



Ideas and Innovations for State Education Agency Leaders Emerging from an NCSI Thought Leader Forum

November, 2022

Background and Context

The National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) convened a select group of Thought Leaders from across the country in an in-person Forum to discuss equity for students with disabilities in a pandemic-impacted world. The objectives of the Forum were to:

- Authentically engage students, families, community members, and education leaders to identify the most pressing systemic challenges for students with disabilities in the current world context and identify accompanying solutions that could be the most impactful
- Create a set of leadership recommendations that can guide state education agencies (SEAs) to design or refine systems to implement high-impact solutions in pursuit of equitable outcomes for students with disabilities
- Enhance understanding of technical assistance needs and priorities for SEAs and their partners

The 27 Thought Leaders and eight NCSI team members in attendance included: federal, state, county, and local policy leaders; teachers; school and district administrators; family advocates; researchers; educator preparation program faculty; and regional and national technical assistance providers. The Forum was discussion-based, with mixed-role small groups with dedicated facilitators and note-takers, and facilitated whole group dialogue.

Thought Leaders examined national and state level quantitative and qualitative data on education conditions and outcomes related to academics, behavior, placement, and other factors. As part of this data analysis, they experienced videos of seven students with disabilities and in a couple cases their families, discussing their lived experiences with the education system, including during the COVID pandemic, and which were produced by NCSI for the Forum. From the collective data, Thought Leaders surfaced and sought shared agreement on contributing factors to existing inequities for students with disabilities, and proposed recommendations for SEA leadership actions that could further equitable opportunities and systemic improvement for students receiving special education services. These recommendations are shared further below.

The discussion was deep and rich, with participants bringing their lived experiences and professional expertise to the conversation, as well as actively listening to and learning from each other. Numerous identity intersections were highlighted and held close throughout the two days, in particular the intersection of race and disability. Central to the conversation, and inherent within the Thought Leaders' resulting recommendations is the underlying theme of recognizing, addressing, and dismantling ableism within SEA policies, practices, and procedures. Ableism, as defined by Emily Ladau (2021), is "attitudes, actions, and circumstances that devalue people because they are disabled or perceived as having a disability". The Thought Leaders identified and explored a number of ideas they thought could be useful in addressing the perpetuation of ableism within our education systems. These ideas and others are reflected in a set of recommendations that the Thought Leaders suggest may have a large return on investment in promoting equity in experience and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

Actions for State Education Agencies to take to advance equitable educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities:

1. Promote understanding that students and families served by education and other child-serving systems bring essential knowledge, and are critical partners in designing and implementing policies, procedures, and practices
2. Ensure approaches to accountability, compliance monitoring, and guidance development are focused on student impact and results
3. Improve coherence across educational programs
4. Create and reinforce expectations for an inclusive, whole-child approach to educator preparation and licensure requirements
5. Create a statewide vision for closing opportunity and achievement gaps for students with disabilities, and develop an aligned strategic plan that includes TA&PD to support all levels of the system to achieve this vision

1. Promote understanding that students and families served by education and other child-serving systems bring essential knowledge, and are critical partners in designing and implementing policies, procedures, and practices

A consistent theme throughout the Forum was the need to meaningfully connect with students and families, recognizing that they are essential contributors in designing good policy and implementing procedures and practices in ways that ensure good policy is implemented with fidelity. As part of such engagement, Thought Leaders emphasized the importance of understanding that students' and their families' firsthand stories are critical pieces of data and should be treated as such in understanding systemic needs and successes, and making aligned data-based decisions that improve systems design and implementation. In order to put this recommendation into practice, Thought Leaders suggested the following strategies:

- Center student and family knowledge and perspectives when convening advisory councils and making high-stakes decisions. As part of such actions, ensure that members sufficiently represent the various demographics associated with the students and families served by the system, such as age, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability identification, etc.
- Advocate for leaders at other levels and parts of the education system to similarly understand and center student and family knowledge and perspective as part of their systemic improvement and implementation efforts, including LEAs, schools, personnel preparation programs, and technical assistance and professional development (TA&PD) programs.
- Require personnel preparation programs to include coursework and field experience in authentic student and family engagement strategies in order to meet teacher and administrator licensure criteria.
- Include collection and analysis of student and family engagement data within monitoring and compliance efforts, such as including self-assessment questions focused on student and family engagement in evaluation and IEP processes.
- Foster relationships with and encourage routine collaborations between Parent Training and Information (PTI) Centers and SEAs, LEAs, and technical assistance and professional development (TA&PD) programs, including sharing and making sense of data, and designing and executing technical assistance and professional development activities.
- Showcase impactful models of authentic partnerships and effective methods of elevating student and family knowledge and perspectives in written communications, TA&PD, and other information dissemination efforts.

2. Ensure approaches to accountability, compliance monitoring, and guidance development are focused on student impact and results

Thought Leaders expressed a strong perspective that SEAs focus on student-level experiences and outcomes whenever possible. They suggested that such approaches to accountability, compliance monitoring, and guidance development would meaningfully include the following strategies:

- When implementing accountability systems with regional or local education agencies, where SEAs have flexibility to do so, include or increase the weight of metrics such as family engagement; the use of exclusionary disciplinary practices; Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) measures; outcome measures such as post-high school outcomes, graduation, and dropout rates; engagement measures such as attendance; and growth measures.
- Develop and disseminate resources and guidance that are brief and user-friendly to the maximum extent possible, including scrutinizing them for unconscious bias in language and examples.
- Critically examine the balance of SEA staff time in terms of how resources are allocated for monitoring and regulatory oversight alongside allocation for TA&PD on effective instructional and systems-change endeavors, and seek to align resources in ways that serve the field to realize positive results for students.
- Decrease the use of punitive consequences for LEAs and where possible, instead offer TA and incentives that support them to achieve equitable outcomes for all students.
- Develop suites of brief, user-friendly resources specifically aligned to areas of identified non-compliance or areas for improvement, and provide TA&PD that supports local level improvement, through internal capacity and/or by leveraging or acquiring external support.
- Leverage the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and federal regulations, along with guidance from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), recognizing that these resources can be useful in advancing the civil rights of students with disabilities.

3. Improve coherence across educational programs

Thought Leaders emphasized the importance of coherence across educational programs at each level of the system, including within the SEA, the LEA, and the school. They stressed the importance of a whole-child approach, and noted the efficiencies that are gained when vision, resources, and programming are aligned across programs. Specific strategies the Thought Leaders encouraged include the following:

- Work cross-divisionally at the SEA to align messaging, requirements, and resource allocation, in order to create holistic equity-focused accountability systems, particularly with regard to IDEA and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
- Provide clear guidance to LEAs on allowable use of funding and funding flexibilities, including providing examples of appropriately and effectively aligning multiple funding sources toward a common vision.
- Provide guidance and encouragement to LEAs on how to meaningfully align services across funding streams and intentions (special education, multi-lingual services, Title I, Title II, etc.).
- Work cross-divisionally within the SEA to align priorities on initiatives, eliminate competing initiatives, and ensure messaging alignment.
- Create or strengthen internal special education and general education collaboration structures and encourage the same within LEAs and schools.
- Align data systems to analyze patterns of successes and challenges and address needs with a coherent approach. Use the experience of students who have historically been the most marginalized by the system as a primary indicator of the overall health of the system.

4. Create and reinforce expectations for an inclusive, whole-child approach to educator preparation and licensure requirements

Thought Leaders stressed the importance of *all* educators taking ownership of the success of *all* students. They discussed the importance of strong inclusionary practices, and the need for effective educator preparation in order to equip them with the skills necessary to effectively engage in teaching and learning for all students. They identified the following steps as suggested strategies for systems improvement:

- Critically examine licensure requirements and adjust them so licensure doesn't drive segregation in placement for students. Examples include decreasing the use of categorical certifications and increasing dual licensure opportunities.
- Create a unified vision across the SEA such that teacher licensure requirements include strategies for and evidence of proficiency for effectively educating *all* students, and expecting field experiences that include multiple models of instruction.



5. Create a statewide vision for closing opportunity and achievement gaps for students with disabilities, and develop an aligned strategic plan that includes TA&PD to support all levels of the system to achieve this vision

Many of the recommendations that Thought Leaders discussed focused on SEAs providing leadership, messaging, and supports for schools and LEAs within their states. Thought Leaders discussed the fact that SEA authority varies across states and entities, and suggested that in those instances where sufficient *authority* doesn't exist to compel change, then SEAs should try to leverage opportunities to *influence* strategies for systemic improvements. Specific strategies the Thought Leaders identified include the following:

- Provide strong messaging to the field to support understanding of the following:
 - » special education is a set of services, *not* a location.
 - » the benefits of inclusionary practices and meaningful access to core instruction.
 - » the risks of exclusionary discipline, and the need for a significant decrease in its use.
 - » the importance of elevating student and family knowledge and perspective, student-centered planning, and relationship-building.
 - » the use of varied data (qualitative, quantitative, first-hand experiences) within Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), as well as in eligibility determinations.
 - » innovative strategies for recruiting and retaining highly effective educators who are representative of the community, which may include revisiting salary structures, including community member involvement in the recruitment process, providing innovative work schedule options, and increasing preparation time.
 - » the importance of self-care and ideas for concrete practices to support educators.
- Provide technical assistance, professional development, and other implementation supports for:
 - » Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
 - » Professional Learning Communities (PLC).
 - » strong outcome-oriented implementation practices.
 - » equity-focused MTSS practices, such as the use of varied data, the disaggregation of data, and a focus on core instruction.
 - » the creation of local community/family advisory groups.

Attending Thought Leaders:

Lupita Alcalá, Director, Education Policy and Outcomes, WestEd

Dr. Sarah Barzee, Senior Director of State Education Services, WestEd/Region 2 Comprehensive Center

Dr. Maria Cioè-Peña, Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education

Dr. Michelle Daley, Group Leader for Comprehensive Centers, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

Dr. Edward Fergus, Professor of Urban Education, Rutgers University

Dr. Bernadine Futrell, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Equity and Discretionary Grants and Support Services, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

Dr. Glen Harvey, CEO, WestEd

Rochanda Hiligh-Thomas, Executive Director, Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

Dr. Carol Keirstead, Senior Research Associate, The National Comprehensive Center

Dr. Kathleen King Thorius, Associate Professor, Indiana University-IUPUI; Executive Director, Great Lakes Equity Center

Mireika Kobayashi, Department of Student Services Manager, Cincinnati Public Schools

Augustus Mays, Director of Policy and Outreach, WestEd

Dr. Erica McCray, Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Community Engagement; Director and Professor, School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies

Dr. Kent McIntosh, Knight Chair of Special Education, *University of Oregon*; Co-Director, Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Dr. Lauren Morando Rhim, Executive Director, Center for Learner Equity

Dr. Fatima Morrell, Chief for Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Initiatives, Buffalo Public Schools

Kareem Neal, Special Education Teacher, Phoenix, AZ

Heath Peine, Executive Director of Student Support Services, Wichita Public Schools

Ruth Ryder, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

Matt Sewell, Director of Special Programs, AR Department of Education

Alissa Trollinger, Deputy Associate Superintendent, Exceptional Student Service, AZ Department of Education

Dr. Larry Wexler, Director of Research to Practice, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education

Dr. Perry Williams, Education Program Specialist, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education

Valerie Williams, Director, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education

Kristin Wright, Executive Director of Equity, Prevention, and Intervention, Sacramento County Office of Education

Jonas Zuckerman, Consultant/former SEA Title I Director, Zuckerman Education Consulting

Dr. Rebecca Zumeta Edmunds, Director, National Center on Intensive Intervention; Principal Investigator, PROGRESS Center

Participants from the National Center for Systemic Improvement:

Rorie Fitzpatrick, NCSI Director, WestEd

Dr. Nicholas Gage, Senior Researcher, WestEd

Julia Hartwig, NCSI Content Specialist, WestEd

Dr. Alexandria Harvey, NCSI Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator, WestEd

Debra Jennings, NCSI Content Specialist, DAJ Consultation & Coaching

Dr. Laura Kuchle, NCSI Content Specialist, American Institutes for Research

Michele Rovins, NCSI Deputy Director, WestEd

Dr. Zach Smith, NCSI Content Specialist, WestEd

References

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