaboration.

CONCLUSION

All of the superintendents maintain a clear and consistent focus on student learning. Likewise, each held some type of belief, based on personal and/or professional experiences,

that students benefit when general and special educators collaborate. They identified several strategies they use to promote and sustain collaboration within their districts.

There are currently several research-based models that address both student learning and collaboration. PLCs, RTI and co-teaching are strategies that demonstrate promise in raising student achievement and increasing general and special education collaboration (Murawski & Hughes, 2009).

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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APPENDIX A

Table 1 Superintendent Sample and District Characteristics

Superintendent	District	Urbanicity*	Student Population*	Students with IEPs*
Larry Crowder	Culbertson Public Schools, MT	rural	265	40
Michael Johnson	Bexley City School District, OH	suburban	2,183	229
Randall Collins	Waterford School District, CT	suburban	2,975	300
Tom Lockyer	White River School District, WA	suburban	4,526	562
Linda Clark	Meridian Joint District, ID	suburban	32,277	3,296
Virginia McElyea	Deer Valley Unified School District, AZ	city	36,059	4,410
Edgar Hatrick	Loudoun County Public Schools, VA	suburban	>59,000**	6,100**

*Information obtained from National Center of Education Statistics Common Core of Data on May 19, 2009. Data current as of 2006-2007 school year.

**Current data provided by the superintendent.

Table 2 Superintendents' Professional Background

Superintendent	Total Years as a Superintendent	Degrees in Special Education	Positions in Special Education	Other Previous Positions
Larry Crowder	11 years	None	Currently special education coop director	Principal, coach, grant writer, teacher
Michael Johnson	23 years	None	None	Principal, teacher
Randall Collins	29 years	None	District special education coordinator	Guidance counselor, grant writer, teacher
Tom Lockyer	18 years	None	Teacher, self-contained class	Principal, teacher
Linda Clark	5 years	None	None	Dir. of staff dev., dir. of student achievement, principal, teacher
Virginia McElyea	7 years	None	None	Asst. superintendent of curriculum and instruction, dir. of gifted education, dir. of staff dev., professor, teacher
Edgar Hatrick	18 years	None	District dir. of special education	Asst. superintendent, Dir. of instruction, principal, teacher