

Improving Achievement: The Research

In a recent study that demonstrated unusually strong performance among special education students in certain California schools as compared to others in similar schools, Huberman, Parrish and Navo, (2012) identified emerging themes consistent with the research and literature on effective practices:

- Inclusion and access to the core curriculum
- Collaboration between special education and general education teachers
- Continuous assessment and use of RTI
- Targeted professional development
- Use of Explicit Direct Instruction (p.13)

Eleven Practices for Success The study, replicating one conducted in 2004 by the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, set out to determine district- and school-level practices supporting achievement among urban elementary and middle school students with special needs. (p.61) Data collection identified 11 practices that supported improved academic success:

1. An emphasis on curriculum alignment with curriculum frameworks;
2. Effective systems to support curriculum alignment;
3. Emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum;
4. Culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement;
5. A well-disciplined academic and social environment;
6. Use of student assessment data to inform decision-making;
7. Unified practice supported by targeted professional development;
8. Access to resources that support key initiatives;
9. Effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment;
10. Flexible leaders and staff who work effectively in a dynamic environment; and
11. Effective leadership

All of the identified practices, with the exception of “emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum,” are consistent with an exhaustive body of research literature on effective schools (p.62).

Rethinking Practices and Policies In *Something Has Got to Change: Rethinking Special Education* (2011), Levenson found similar themes and practices in his research of schools in Arlington, Massachusetts. In this qualitative study, Levenson stresses the importance of rethinking special education policies and practices, incorporating strategic management structures, and the “relentless focus on reading instruction.” He states, “Only three things matter, reading, reading, and reading.” When reading improves, classification rates drop (p.5). Citing National Reading Panel recommendations and the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse, Levenson delineates best practices correlated to improve student achievement:

- Clear and rigorous grade-level expectations for reading proficiency;
- Frequent measurement of student achievement and growth, which influences instruction;
- Early identification of struggling readers, starting in kindergarten;

- Immediate and intensive additional instruction for struggling readers, averaging 30 minutes per day and using more than one pedagogical strategy;
- Remediation and intervention seamlessly connected to each day's full class instruction;
- Balanced instruction in five areas of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) as part of a 90-minute literacy block;
- Explicit instruction in phonics in the early grades and comprehension in the later grades, and
- Skilled teachers of reading.

Levenson notes that, although these practices are well known, in most cases they are not implemented. He states:

If so few schools adhere to best practices one might assume the plan is controversial or contested. Not so. Most desire to implement the recommendations.... they cite lack of funding as an obstacle, not realizing that they are already spending 2 to 5 times as much on special education services that weren't as effective" (Levinson, 2011, p.6).

To improve student outcomes, more needs to be done in general education, he argues. The redesign of how and what we teach struggling students is essential.

In best practice districts, the general education teacher is the primary teacher for students with mild to moderate special needs. Instead of decreasing the scope or rigor, classes for struggling students must teach the standard curriculum. The expectations for these students should be the mastery of the same grade level content as their peers; it will just take them longer. By shifting resources from special education to general education students with special needs can take the same class for two periods per day in order to have twice the time. Class size can also be reduced (Levenson, 2011, p.8).

Other cost-effective strategies identified by Levenson include the rethinking of how we deploy staff and the purposeful use of creating teams of administrators that utilize benchmarks and metrics for staff scheduling and assignments. By improving instruction and intervention practices in general education, special education classification rates and expenditures will decrease.

Cost-Effectiveness, Not Cost-Cutting In *A Win-Win Approach to Reducing Special Education Costs* (2009), Levenson outlines ten steps to improve quality and reduce costs. He states that, as classification rates increase and special education costs increase, districts must take on the challenge of controlling costs and improving achievement (p.1). Levenson offers four pieces of advice to schools and districts: focus on reading and integration with general education; rethink deployment of support staff; design more sophisticated metrics to gauge teacher effectiveness, and employ more strategic management structures (Hess, 2011).

At the forefront is the necessity to "change the discussion: Stop talking about cost cutting and talk instead about cost effectiveness" (Levenson, 2009, p.21). The author asserts, "Cost-cutting assumes that we are taking away something from children. No one wants to support it. Cost-effectiveness means getting the same or better results for less money. No one wants to not support that" (p.21).

Levenson identifies other measures to assist districts in becoming more cost-effective:

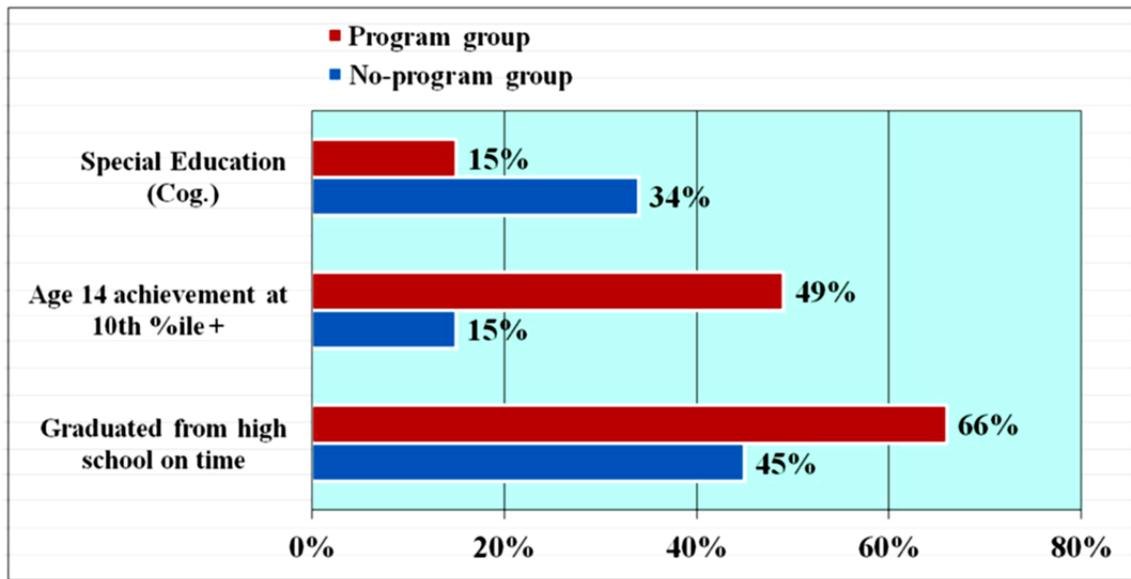
- Creating a team that has experience in scheduling, financial analysis, forecasting and purchasing;
- Conducting an Opportunities Audit, which entails collecting quantitative and qualitative data in analyzing district and school trends;
- Comparing those findings to regional and national benchmarks, and
- Assessing strategies that will improve quality in a cost-effective manner.

Strategies include returning out-of-district students, where appropriate; rethinking the role and scheduling of paraprofessionals; creating teams to manage and oversee district transportation; benchmarking staffing and service levels; focusing relentlessly on early literacy, and reducing referrals by “shifting some remediation to general educators” (p.23).¹⁰

Quality Pre School: Invest and Act Early Research on pre-school programs has provided evidence of lasting, positive effects in cognition, academic motivation and behavior. Data collected over the last four decades demonstrate potential gains from investing in early childhood programs. Such gains are improved achievement scores, increased graduation rates and the reduction of special education classifications and placements, which result in reduced costs to taxpayers and greater future economic gains.

Schweinhart, *et al.*, (2005) reports on the High/Scope Perry Preschool project, the seminal work on the short- and long-term effects of preschool. This experiment began in the 1960s and tracked the attendees through age 40 by collecting data from psychological tests, school achievement measures, employment, and family and health outcomes, as well as police and prison records. Earlier research established that the project provided significant benefits (Weikart, *et al.*, 1970). The researchers found that there were cognitive, social and future economic benefits for those children who attended the pre-school program. Of particular interest is the reduction of special education classifications, the decreased retention rates, and the increased graduation rates. (See the chart on the following page.)

¹⁰ For a useful tool in determining opportunities to manage special education more effectively, go to “DMC Managers Toolkit: Can Your District Manage Special Education More Effectively?” (2009), www.dmccouncil.org.



Berrueta-Clement, J.R., Schweinhart, L.J., Barnett, W.S., Epstein, A.S., & Weikart, D.P. (1984). *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths through Age 19*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

A recent multi-year study of New Jersey’s Abbott Preschool Program demonstrates that children in the state’s most disadvantaged communities who participate in the pre-K program make significant gains in literacy, language, math and science through 4th and 5th grade.

The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) estimated the effects of preschool education programs on academic skills in language arts and literacy, mathematics, and science based on standardized tests given to all New Jersey children in 4th and 5th grade. The study found gains in all tested subjects on the state assessments, with larger test score gains for children who participated in two years of preschool. Abbott Preschool Program participation was linked to lower retention rates and fewer children needing special education (W. Steven Barnett, Kwanghee Jung, Min-Jong Youn, and Ellen C. Frede, 2013).¹¹

¹¹ For more information on the APPLES project, go to http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Economics%20of%20ECE_Loyola_Nores.pdf.