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# Effective leadership makes schools truly inclusive

There's been much commitment and extensive legislation intended to make schools inclusive for all students but not much real progress in improving student outcomes. Here's what some successful schools have done.

**By James McLeskey and Nancy L. Waldron**

**O**ver the past 25 years, U.S. schools have educated increasing numbers of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. In 1990, 34% of students with disabilities spent most of the school day in general education classrooms; by 2011, that percentage had increased to 61% (McLeskey et al., 2012). As inclusive programs have been developed, many seem to assume that inclusion will produce significantly better achievement for students with disabilities. This hasn't proven true: Most students with disabilities educated in inclusive schools continue to lag far behind peers in reading, writing, and math (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

At least part of the reason students with disabilities continue to lag is that before No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001, schools in most states weren't held accountable for the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, and, as inclusive programs were being developed, the emphasis was more on inclusion than efficacy. That has changed, as most students with disabilities nowadays are included in state accountability systems and must be provided access to the general education curriculum, while local schools are held accountable for ensuring that these students make adequate yearly progress in core content areas.

Given the pressure on schools to improve achievement outcomes for students with disabilities, researchers have begun seeking out schools that are effective and inclusive to figure out what they're doing to achieve such success. We recently conducted a case study of an effective, inclusive elementary school (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011), and one of the authors and a colleague examined the role of the principal in an effective, inclusive school (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). We also located case studies of effective, inclusive schools conducted in the northeastern U.S. (Hehir & Katzman, 2012) and in England (Dyson et al., 2004). These few investigations provide an outline of the factors crucial to developing and supporting effective inclusive schools.

The case studies suggest three must-haves for an effective, inclusive school to be developed and sustained:

- **Strong, active principal leadership to ensure that teachers share core values and an institutional commitment to developing an effective inclusive school;**
- **A data system that monitors student progress; and**
- **A school-based system of learner-centered professional development to improve instruction.**

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In the following sections, we describe each of these must-haves for effective inclusive schools.

### **Commitment to core values**

More than anything else, a commitment to a set of core values by teachers and administrators is part of what makes inclusive schools successful. These schools valued all students and committed themselves to improving the achievement of all students, including those with disabilities. These shared values are especially important because many teachers feel

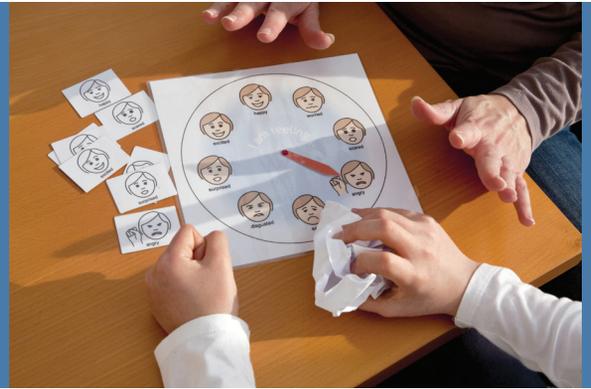
**Demonstrating trust and support for teachers provided the foundation for developing good relationships with teachers.**



they are not sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities and thus may not support the development of inclusive programs (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). This commitment also motivates teachers and school administrators to engage in the difficult work of school change (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Three of the case studies described how principals provided leadership to develop this commitment (Hehir & Katzmann, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Waldron et al., 2011). When the principals began work at these schools, they brought with them strong core values related to inclusion and student

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achievement that ultimately became part of the vision for their schools. For example, one principal was described as “adamant and uncompromising” about her core values, which included “meet(ing) the needs of all students in her school, not just a particular group” and “ensur(ing) that students with disabilities were included as a natural part of this vision and were educated as much as possible with their typical peers” (Waldron et. al., 2011, p. 54). Similarly, in a case study of three effective inclusive schools, the shared vision did not “bubble up from the bottom.” Rather, core values in these schools came from the principals who “were clear about their schools’ fundamental mission . . . to them, inclusion was a non-negotiable grounded in civil rights” (Hehir & Katzmann, 2012, p. 33).

While the principals felt strongly about these core values, they realized that they could not mandate a vision and ensure teacher commitment. Instead they had to develop a trusting, supportive relationship with teachers. This trust was characterized by the extent to which the teachers felt they could depend on the principal. Trust was more likely to occur if the principals demonstrated trust and concern for their teachers, shared decision making, and engaged in a range of behaviors to demonstrate their support for teachers and for the core values of the school.

Demonstrating trust and support for teachers provided the foundation for developing good relationships with teachers. One principal pointed out the importance of trust when he said “. . . the degree to which we trust each other determines the degree to which we can actually get together and solve problems and figure things out” (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 249). This principal went on to say that “if you want to get trust, you’ve got to give trust.” To build this trust, the principal made a major priority of building relationships with teachers by personally investing time and working closely with them. One of the ways he did this was by exhibiting care in explicit and meaningful ways, which included displaying trust in teachers, listening to their ideas, concerns, and problems, and treating staff fairly.

Principals in all of the case study schools also built trusting relationships with teachers by engaging them in shared decision making and sharing control of all aspects of school change. For example, one principal was flexible regarding all aspects of school change aside from the core values that guided this work (Waldron et. al., 2011). This principal collaboratively engaged teachers to determine how the school would be changed to enact these core values. Through the school change process, she “shared decision-making power and remained flexible, open-minded, and ready to learn from others” (p. 54). This principal’s trust and support for her teachers was illustrated by a comment from one teacher who noted that she did not micromanage instructional practice and was “not intrusive in the classroom. There are expectations set, but if you’re doing your job, she’s not going to bother you” (p. 55). As teachers in this school were “empowered to make real decisions . . . they were motivated to improve their practice and determine approaches to better meet the needs of all students” (p. 55).

Finally, principals in all of the case study schools built trusting relationships with teachers by engaging in a range of behaviors that demonstrated strong support for teachers and for the core values of the school. This included providing opportunities for teacher leadership, hiring teachers and paraeducators who were a good fit for the school, redesigning the school day so adequate time and resources were available to ensure that teachers were successful, obtaining and providing sufficient resources to support teachers, and a willingness by the principal to make difficult decisions “that benefited students and improved teacher working conditions” (Waldron et. al., 2011, p. 56). Further evidence of this support for teachers is provided in the following section, as principals worked collaboratively with teachers to develop school-based professional development to improve teacher practice, as well as an internal accountability system to monitor student progress and guide decision making.

## Improving student outcomes

While teachers and administrators need timely data for making instructional decisions, external accountability measures (e.g., statewide high-stakes tests used to evaluate schools and monitor school-wide progress) haven't proven useful in providing this information (Roderick, 2012). In all of the case studies, these effective, inclusive schools addressed this problem by developing school-based data systems that principals and teachers could use to monitor student progress and make informed instruc-



tional decisions. These data were directly related to the curriculum and included a range of tools, such as informal classroom measures — math facts and word identification, for example — unit tests, Response to Intervention progress monitoring measures, observations, screening tests, and district or state-administered diagnostic tests given several times per year.

Teachers, principals, and other professionals worked collaboratively to develop these internal accountability systems. One principal said he and his teachers developed their own standards and measures of accountability that were intended to describe what was important to them so they would know when they were doing a good job. As teachers in this school examined data to inform their instruction in reading and math, using data to

make instructional decisions became ingrained in the school's culture. Using these data led to many changes in the school, including more frequent use of evidence-based practices to address the needs of struggling students and reorganizing the school day to provide more time for coteaching (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 251).

A principal in another school succinctly described the need for an internal accountability system: "How can I have conversations with teachers about their students, how they're progressing, how well they're teaching without individual data about students? So we had to come up with ways to monitor student data. We [use these data to] have good conversations about how kids are doing, how we can get them moving, what resources you need, and all that" (Waldron et al., 2011, p. 58). These data also were used to create high expectations for all students, guide decisions about the use of resources (e.g., coteachers, paraprofessionals) and how instruction was delivered to struggling students (e.g., more small-group, tiered instruction), and to inform decisions about areas of professional development for teachers.

Across all of the case studies of effective, inclusive schools, internal accountability systems became part of the school culture and were viewed as indispensable to creating and sustaining school change. Ongoing assessment was "part of the culture. They do not wait for state testing to act," said one study. Data-wise teachers in these schools spent a substantial amount of time "acting on student data concerning academic progress" (Hehir & Katzman, 2012, pp. 94-95). These data systems were thus used in the effective, inclusive schools to make change last as teachers used the data to examine and improve their instructional practice and better meet the needs of all students.

### **Professional development**

Most general education teachers — about 70% — feel that they lack the expertise to address the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Waldron, 2007). While an internal accountability system is important for determining the specific expertise needed by teachers, intensive and carefully planned professional development is then required to support teachers in developing the skills to improve their practice. Unfortunately, most of the professional development provided by local districts is not sufficiently intensive or focused on individual teachers to meet the needs of effective, inclusive schools (Desimone, 2011). We found that for the most part these schools developed their own professional development to support teachers.

While professional development across the effec-

**Effective, inclusive schools develop school-based data systems that principals and teachers can use to monitor student progress and make informed instructional decisions.**

tive, inclusive schools took many forms, these activities could generally be characterized as learner-centered (Desimone, 2011). Such professional development is teacher-directed, often involves collective participation, actively engages teachers in learning via opportunities for observing, receiving feedback, or coaching. It also tends to be job-embedded and sufficiently intensive (lasting 20 hours or more) to support teachers in developing and using new skills.

Principals in the effective, inclusive schools believed that providing a broad range of opportunities for learner-centered professional development tailored to individual teacher needs was one of their primary responsibilities. For example, in one school, the principal said his role had been "redefined . . . to be more a mentor or a coach" who "spends the majority of my time growing people" (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 252). This school provided a large group of its teachers with intensive professional development over several months to plan the transition to an inclusive school and to develop the expertise to support student needs in their classrooms.

All the effective, inclusive schools emphasized the collective participation of teachers in learning-centered professional development, often as part of a professional learning community. In several schools this included collaborative problem-solving teams, study groups, or book studies, as most professional development rested on teachers working together and seldom included one-shot workshops. One school emphasized growing its own experts. As the principal noted, "I believe in creating experts in your building and encouraging them to coach others. It's the same way with inclusion, if we've got some people who are leaders, they can share [effective practices] with other people" (McLeskey et al., 2014).

### **Conclusion**

While administrators and teachers engage in a

range of activities to develop and sustain effective inclusive schools, these case studies suggest there are three must-haves related to developing and sustaining these schools. These include a commitment by teachers and administrators to a set of core values, an internal accountability system to monitor student progress and determine the effectiveness of interventions, and a school-based system of professional development to improve teacher practice.

Principals play a critical role in transforming schools as they become effective and inclusive. Indeed, these successful programs would not have been developed without strong, active principal support. This included demonstrating expertise at building a vision and setting direction, understanding and developing people, and redesigning the school to support teachers. The importance of the principal's role has been echoed by previous research on inclusive schools. For example, the author of one study of elementary inclusive programs pointedly stated, "Schools that function inclusively do so for a reason . . . principals in these schools were the reason" (Salisbury, 2006, p. 79).

Inclusive schools can be developed but accomplishing this task is not simple. While these changes are not substantially different from other school change that results in improved student outcomes, what seems to be required is a focus on the needs of students with disabilities and others who struggle and tenacity and persistence on the part of administrators and teachers to ensure success. As one of the case studies concluded, teachers and administrators cannot "simply give lip service to 'putting students first', but [must] do *whatever is necessary* to make sure that all students in their school [are] successful" (Waldron et. al., 2011, p. 59). **K**

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"He has attendance deficit disorder."

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