BRIDGING THE GAP

BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

Best Practice Schools’ Experiences of New York City Department of Education Special Education Reform
The Fund for Public Advocacy and Perry and Associates, Inc. acknowledge generous support for this study from The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, the New York Community Trust, and the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation.

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Perry and Associates, Inc. (P&A) is a national consulting firm that acts on its commitment to social justice and equity by assisting district, school, and teacher leaders improve the academic achievement and performance of all students. P&A has extensive experience in expanding the instructional leadership of district and school leaders, and designing, implementing, and aligning systems of support that contribute to raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. P&A senior associates, assisting districts across the country, are practitioners with current and/or recent experience working in districts and schools.

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The Fund for Public Advocacy was formed by the Office of the New York City Public Advocate and incorporated in 2002. The mission of the Fund for Public Advocacy is to serve and promote the public good by engaging New York City residents in policy making and programs that make government more responsive, accountable, innovative and transparent. The Fund for Public Advocacy, affiliated with the Office of the New York City Public Advocate, is an independent non-profit organization created to aid and advance critical New York City civic issues.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About this Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part One: National Research Overview</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Areas of Focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently Used Practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Two: Findings</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual Themes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cautionary Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Three: Recommendations</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design and Methods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is the third and final report in a series that examines Special Education Reform implementation in New York City Public Schools. This report, Bridging the Gap, asks “What constitutes best practices in New York City’s public schools successful at improving the overall performance of students with disabilities?” and “What can the New York City Department of Education and schools learn from the experiences of best practice schools about Special Education Reform implementation?” Successfully implementing and integrating a system-wide education reform is challenging. Public schools are in different places on their journey to serve students’ needs and raise achievement within an ever-changing reform landscape. In this case, some schools are succeeding at providing a high-quality education for all children, particularly students with disabilities. We refer to these schools as best practice schools. Best practice schools already have well developed, comprehensive approaches to meeting students’ needs. Our report findings aim to identify the elements that best practice schools do well under Special Education Reform in New York City wherever they are in their journey.

This report acknowledges the complex and layered nature of successful educational practices. Therefore, we provide a holistic view of what allows schools to serve all students well by including (1) A national research overview on prominent areas of focus in special education; (2) Contextual themes and supports that accompany best practice schools, as well as specific practices that thrive within them; and (3) Recommendations specific to the city level and school level for perpetuating best practices across the city.

The Project

In 2010, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) announced its intention to begin a system-wide effort to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. This project sought to systematically understand successes and challenges as New York City public schools define, interpret, and implement the Reform.

The first report, Educating All Students Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools,¹ released in August 2012, provides a system-wide perspective on the Reform’s purposes and actions taken to carry it out. The second report, Getting it Right: School-Level Implementation of New York City Department of Education Special Education Reform,² released in December 2013, provides a school-level perspective on the Reform, gathering evidence from the efforts of 25 Phase One New York City public schools involved in the Reform for three years. Getting it Right is the first documentation of the voices of school staff and parents as they experience the effects of Reform implementation.

For this study, we selected 15 New York City Schools to visit that we characterized as “best practice” schools. The schools were selected so that they cut across geographic locations, have a variety of cluster and network affiliations and represent various school levels (e.g. elementary, middle, secondary, etc.). In addition to asking Network Leaders to nominate schools in their networks that they perceived to be schools of “best practice,” a range of quantitative criteria (e.g. graduation rate, achievement test scores, etc.) were also used in the selection process. All selected interview schools also had a reasonable proportion of students with disabilities. Bridging the Gap brings together information from the 15 best practice Schools as well as the 25 Phase One Schools to make connections and draw conclusions about Reform implementation at the school-level.


Key Findings

The 15 best practice schools in this study represent a variety of approaches and local contexts for the work of the reform. For each school we asked about how they serve their students with disabilities well, and what the Reform looks like in their school. Our findings focus on the best practices that emerged from the interviews. Five themes contextualize this information, 12 findings specify four areas of best practices, and a summary of cautionary challenges concludes this section.

Themes

Best practice schools successful in serving all their students exhibit common themes. Best practice schools (1) have strong leadership that foster a positive school culture with culturally competent staff; (2) prioritize high quality teaching and instruction and school leaders find ways to deliver it; (3) have highly qualified and appropriate staffing with high expectations and the right policies in place; (4) integrate data into the school improvement process; and (5) are managing the challenging trend toward increasingly decentralized school funding, driven by student enrollment.

Schools with these structures in place have a foundation which allows the practices described in the following findings to thrive. We organized these 12 findings into the following four categories: (1) interventions and IEPs, (2) curriculum and instruction, (3) school culture and strategic partnerships, and (4) school budget and system-level support.

Findings

- **Interventions and IEPs** describe how best practice schools emphasize the importance of utilizing interventions, specifically in an approach referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI). This approach provides assistance to students who are identified as in need of extra help before considering a formal evaluation for special education services. In schools that appear to be doing this well, interviewees describe various aspects of their approach to interventions, including: the system’s tiered structure to ensure students receive the proper level of support, constant and transparent parental engagement, and positive methods of behavior management. Additionally, schools make the most of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students that have disabilities by using this document to share up-to-date information about student progress and goals. The IEP is considered a supplement to the central task of having constant discussion with the student, and about the student with school staff and parents.

- **Curriculum and Instruction** explains the ways best practice schools focus on the relationship between students, teachers, and content, in crafting an instructional task that is part of a rigorous curriculum. Instructors also use a wide variety of strategies, including data-based decision making, differentiation and grouping, demonstrating an ever-expanding “toolkit” of methods to teach effectively.

- **School Culture and Strategic Partnerships** explains that a supportive school culture emerged as one of the most important factors shaping the practices integral to achieving successful inclusion. In schools where inclusion is done well, school staff understand, adopt and internalize the Reform’s core principle of inclusion with a team approach to improving the outcomes for students with disabilities and all students. A strong school wide philosophy of inclusion motivates staff to seek out information and expertise when it is not readily available to fully meet the needs of their students. Best practice schools seek expertise from District 75, Nest programs and community partnerships to enhance the knowledge of school staff pertaining to students’ disabilities and management techniques. They also have created a strong professional
community that acknowledges the importance of students’ racial and ethnic background, and embrace family-school-community engagement (FSCE). School staff are honest and collaborative with parents, and innovative strategies promote school-wide cultural awareness.

- **Budget and System-Level Support** describes the ways administrators in best practice schools navigate a challenging budget process to get what they need for their school. Many of these principals expressed a belief that they have insufficient staff to fully support the programmatic and instructional needs of students with disabilities, but find creative and innovative ways to meet their staffing needs. All schools, and in particular principals, are required to problem solve and negotiate how to best support students with disabilities and their staff. However, the success of these negotiations seems to be based on distinctive factors like the ability of a principal to creatively budget and manage politically sensitive relationships with Network leaders. Managing these relationships well is critical because Network teams provide resources, instructional and organizational support for special education. This becomes an essential component of schools’ ability to secure necessary resources.

**Challenges**

Best practice schools have a strong sense of identity as defined by their internal school mission, external reputation, admission process and student body. Though they have adopted successful organizational strategies and contributed positively to student achievement, increases in the number and/or percentage of students with more severe needs present a new struggle for schools. Consistent with the forthright communication style at best practice schools, interviewees were very honest about the ways in which the Reform causes complications. In considering the ways best practices can be shared system-wide, it is important both at the central and the school level to heed the following pitfalls and ongoing challenges. Challenges fall into three areas; budget constraints, parental engagement, and behavior management.

- **Budget Constraints**: Best practice schools share the concerns heard from Phase One schools in our previous study about their belief that there is inadequate funding to fully implement the Reform. The school’s ability to match programs to the student’s best interest is still a point of great concern to schools.

- **Parent Engagement**: An ethical dilemma about transparency carries over to the ways schools engage parents of students with disabilities. Best practice schools are accustomed to engaging parents in honest discussion. However, under the Reform’s requirement to serve students at their school within the limits of budget-strapped programming, staff are not always confident in the proper support-level of students’ placements. As a result, they are unclear and conflicted about how to communicate with the parents at IEP meetings who must sign off on the proposed program.

- **Behavior Management**: Lastly, best practice schools continue to struggle with students who have behavioral and emotional challenges. In some best practice schools, staff want to include these students but struggle to understand and define their behavioral challenges and effectively differentiate instruction for them. Other best practice schools are concerned about increasing numbers of students with disabilities who don’t fit neatly into their discipline policy and might potentially "blemish" the school’s reputation. This discrepancy in understanding the schools’ responsibility for taking ownership of all students illustrates the conflicting interpretations of DOE’s Reform message at the school level, and a perceived lack of accountability for ensuring successful Reform implementation that prioritizes the student’s needs.
**Key Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this report, we make seven recommendations to the central office of the DOE for ways to improve Reform roll out from the city level, and we also make six recommendations to schools for ways in which they can better serve students with disabilities.

**City Level**

**Recommendation 1:** *We recommend that the DOE continue to expand the process for seeking out best practices among New York City public schools and make information about best practices accessible system wide.* Information sharing should include reports made available centrally as well as hands on learning through professional development workshops and conferences. Further, learnings from best practices can be helpful in crafting policy and resource allocations that meet the needs of schools and guide schools in using their resources wisely.

**Recommendation 2:** *In the face of increased staffing needs due to the Reform, the DOE should increase efforts to partner with city agencies and workforce programs to tie the need for more related service providers to job seekers and training programs.* The DOE should target additional funds to areas of the greatest need, including funds for more teachers, service providers, assistive technology, and data systems. This strategy should also include incentives for bringing highly qualified staff to low performing schools and hard-to-staff schools.

**Recommendation 3:** *The DOE’s support structure for schools must be defined by supportive, open, and transparent relationships between staff at both the school and the Network levels.* Central office needs to increase and improve communication across relevant divisions and recognize when school-level policy is effective and sometimes get out of the way of those already doing great work. We also reiterate Recommendation 8 from our previous report which states that the Networks must uphold their responsibility to assist when administrators struggle to create quality programs for their students.

**Recommendation 4:** *The DOE should continue to expand the publicly available materials and practices clearinghouse that pools resources pertaining to understanding and educating students with various disabilities.* This can include programs, practices, books, and articles. It should be publicly available and easily accessible to schools through a web-based portal. Sharing information internally across programs, between schools, and from community based organizations should be emphasized at the school-level.

**Recommendation 5:** *The DOE should expand support systems that enforce positive behavior strategies which incorporate the students’ social and emotional health alongside their academic growth.* School staff must be given the tools to understand the classification of emotional disturbance and implement effective behavioral practices. DOE should provide schools with detailed information to better understand, classify, and monitor behavioral challenges for all students. Doing so should help ensure that students are not left behind in the movement towards less restrictive environments.

**Recommendation 6:** *The DOE should facilitate and continue to provide supports for school-based professional development that clarifies what successful implementation of rigorous curriculum looks like.* Professional development around the instructional core is necessary to ensure teachers have a deep understanding of the intersection between themselves, students, content, and the central task at hand. This should contribute to

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teachers’ ability to differentiate instruction and make rigorous curriculum accessible to improve student learning. This should also be applicable to a classroom with a group of students that has a wide range of needs.

Recommendation 7: We reiterate Recommendation 16 from our previous report, which states that “funding mechanisms need to support schools in serving students well while reinforcing the Reform as a DOE priority.” Further, we repeat our recommendation that transition funding should be instituted in such a way as to both “incentivize Reform implementation while also ensuring that there are sufficient resources to provide students with needed support.”

School Level

Recommendation 1: School leadership must put time, space and resources in place that foster collaborative exchanges, planning, and a commitment to policy goals amongst all members of the school community. This kind of collaboration and communication should lay the groundwork for all other practices, systems, and structures. The goal should be to build a professional community that encourages teamwork and student-centered planning.

Recommendation 2: School staff must take a detailed and data driven approach to understanding each student’s strengths and weaknesses using the least restrictive appropriate setting. This applies to students who require intervention services (such as RTI) and those that already have an IEP. Regular team meetings, specific timelines, and shared knowledge among staff should all contribute to understanding students’ specific strengths and weaknesses, considering the least restrictive setting appropriate, and constantly monitoring progress to make adjustments accordingly.

Recommendation 3: In building a strong sense of professional community, schools should be explicit in their exploration of race, culture and class in the classroom and throughout the school. Further, cultural awareness and family engagement should be emphasized as schools strive to develop trusting relationships with students and families rather than alienate them. School leaders should think through the possibilities as well as difficulties of explicitly addressing race and educational equity. This knowledge should pertain to the individual needs of each student, and schools should support the work of staff who address these issues successfully.

Recommendation 4: Schools should be held accountable by first ensuring that the IEP matches the students’ needs, then checking for the provision of those services, evaluating that the services offered are of high quality, and lastly, monitoring student progress. Schools should not let compliance responsibilities solely define their work, funding allocations, and programming.

Recommendation 5: Schools should look for ways to creatively repurpose existing resources to meet the needs of all students with disabilities. As we have learned from best practice schools, schools must think creatively about their existing resources. When schools receive new financial resources, they should also be aligned towards specific objectives and used strategically. In this way, schools should be creative and purposeful in regards to their budgetary planning.

Recommendation 6: Parents’ input needs to be prioritized at IEP meetings and parents should be made aware of their right to bring someone who can help them. This recommendation from our previous report extends school-family engagement beyond the legal requirement of a parent’s signature on their child’s IEP to

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account for the spirit of the law. Parents should be provided thorough access to information and supports so they can effectively advocate for their child and be respected partners in this process. We also emphasize that parent advocates speak the parent's home language and be familiar with the IEP process.
Introduction

*Bridging the Gap*, the third and final report in our three-year study of Special Education Reform, examines how best practice schools serve students with disabilities and experience the Reform. System-level initiatives are defined and interpreted at the school-level, and results can be uneven. Some schools prove better than others at bridging the difficult gap between policy and practice. Nevertheless all schools need the right tools to make policy a reality in their classrooms. It is our hope that this report will provide school communities, the New York City Department of Education and elected officials with useful, practical recommendations about ways to improve education for all students, particularly students with disabilities.

To understand how best practice schools serve students with disabilities well, we gathered evidence from the efforts of New York City Public Schools exhibiting successful practices. These schools have stories that are useful in understanding what it takes for current system-level efforts to succeed at all schools in New York City. We also utilize the opinions and expertise of the policy community, advocates, union and association leaders in crafting this report to be a useful tool in the ongoing discussion around Special Education Reform.

Our national research overview and findings suggest that most of our best practice schools are already doing well, developing a foundation in research-based models. Despite the challenge of turning general knowledge about what works into action-oriented processes, best practice schools often find creative ways to know their students well and meet their needs. However, changes attributed to the Reform sometimes make it harder for schools to continue work they were already doing well. These instances reveal cautionary pitfalls for successful implementation. *We conclude that the commitment to Special Education Reform should not waiver. However, to be successful, actions must be taken to learn from the contextual elements of success stories so all schools can effectively bridge the gap between policy and practice.*

Background

The New York City Department of Education’s (DOE) Special Education Reform, a term used to describe the collective actions (outlined below) taken to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities, is an ambitious and complex system-wide initiative. The Reform is designed to address three system-wide goals:

- Build system-wide instructional and organization capacity at the central, Network and school levels.
- Close the substantial achievement gap by providing students with disabilities increased access to and participation in the general education curriculum.
- Promote more flexible instructional programs by using innovative approaches and maximizing the flexibility within the Continuum of Services provided to students, and learn about these designs from schools.

The goals are to ensure that all students with disabilities:

1. have access to a rigorous academic curriculum and are held to high academic standards, enabling them to fully realize their potential and graduate prepared for independent living, college, and careers;

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6 http://intranet.nycboe.net/SpecialPopulations/SpecialEd/default.htm
2. are taught in the "least restrictive environment" that is academically appropriate, and, as often as possible, alongside students without disabilities;

3. receive special education services that are targeted and provide the appropriate level of support throughout the school day; and

4. are able to attend their zoned schools or the school of their choice, while still receiving the supports they need to succeed.

In September 2010, the DOE invited 10 Children First Networks and their member schools, to be the first to implement the Reform. These 260 schools became known as “Phase One Schools.” During the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years, Phase One schools began the process of changing their practices to meet the Reform’s goals. Phase One continued through August 2012, at which time DOE required the Reform to be implemented by all of New York City’s more than 1,700 public schools.

In June 2011, then-Public Advocate Bill de Blasio and then-Chancellor Dennis Walcott agreed to collaborate in a study designed to inform the DOE’s implementation of Special Education Reform, and charged Perry and Associates, Inc. (P&A) to conduct the study. The study is an independent, objective inquiry into DOE’s efforts, with oversight provided by the Fund for Public Advocacy. We recognize and applaud Mr. de Blasio and Mr. Walcott’s commitment to the success of the Reform, and appreciate their support for the study. We also appreciate Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi’s commitment to examine the themes emerging from our study, engage in thoughtful dialogue and use the data to inform their approaches and strategies. In order to study various aspects of the Reform and inform implementation along the way, this project is conducted in three parts.

The first report, *Educating All Students Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools*, released in August 2012, provides a system-wide perspective on the Reform. *Educating All Students Well* records and explains, from the perspective of system leaders, the purposes of the Reform and the actions taken at the system-level. The report provides the context and history of Special Education Reform and the implementation timeline. Further, the report chronicles DOE’s professional development and system-level support in the initial two years of the Reform.

The second report, *Getting it Right: School-Level Implementation of New York City Department of Education Special Education Reform*, released in December 2013, provides a school-level perspective on the Reform. *Getting it Right* gathers evidence from the efforts of Phase One New York City’s public schools involved in the Reform for three years as they define, interpret and implement the Reform. The report provides a comprehensive look at schools’ successes and challenges under the four Reform Goals. *Getting it Right* is the first documentation of the voices of school staff and parents as they experience Reform implementation.

**Methodology**

In this third report, *Bridging the Gap*, we focus our analysis on 15 best practice schools. We do not claim that these 15 schools are fully representative of all New York City public schools. For this work we sought schools that represent an array of successful approaches and experiences educating students with disabilities under New York City Special Education Reform. This report, *Bridging the Gap*, asks “What constitutes best practices in New York City public schools successful at improving the overall performance of students with disabilities?” and “What can the DOE and other schools learn from the experiences of best practice schools about Special Education Reform?

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To answer these questions, starting in April 2013, P&A conducted regular coordination meetings about this phase of the work with the DOE’s Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi and DOE staff to discuss and design a set of criteria for school selection and encourage principal and school participation. The study uses a mixed method design that concurrently includes quantitative and qualitative methods to provide multiple metrics and contextual information to analyze best practices. More information about our research design and methods is provided in the appendix (page 68).

**What can DOE and other schools learn from the experiences of best practice schools about Special Education Reform implementation?**

- **Quantitative Data**
  - Department of Education metrics/data

- **Qualitative Data**
  - 142 interviews at 15 Best Practice Schools

**Data Analysis and Recommendations:**
City Level and School Level

We used a purposive sampling method to identify best practice schools:

- Geographic variability. Schools chosen were distributed across all five boroughs of New York City.
- School level variability. We took care to include elementary, middle and high schools in the sample selection.
- Children First Network variability. Network leaders from each Network were asked to recommend two best practice schools in their Network for the study.
- Quantitative data. We analyzed 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 DOE school- and student-level quantitative data on daily attendance, graduation rates, dropout rates, and movement to least and most restrictive environments.
- Anecdotal and public information about schools that serve students with disabilities well was deliberately taken into account in school selection (such as Inside Schools list of Noteworthy Special Education Schools).
- Qualitative interview data. Using the above mentioned criteria, from May through June and September through October 2013, P&A visited and conducted confidential in-depth interviews in 15 best practice schools, resulting
in a total of 142 interviews with principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, service providers, psychologists, parents and students.

Quantitative Context

We reviewed 2011-12 and 2012-13 school year data from all Phase One schools, DOE comparison schools, 25 Phase One schools selected for our Getting it Right study, and schools identified as best practice schools. (See Quantitative Section beginning on page 51 for descriptions of the school types, data tables and further analysis.) The purposes of reviewing data were to (1) find trends between and among school types and (2) examine whether quantitative data from best practice schools revealed student outcomes that were different than outcomes from other schools. The data were useful in better understanding the context of the Reform.

We found similarities among the schools. In looking at 2011-12 and 2012-13 data, across all schools, the percent of students with IEP’s present at school (daily attendance rate) is roughly the same. There were also notable differences in the data. The percentage of recommendations to the Most Restrictive Environment (MRE) was notably lower in best practice schools (by 10-to-16 percent) compared to all other schools. Likewise, the percent of recommendations to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) was notably highest in best practice schools (by 10-16 percent) compared to all other schools. There was no major change in MRE and LRE across the two years.

Our analysis of trends by school level revealed that best practice elementary schools have a notably higher percentage LRE of all recommendations (12-to-17 percent) and a notably lower percentage MRE of all recommendations (12-to-17 percent) across both school years. Further, we observe that in high schools, the overall percentage of students referred to LRE is higher than other school levels, and drops considerably for all Phase One schools and Phase One comparison schools in the second year. Likewise, the percent MRE of all recommendations for all Phase One schools and Phase One comparison schools almost doubles from the 2011-2012 to 2012-2013 school years.

Across all states, the graduation rate for students with learning disabilities is 68%. In New York City, there have been improvements in the graduation rate for students with learning disabilities. However, these students still earn high school diplomas at a low rate.

In our analysis, graduation rates and dropout rates display similar trends across school types, with best practice schools and 25 Phase One schools maintaining the highest graduation rates and the lowest dropout rates. The graduation rates for best practice schools increased significantly (from 51 to 65 percent) across both cohorts and schools years. In New York City, the four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities for the class of 2010 (2006 Cohort) hovered at approximately 31% for the class of 2010 (2006 Cohort) through the class of 2012 (2008 cohort). The five-year graduation rate for the same cohorts across the same years increases to 36.7% and their six-year graduation rate increases to 38.1%. Despite improvements in graduation rates, dropout rates for students with disabilities in New York City remain unchanged. In the 2009-2012 school years, the dropout rate for students with disabilities hovered at approximately 20%.

Graduation rates are complicated to calculate and interpret. In 2008 the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations requiring all states to calculate graduation rates uniformly. The variation in graduating rates can be explained, in part, by the many different graduation policies, requirements and high school exit exams for students with disabilities. Further complicating the need to improve graduation rates is the introduction of Common Core

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State standards. Common core standards in English, Language Arts and Mathematics are supposed to raise standards and prepare all students for college and the workforce, including students with disabilities. However, critics argue that the increased standards pose heavy challenges for students who received special education services and could result in even fewer graduates. More attention should be directed towards ensuring they are able to meet the challenge of completing high school with a regular diploma.

Outline

Part One presents an abbreviated national review of selected research in six focus areas: Inclusion; teacher training and professional development; early intervention and data-driven modes of assessment; school climate, discipline, and safety; family engagement; graduation and post-graduation transitions. These focus areas frame the field of special education research.

Part Two presents the findings from the interviews. This part is organized into three segments. Segment One includes five best practice contextual themes that set the stage for understanding the report findings. Segment two includes the 12 findings about best practices grouped by topic: interventions and IEP's; curriculum and instruction; school culture and strategic partnerships; and budget and system-level support. Finally, segment three includes cautionary challenges which highlight areas of struggle for best practice schools in three areas: budget constraints, parent engagement and behavior management.

Part Three contains seven city-level and six school-level recommendations for moving forward. The recommendations come from our analysis of the findings and synthesis of the data from the interviews.

Each part begins with a brief introduction. Each finding that follows includes an in-depth explanation of the finding from the data. Quotations are used frequently to give voice to interviewees who generously gave their time to participate in this study.
PART ONE:
NATIONAL RESEARCH OVERVIEW
This is an overview of the critical areas of focus and overlapping trends within the field of special education research. This section does not intend to evaluate or make specific recommendations towards best practices/modes of intervention in special education. Rather, it aims to (1) provide a broad overview of the predominant areas of focus (or critical issues); and (2) highlight the potential disconnects between policy and practice.

In reviewing such a broad body of literature, several important areas of focus began to emerge. These areas are:

- Inclusion
- Teacher Training and Professional Development
- Early Intervention and Data-driven Modes of Assessment
- School Climate, Discipline, and Safety
- Family Engagement
- Graduation and Post-Graduation Transitions

**Inclusion**

When Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975, the focus was on ensuring that children with disabilities have the same opportunity to receive a free and appropriate public education alongside their non-disabled peers. Since its enactment, the law has been amended many times, reflecting a dramatic change in our conceptualization of the issue of access for children with disabilities. While initially Congress was focused on getting children with disabilities into school, today’s policy pushes for access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.

In the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, Congress declared: “Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible, in order to meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children; and be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives…” This movement to provide all students with disabilities authentic membership and full participation in the regular education setting is referred to as inclusion.

Inclusion remains an important pocket of research in the field of special education, and one that is frequently debated. Terms such as inclusion, full inclusion, partial inclusion, mainstreaming, etc. are not defined in the legal

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11 This review draws on national, school-based research studies and literature that address current issues in special education. While some of our sources cite studies prior to 2003, we limited our scope to review to studies that were published in the last 10 years. Three major databases were accessed in order to secure the preliminary sources of this literature review: The American Education Research Journal, General Alfred M. Gray Research Center; as well as a general Google search for additional online resources and publications.

12 [http://nichcy.org/laws/idea](http://nichcy.org/laws/idea)


14 University of New Hampshire, National Center on Inclusive Education
“Rationale for and Research on Inclusive Education”
stature and thus may vary slightly from one organization to the next. Furthermore, given the broad nature of special education, placement recommendations must be made on a case-by-case basis, giving way to the interpretation of vague legal expressions like “maximum extent possible” and “least restricted environment possible” in determining the best placement for each student. Sec 300.114(a)(ii) of IDEA explains the least restricted environment (LRE) requirements, stating: “Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” Although this statute clearly opens the door to interpretation, it remains clear that educating children with disabilities in regular classrooms is highly encouraged and should be treated as the norm, not the exception.

**Teacher Training**

There is a lot of research suggesting that teacher preparation programs provide critical experiences that are necessary for the development of core knowledge and skills for teaching. Research shows that teacher preparation programs provide valuable pedagogical coursework focusing on core concepts such as student assessment, classroom management, and curriculum development. While the literature regarding special education teacher training generally agrees to the value of practical experience, there exists a lack of consensus over the viability of various types of field experiences such as traditional student teaching, on-the-job experiences, and extensive versus limited pre-service training field experiences.

Some of the debate around the importance of teacher preparation programs revolve around the conception of teaching as a craft – primarily learned through practical, on-the-job experiences – versus teaching as a profession – where skills are acquired through substantive preparation prior to practical application. One effort to bridge these two schools of thought is through the conception of teaching as a clinical practice profession, which serves as a useful framework for understanding the nature of many special education teacher preparation programs. This reconceptualization characterizes the profession of teaching as following the completion of more rigorous academic and practical preparation through the integration of pedagogical training in clinical settings into academic courses.

Although consensus is difficult to achieve regarding methods for achieving the broad goals around the purposes and methods of special education teacher preparation, agreement is clear regarding the role of teacher preparation in the development of future educators. According to one research synthesis, teacher preparation programs serve an invaluable role in the provision of critical experiences necessary for the development of effective special educators. The importance of developing reflective practices as a means of encouraging professional growth is undeniable. In recent years, the literature on special education has grown to emphasize the importance of collaborative/team-driven partnerships in helping to mold this reflective practice and make decisions based on the consensus of a learning team. This is made evident by the growing popularity of approaches such as Integrated Co-Teaching that underscore a team-based approach to learning.

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15 See also: [http://www.inclusiveschools.org/inclusion-basics/](http://www.inclusiveschools.org/inclusion-basics/)
16 See: [http://idea.ed.gov](http://idea.ed.gov) Sec 300.114
17 Education Commission of the States [http://ecs.org](http://ecs.org)
20 Ibid. See also: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2002
Early intervention and data-driven modes of assessment

The disproportionate representation of students from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds has been a persistent concern in the field of special education for more than 30 years. Studies reveal that low-income students are much more likely than their counterparts to be deemed eligible for special education services. Without interventions in response to early warning signs, including accessible mental health resources via stronger linkages with community mental health providers to support them and their families, their futures are at risk. The need for better educational and mental health support is particularly urgent for children living in poverty.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 74 percent of fourth-graders who scored below the 25th percentile in reading for 2011 were eligible for free/reduced-price lunch. Low achievement levels, especially in reading, also contribute to minority representation in special education. Findings presented in a 2009 briefing report the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on minorities in education suggest that 70 to 89 percent of all referrals to special education implicate poor reading as a first or second reason for the referral. These findings reiterate the need for (1) effective literacy instruction for students and better teacher preparation to address literacy gaps, (2) reliable, unbiased modes of assessment (and intervention) using hard data to help eliminate the over/underrepresentation of minority and low-income students in special education, and (3) early intervention strategies with emphasis on literacy skills.

The field of special education is incredibly complex and encompasses a vast array of abilities across a spectrum of educational contexts. No one-size-fits-all intervention will work for every student, under every circumstance. Therefore reliable, data-driven modes of assessment are critical for providing feedback on what works in each individual scenario. Response to Intervention (RTI) is one popular method that seeks to provide early systematic assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. RTI implements a multi-tier system of supports to monitor students’ progress at each stage of intervention to determine whether there is a need for more research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education, or both. The effectiveness of methods like RTI depends on a system of progress monitoring that is based off hard evidence.

School Climate, Discipline, and Safety

The National School Climate Center (NSCC) refers to school climate as the quality and character of school life. According to their definition, school climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. While there is widespread agreement that a positive learning and teaching environment is essential if students are to succeed in school, there is not a national consensus about which dimensions of school climate are essential to assess in conducting research. Synthesizing past school climate research as well as the NSCC's research efforts, the National School Climate Council and NSCC suggest that there are four major areas that school climate assessment needs to include: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the external environment.

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25 This definition of school climate and a positive, sustained school climate were consensually developed by the National School Climate Council that NSCC co-leads with the Education Commission of the States. For more information, please visit: [www.schoolclimate.org](http://www.schoolclimate.org)
26 [www.schoolclimate.org](http://www.schoolclimate.org)
Studies show that positive school climate increases student learning and achievement, reduces dropout rates, prevents bullying and other forms of violence, and enhances teacher retention rates. While these findings certainly impact the general education body, they are especially meaningful to the population of children with special needs who, according to one popularly referenced study from Ability Path, are two to three times more likely to be harassed and bullied in school.

School safety is an essential dimension of school climate, and encompasses social and emotional security, physical safety, and rules and norms in the student’s environment. Schools today are tasked with creating welcoming, respectful, and inclusive environments while at the same time adhering to rules and norms that address misbehavior and promote school security. As previously mentioned, children with special needs are often easy targets for children who bully. But how should educators respond when students with special needs, particularly those with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders (ED), violate school rules and norms? In ever-increasing integrated classroom environments, are teachers equipped with the skills to manage disruptive behavior? One Education Week survey found that 74 percent of administrative respondents strongly believe that administrators provide adequate support to teachers regarding the management of student behavior, but only 29 percent of teachers agreed.

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights reports that students covered under IDEA are over twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than their non-disabled peers. And across all districts and abilities, African American students are over 3.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers. These statistics call into question both the school-wide disciplinary procedures for all students as well as the evaluation and treatment of students with special needs, particularly those suffering from mental health and/or behavioral disorders. Identifying these mental health issues can be challenging, especially with very young children who have difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings, and according to the National Institute for Mental Health, many children are not getting the help they need.

These untreated mental health problems may lead to poor school performance, school dropout, strained relationships, involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, substance abuse, and engagement in risky sexual behaviors. It is also well documented that children whose family income is below the federal poverty threshold are at an elevated risk for behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and physical problems as well as psychiatric disorders.

32 Mental Health America: http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/recognizing-mental-health-problems-children; see also the National Institute for Mental Health: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/index.shtml; Kids Counsel
disorders and social impairments. This is an area of concern for schools, and maintaining policies that promote school safety and discipline while at the same time fostering a climate that is conducive to healthy social and emotional learning for all students, especially those classified as being emotionally disturbed or with mental health issues, is a delicate balancing act. Whether it be adequate training for teachers and educators, a reevaluation of administrative policies, or a closer look at the diagnostics and treatment for children classified as being emotionally disturbed or with mental health issues, a large body of literature makes it clear that more support is needed and in a climate of increasing accountability for educators, the critical influence of children’s mental and emotional health on successful student outcomes is beginning to receive more noteworthy attention.

**Family Engagement**

In many ways, school climate and family engagement research go hand in hand, spotlighting the important role that relationships and environmental factors play in fostering successful student outcomes. Both school climate and family engagement strategies aim to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness and relationships and create safe, welcoming environments in their learning communities. Family, School, and Community Engagement (FSCE), like school climate, is a popular, and well-researched area of focus. Many researchers, policy-makers, and administrators recognize the role that effective FSCE initiatives can play in fostering more successful outcomes for students of all abilities and backgrounds.

According to the National Policy Forum for FSCE, “effective family and community engagement emphasizes shared responsibility and opportunities to support children’s learning from cradle to career in the home, school, and community.” While this support is important for children of all backgrounds, it is critically important for children with special needs who often require a much greater degree of parental engagement and advocacy than the general education students. Parents of students with disabilities are in an entitled position that demands a high understanding of the specialized laws, language, and supports governing special education. IDEA legally requires schools to provide parents with the opportunity to participate on many different levels (school selection decisions, IEP team meetings, evaluation meetings, etc.).

Findings in the field of FSCE research stress the value of strong communication skills and collaborative partnerships between educators and parents while working towards providing successful outcomes for students with disabilities. Interaction with the community can play a tremendously important role in cultivating these partnerships by helping families obtain the resources, skills, and knowledge they need in fulfilling these critical roles

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36 http://www.nationalpirc.org/engagement_forum/


as partners, advocates, and analysts in Special Education. There are many community-based groups that work to ensure that parents have the resources and the skills they need to fulfill their roles as child advocates. And when communication seems to break down, community-based organizations can also play central roles in helping to mediate conflict resolutions between educators and families.

Graduation and Post-Graduation Transitions

The importance of setting goals for graduation and beyond is clearly marked, not just in the literature, but also in the laws governing special education. The IDEA required the implementation of transition assessment to develop postsecondary goals. According to Sec 300.43(a), Transition services means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that (1) is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (2) is based on the individual child’s needs taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests.39

These approaches show promising results for students with intensive behavior challenges, yet not all students receive the care they need. According to one 2006 study from the Journal of Adolescent Health, among adolescents with mental health needs, 70 percent do not receive the treatment they need.40 The Southern Poverty Law Center also found that up to 85 percent of children in juvenile detention facilities have disabilities that make them eligible for special education services, yet only 37 percent of these children were receiving any kind of services in their school.41 It is common knowledge that untreated mental health issues may lead to poor school performance, school dropout, strained relationships, involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, substance abuse, and engagement in risky sexual behaviors.42 This is evidenced by the disproportionate number of students with disabilities that drop out of high school, particularly those diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD): the dropout rate for high school youth with EBD exceeds 50 percent, and many youth with EBD display extremely poor post-school social and economic outcomes, including difficulty with employment, high rates of criminality, and substance abuse.43

39 IDEA 2004 Sec 300.43(a)
Three popular practices were cited frequently during our review. The three have clearly made their mark in the literature on special education. These practices are Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS).

**Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT)** classrooms include students with and without disabilities and have two teachers, a general education teacher and a special education teacher, who work together throughout the day to adapt and modify instruction and make sure the entire class has access to the general education curriculum. Research on co-teaching is very difficult to conduct in a way that informs practice, for many reasons. For example, definitions of co-teaching roles vary, random assignment of teaching partners is very difficult, and matched samples are not actually possible because groups of students and teachers are not sufficiently “alike”. As a result, co-teaching is not a phenomenon that lends itself to precise investigation, and validation research is not readily available.

Since 2001, and given the increasing popularity of ICT, the research base has certainly grown, but researchers are still cautiously optimistic moving forward. In one recent study, 32 qualitative investigations of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms were included in a meta-synthesis employing qualitative research integration techniques. It was concluded that co-teachers generally supported co-teaching, although a number of important needs were identified, including planning time, adequate training, and teacher compatibility; many of these needs were linked to administrative support. Ultimately, the researchers call attention to the persistent gaps between what the literature on ICT recommends and what was being observed in the schools. For example, techniques often recommended for special education teachers, such as peer mediation, strategy instruction, mnemonics, and training of study skills, self-advocacy skills, and self-monitoring, were not observed very often. The researchers’ findings also revealed that the dominant co-teaching role was “one teach, one assist” (the special education teacher was often observed to play a subordinate role) in classrooms characterized by traditional instruction, despite the fact that this method is not highly recommended in the literature.

ICT, when implemented successfully, can have tremendous benefits for the classroom. In the above mentioned research study, participants reported benefits for students both with and without disabilities as well as for the co-teachers themselves. These perceived benefits included greater cooperation between students; greater attention being paid to all students; positive peer models for students with disabilities in an inclusive setting; and teachers often reported increased competence in their colleague’s areas of expertise.

**Response to Intervention (RTI)** is another popular practice that holds particular benefits for students both with and without disabilities. Chiefly implemented in elementary and middle schools, RTI seeks to provide intensive, early intervention to children who are having difficulty learning. The expectation is that RTI will reduce the inappropriate placement of students into special education when perhaps all they need is some extra support to get back on track. RTI is also described as having the potential benefit of reducing the disproportionality of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. This is due in large part to its reliance on a system of progress

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44 http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/SpecialEducation/programs/environment/ict.htm
47 ibid.
monitoring that is based on hard evidence, leaving less room for personal bias in the evaluation process. According to the Center on Response to Intervention at American Institutes for Research, this data-based decision making makes up one of the four essential components of an RTI framework. The other three components implement universal screening, progress monitoring, and multi-level or multi-tier systems.49

Like many other emerging interventions and practices in special education, researchers have lingering concerns with regards to RTI. Based on one review of available research, two obvious potential problems that the researchers identify are (1) the teacher may be providing instruction in an area where they have not been sufficiently trained, or (2) the interventions designed by the teacher or the school specialists may be ineffective. Furthermore, with the bulk of RTI studies, the interventions are either conducted by well-trained research personnel, or teachers receive continued support and guidance as they proceed through the process. Therefore, researchers warn that as RTI is increasingly implemented, these same conditions will not necessarily be in place. Like many other interventions, in order to be successful, researchers caution that teachers must be well prepared and need consistent support to implement RTI.50

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another popular decision making framework that helps guide suggested behavioral practices for improving student outcomes. Like many of the other popular practices, PBIS places heavy emphasis on the use of data-driven problem solving and the implementation of science based behavior and academic interventions and supports. According to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Technical Assistance Center on PBIS, school-wide PBIS emphasizes four integrated elements: (1) data for decision making; (2) measurable outcomes supported and evaluated by data; (3) practices with evidence that these outcomes are achievable, and (4) systems that efficiently and effectively support implementation of these practices.51 While most researchers agree that school-wide PBIS is in its infancy, the early results lend themselves to a growing body of support, particularly for children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) or other mental health issues.52 Despite this support, researchers caution that like the above-mentioned interventions, the efficacy of PBIS depends on the level of training and support that its facilitators receive, as well as the validity of the data that are informing the whole system.

51 http://www.pbis.org
Moving forward, it is important to call attention to the potential disconnects that can occur between the promising interventions in research, policy, and practice. Popular practices like ICT, RTI, and PBIS are often directed by experts in the field of research, and thus show promising results. Without the proper support and training, these practices are not always as effective as the research indicates, and realistically, teachers have varying degrees of aptitude and interest in carrying out these interventions and monitoring their progress.\footnote{Gersten, R. & Dimino, J. A. (2006). RTI (Response to Intervention): Rethinking special education for students with reading difficulties (yet again). Reading research quarterly 41(1), 99-108.}

There is no one-size-fits-all solution that will work for every student with special needs; interventions must be tailored to meet the individual needs of each student. But on a broader level, we sought to provide an overview of the critical areas of focus in special education, in order to provide more insight into the frequently used practices and methodologies framing this field. Many overlapping trends and common threads are woven throughout, highlighting the popularity of methods that: (1) are highly individualized - tailoring goals and interventions to best fit the abilities and the needs of each student; (2) are data-driven - evaluating progress and making smart decisions based on hard evidence, with the earliest means of intervention possible; (3) engage high levels of teacher support and training - ensuring that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to be successful; (4) are collaborative - emphasizing team-based efforts and strong communication skills among school members and families; and (5) are connected to the community - focusing on strengthening relationships and supporting students and families of all abilities, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The literature also points towards some critical areas of focus that are perhaps not addressed satisfactorily in practice, but are flagged heavily in research. One such area concerns the need for adequate systems of mental health evaluation and treatment for students. As previously mentioned, students classified as emotionally disturbed or with other mental health issues are far more likely than others to drop out of school and engage in risky or disruptive behavior both inside and outside of school, and teachers often feel like they are lacking support they need to handle behavior issues in their classrooms. Another similar area underscores the need for more programs directed towards social justice advocacy, not only targeting students with special needs, but also recognizing the disproportionate representation of minorities and low-income children in special education, and working to provide equitable and effective evaluations, interventions, and solutions to behavioral challenges.
PART TWO:
FINDINGS
Context matters. Public schools are in different places on their journey to serve students’ needs and raise achievement within an ever-changing reform landscape. Successfully implementing and integrating system-wide education reform can be challenging. Nevertheless, some schools are succeeding at providing a high-quality education for all children, including students with disabilities; we refer to these schools as best practice schools. Best practice schools already have well developed comprehensive approaches to meeting students’ needs and our report findings aim to identify elements of what best practice schools do well under Special Education Reform in New York City wherever they are in their journey. Findings from best practice schools highlight the hierarchical, nested and interconnected nature of good schools and schooling. That is, the flow of resources and activities from the district to the school to the classroom to the individual student matters for optimal teaching and learning.

Best practice schools have a deep commitment to the principles of Reform and inclusion and maintain practice in line with policies which, when well designed and integrated, support all students’ learning. At the broadest level, this includes:

- An academic and cultural school environment characterized by high expectations of achievement, strategic partnerships and caring and productive relationships;
- A professional community characterized by strong leadership, collegial community of teachers and staff with sustained, coherent and collaborative professional development;
- A school structure characterized by physical, emotional and academic safety so students can focus on learning;
- Budget, materials and staffing allocations characterized by increased transparency, efficiency and equity, with improved support and “liaison functions” from the central office;
- Excellence in teaching and learning characterized by a focus on curriculum and instruction with high expectations, constructive interventions and feedback with parent involvement, accountability and assistance when needed.

This introductory segment sets the stage for understanding the report findings.

**In best practice schools the character of school life is enthusiastic and engaging, not demoralizing or disillusioning.**

Best practice schools have strong leadership that foster a positive school-wide culture with culturally competent staff. Staff promote a positive school-wide culture by focusing on academics as well as students’ social/emotional needs and expectations. Teachers are fair and create academically and emotionally safe learning climates with high and clear expectations about academics and behavior so every student can reach their personal best. Adults in the school care about student learning as well as about students as individuals. Teachers are respectful and sensitive to race and class inequities, empowering them to better identify students’ needs and potential. Further, school staff are culturally competent. That is, they address race and class openly, manage dynamics of difference in the school and keep open lines of communication with students, families and the communities they serve. Teachers can’t create a positive school-wide culture alone. School culture is strongly influenced by the philosophies and policies of school leadership.
Best practice schools prioritize high quality teaching and instruction and school leaders find ways to deliver it.

Best practice schools recognize that flexible and relevant instruction leads to better student outcomes. The quality of outcomes for any school is, in part, based on the quality of the instruction that its teachers deliver. Leaders in best practice schools understand which interventions and strategies are effective in achieving this – targeted professional development focused on classroom practice, collaborative staff and teacher trainings, curricular coherence, development of stronger school leaders, and opportunities for teachers to learn from each other – and have found creative ways to deliver these.

Best practice schools set high expectations for what each child should achieve and then monitor performance against these expectations, intervening whenever they are not met.

Getting the right people to become teachers and developing them into effective instructors gives schools the capacity they need to deliver appropriate, targeted and differentiated instruction that leads to improved outcomes. Schools that are successful with students with disabilities go further. They use strategic staffing assignments that make the most of individual’s strengths and weaknesses and put in place processes designed to ensure that every child is able to benefit from this increased capacity.

Best practice schools integrate data into the school improvement process.

Data on student progress, gathered and used regularly is understood by best practice schools as an empowering tool for school staff. Data provides information that guides decisions about instruction, curriculum and programming. Data-driven assessment, analysis, and action are deeply embedded in the school's culture and a top priority for better student achievement and school-wide improvement. Student achievement data by demographic, racial groups and ability groups provides an opportunity to reflect on institutional policies and practices that may unintentionally perpetuate differential achievement patterns of different student groups. In this way, best practice schools bridge policy and practice.

Best practice schools are managing the challenging trend toward increasingly decentralized school funding, driven by student enrollment.

State and local school funding is driven less and less by local resources. Increasingly, school funding is attached to students and given directly to the school in which the child enrolls. The New York City Department of Education has adopted a student-based budgeting framework. Principals in best practice schools understand that funding levels vary according to the child’s needs and can be spent flexibly. These principals are savvy at weighing inputs, programs, activities and staffing with results. They often customize educational services and by design are more transparent about their funding practices.

The way in which best practice schools have done these things varies somewhat, but these schools demonstrate that successful Reform implementation and improved student outcomes is both challenging and achievable. Context, culture, school leadership, the quality of teachers and instruction determine point of departure and the course each school takes towards successful Reform.
Interventions and IEPs

Finding 1: At best practice schools, students in need of extra help are identified and provided intervention services - within a systemic process that prioritizes meaningful, collaborative strategies among school staff - before referring students to be evaluated for special education services.

Schools that speak confidently about their ability to meet student needs and specify their methods for doing so emphasize the importance of utilizing interventions, specifically in a format referred to as Response to Intervention (RtI). In New York City, all schools are mandated to have an RtI structure in place that meets the minimal qualifications of the Regents policy framework, specifically in regards to literacy in grades K-4. New York State regulations define RtI as a school district's process to determine if a student responds to scientific, research-based instruction. It is a school-wide system of organizing instruction and support resources to deliver high quality instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners. Reading in the early grades is a primary focus of the RtI process, however, data-based decision making and the principles of RtI can apply to other content areas and behavioral issues that impact learning. The use of interventions can also refer to the provision of Academic Intervention Services (AIS). According to New York State regulations, all students, including those with IEPs, are entitled to AIS if they score below grade level on any State assessment. Thus, in addition to a robust RtI process and implementation of strong IEP objectives that are well-matched to student needs, AIS must be provided. AIS overlaps with RtI in that it provides targeted research-based interventions that rely on diagnostic assessment and ongoing progress monitoring.

In schools that appear to be doing this well, interviewees describe various aspects of their approach to interventions and applications of the RtI framework, including the system’s tiered structure, behavior management, and parental engagement, which is elaborated on in Finding 9.

This statement from an elementary school RtI coach illustrates the approach taken by some best practice schools that utilize interventions. “There are some students who have struggled who do have a learning disability and haven’t gotten the services...my goal is to make sure that student gets whatever they need. For some, it is a referral, they need an IEP. For others, it’s just you need a little bit more focused instruction... (special education) got to be a dumping ground with Latino and mostly black boys. It got to be (defined as) a behavior problem. With the Reform, somebody started to say…special education is not about student that have behavior problems...RtI was a great step in between…it makes sure that students that are referred to special ed are referred there because they have a learning disability, and not because they haven’t been taught." This notes that proper student placement does not just mean focusing on the level of restrictiveness, but rather ensuring that services are appropriately targeted for the benefit of the student. Interviewees describe RtI as a helpful tool for providing targeted services, but are also able to move forward with a referral when necessary.

55 New York State Response to Intervention Technical Assistance Center. www.nysrti.org
The tiered interventions process that takes place between noticing a student may need additional help and referring the student to be evaluated is described by the New York State Response to Intervention Technical Assistance Center (NYS RtI TAC) as follows.\textsuperscript{57} Best Practice schools used some or all of these practices in following this structure.

Tier 1: Core Instruction – Core instruction or primary intervention intended for all students in the general education classroom.

Tier 2: Core Instruction + Supplemental Intervention – Secondary intervention intended for 10 – 15% of students who are not making adequate progress with core instruction at Tier 1.

Tier 3: Core Instruction + Customized Intervention – Tertiary intervention intended for about 1 – 5% of students who are not responding to instruction at Tiers 1 and 2.

Teachers work collaboratively with service providers to adjust teaching methods when a student is struggling. As an elementary school special education coordinator describes, “The teacher will bring work samples and whatever data she has on the student and we discuss what can be done as a Tier One intervention. Perhaps the OT might say, I can give you a grip that might help on her pencil...or we might also say, why don’t you use the Headsprouts program to help her with this, if it’s strictly decoding. We might have one of the paras go in who’s trained in Great Leaps reading program...those things are tried.” “I do go into the classrooms and I do help the teachers with proven referral strategies that they can attempt in the classroom...We refer to the pre-intervention manual as our guide to help the teachers,” says an elementary school social worker.

Teachers are also held accountable for this step: “In order to be referred to services, first there has to be an attempt at remediation, a documented attempt at remediation, over a six week period of time by the teacher,” says an elementary school guidance counselor. “We can prove and show X amount of weeks we’ve worked with this child, and the process that we went through before we make that referral,” says an elementary school RtI coach. Regular staff meetings support the teacher’s efforts, and ensure that student progress is regularly discussed. “We (PPT) meet every week, and we really try to thoughtfully plan and project,” explains an elementary school principal. This is also made possible through multiple methods of knowing the student well including data tracking, classroom observation, talking to the student directly and regular team meetings.

Finally, school staff carefully consider if the referral for an evaluation is in the student’s best interest. “The factors that we’re looking at, what is the referral question? Is it an appropriate referral? If a parent is in agreement and they want services, when I interview them, I have to get what is their concern, I have to break it down...why are we evaluating the child?” says an elementary school social worker. “If it’s the teacher that’s seeing it we may not go as quickly because we just want to see is there really something that’s happening or should the teacher be doing something differently with their teaching?” says an elementary school assistant principal.

Behavior Management and RtI

Behavioral issues are often challenging, however, they can also be addressed positively through intervention methods. “There’s what we call natural consequences to the behavior...it’s not a punishment, because the child has a choice. So if you don’t do this, this is a natural consequence of what happens,” says an elementary school IEP

\textsuperscript{57} New York State Response to Intervention Technical Assistance Center. www.nysrti.org
Another IEP coordinator at the same school says, “we would give feedback to teachers of some tasks they should do with the child before we decide…come back six weeks later and see how it worked. Especially with our children with behavior issues, putting them on a behavior plan, and making sure that plan is carried out.”

A high school IEP coordinator says, “Sometimes I give behavior scales to teachers, if it’s a behavior issue. If it seems like an attention issue, I give scales for that for the parents.” A paraprofessional at a high school notes the impact of focusing on the strengths, rather than the weaknesses of a student while going through this process: “You’ll hear somebody say, ‘oh, well he’s the one that’s always trying to get out of class or never does his homework’…all of these negative things and in the past I know this student has only heard negative things, and he’s so bright. You need to compliment them, and he’d be beaming, because nobody says that to him.” “The function and the role of the school is letting the child feel it’s OK…we can work with it,” says another paraprofessional at an elementary school.

**Finding 2:** Best practice schools use the IEP as an active tool for documenting student progress and goals in real time, and treat it as supplemental to knowing the current status of students’ progress and needs.

Schools that make the most of the IEP use this document to share up-to-date information about student progress and goals, and plan the students’ programming and curriculum accordingly. In this way, the IEP is considered a supplement to the central task of having constant discussion with the student, and about the student with school staff. This approach utilizes the IEP regularly and helps ensure its accuracy, but also considers the document secondary to the importance of knowing the child directly. As a high school assistant principal puts it, “making sure that their IEP goals are aligned to what’s actually happening and being taught in the classrooms where they can be tested and measured by the classroom teacher is really important.”

Schools that take this approach to the IEP are confident in their success with programming for students with disabilities. “I think our school programs are put together in a way that meet the students’ needs…I don’t think we create programs specifically just looking at IEPs…an IEP is a year old at any given time. And a child’s learning moves so much more quickly, and in a much more sophisticated way, than that paper trail can follow…So I think what’s more important to me is that teachers are talking about students, that they’re communicating with their special ed teachers, that we’re constantly looking at student performance, and making sure we’re providing the supports for them to meet the goals,” explains a secondary school assistant principal.

This translates into a constant reevaluation and placement process called flexible scheduling, targeting services throughout the day. “A student is operating so well in the SETSS class, and now we can move back in the general education population with assistance. We can’t throw them back into the deep end, it doesn’t work, so with any of the assistance that we have there that’s helping to make that child successful, emotionally, physically, spiritually, the gamut,” says a middle school IEP coordinator.

Importantly, this strategy is also accompanied by a meaningful look at the importance of transitions. Service provisions that are offered according to a sophisticated review of the IEP acknowledge the importance of appropriate transitional supports for LRE. A high school assistant principal explains, “You look at an IEP, and if their review was much, much earlier in the year, at this point maybe they can make a change…but we still try to make sure that we manage to get the kids transitioned from one service to the next.”
Finding 3: Best practice schools demonstrate a deep understanding of, and focus on, the elements of the instructional core and rigorous curriculum.

Interviewees are thoughtful about explaining the process of teaching and learning through the lens of what researchers identify as instructional core\(^{58}\) - which is the relationships between and among teachers, students, content and the instructional task.

Starting with the content, principals and teachers alike define rigorous academic curriculum as material that incorporates Common Core Standards and prepares students for Regents examinations. Interviews are rich in descriptions of the experiences of administrators, general education and special education teachers teaching students with disabilities. At the high school level, access to the Regents curriculum and success on the Regents exam is the measure of effective instruction. As a special education teacher explains “… we definitely do differentiate, but … the Regents is what it is and it is just very hard to veer away from that.” At other school levels, often interviewees equate rigorous instruction with efforts to implement the new Common Core standards. While the new standards and curriculum require teachers to change their content and practices, teachers recognize the benefits for students and themselves. One general education teacher says “[it] is more enjoyable as a teacher. I’ve had a challenging year but … I’m not so bored because it is a better curriculum.”

General education teachers with specific content knowledge, who are familiar with the Common Core Standards, are considered to be the best qualified to teach to high standards. An assistant principal explains “… [after reviewing the data] what we noticed is that a lot of the students in the self-contained classes tended not to make it through the four-years, or they really had a hard time just passing the Regents or the RCT. So then the question was why do you think that’s happening? The obvious answer is … the students have to sit for these specialized exams and they need a specialist to teach them. The specialist is the general education teacher. It is not going to

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be the special education teacher.” Both Phase One schools and Best Practice schools provide students with disabilities increased access to rigorous curriculum in well-designed ICT classes.

In addition to knowing the content, interviewees recognize the importance of teachers using data and making choices about the programs and activities that address the learning needs of students. In one school, teachers tried a program that was introduced through professional development. The principal explains that there was sufficient interest in the program that “we chose three classroom teachers who agreed [to pilot the program]. They modeled and co-taught the lessons to help teachers understand how to utilize the program. We presented the data at the end of the year … We explained where the students were at mid-year and where they were at the end. There was overwhelming evidence that it was successful in support of the students. And so therefore, this year we required that all kindergarten teachers introduce [the program].”

Finding 4: Best practice school teachers try, adopt and use an ever-expanding “toolkit” of instructional practices to meet the individual needs of students including data-based decision making, differentiation and grouping.

Interviewees from all schools discuss the use of various instructional practices and strategies to reach students. Generally the practices and strategies, while not fundamentally different, are nuanced based on the school level, experiences with students with disabilities, teaching staff and student population. Nevertheless, there are two practices that almost all schools report using: data-based decision making and differentiation and grouping. In addition, best practices schools report building a toolkit of practices to prepare teachers to meet the needs of students.

Data-based Decision Making

Many interviewees describe the importance of using data and working in small groups to know students well in order to build relationships with students, and to select instructional strategies that lead to learning. Formative assessment data, which are most frequently mentioned by interviewees, are used to determine the strengths and needs of students and differentiate instruction. A UFT chapter leader explains “We definitely assess on a regular basis. And, we will look at our assessments to see where the students are, and based on our assessments we will do a variety of things. So maybe we will take two different groups for a lesson and do completely different lessons. Maybe we will take the same lesson and everybody will be in that lesson together but then once it is time to do independent work, we will meet with different groups. Sometimes it means pulling students aside individually to work with them if they don’t fit in with another group.” A general education teacher shares a different approach to data use. “I gather data … In the case of math, it’s mostly stuff that we are creating ourselves, or have borrowed from other schools in our math Network. But we use a lot of data to inform instruction – observational data, quick assessments, interviews, we video students a lot and watch small group lessons to see what worked and didn’t work and use that to inform the next [time]. It is a pretty recursive cycle.”

Several schools describe the importance of monitoring student performance closely, and acting to support and/or advance students based on their performance. One school uses a case management approach to working with students. An assistant principal explains, “Something that we did two years ago was, instead of just having everyone put input in the SPED department when conducting an annual with the student, we now created an alpha list for the SPED department .. So each teacher is supposed to be the expert on those students, and it breaks down to … nine of twelve students per teacher, which is a very manageable number. The teacher stays with that student through four years so they get to know what their IEP says …” In addition to knowing their students’ IEP, teachers are expected to know whether their students are accessing the services provided for them. Teachers meet regularly
to compare notes about the learning style of their students and suggest teaching practices or adjustments in approaches. They offer suggestions and monitor students so that they do not “fall through the cracks.”

**Differentiation and Grouping**

Differentiating is often mentioned in tandem with grouping students. Some interviewees mention the importance of heterogeneous grouping so that students can learn from student role models. A special education coordinator explains, “If I want all of my students to strive for something else, there has to be something to strive for. You can’t forget there are students that are functioning on-level and there are students that are functioning way above level … If I want heterogeneous grouping to exist, I need to have higher level students in there and they need to be challenged too.” Knowing students is essential to using grouping successfully. “… there is a huge diversity of students in the class … [we group our students] strategically because we have a lot of honor students as well as students who really struggle. After spending the first couple of weeks of school really getting to know the students … we have made sure that we have a strong student at each table so that even though there is only two of us and there are nine or 10 different groups, I feel confident there is someone at each group can lead…”

Grouping in classrooms happens heterogeneously and homogeneously based on the task and content. A general education teacher describes his class “… could be peer modeling through book clubs and math partnerships. It could be small groups. Sometimes a co-teacher will pull a smaller group and it could be mixed. It could be based on the work they are showing, or going over whatever they are missing.” Other teachers switch between homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping based on their purpose. A UFT chapter leader provides an example. “I taught a whole group the book. But what I am going to do next year is… little mini-book clubs. One can do [one piece], another group can do [another piece] another group can do [a third piece]. So you are actually having varied reading levels in the room, but they are all doing their little excerpts of their books and then learning how to write a memoir at the same time… I can mix and match the groups based on reading levels.”

Students are assessed and placed accordingly throughout the school year. A general education teacher explains “…once the second, third trimester comes around, they will get tested … we will see how they perform in the class, and they will be switched around … [students are not placed in a class for a whole year. They are placed] based on their performance and how well they perform in class. And we like to challenge them. There will be some of them that do need help. But then we put them in regular classes where… some of them have flourished.”

Another practice is to provide support to students in groups and individually for short periods of time outside of the classrooms based on their needs. Sometimes the grouping has an academic purpose when students cannot engage successfully in an activity with larger groups of students. A paraprofessional offers an example, “when we were having book clubs, it was very hard for him to sit and read the book. So my role in that instance was to take him out of class … I was reading the book and he was following along, and that is the only way he could get through that 225 page book. He was listening, he was absorbing, but to actually sit there and read those 20 pages at a time would have been an impossible task for him.” At other times the group has a purpose to support students so they can be successful in their classrooms. A special education teacher describes how he supports students. “… I work with them within the classroom. I work with them in smaller groups outside of the classroom, We talk about behavior plans, we talk about how they feel in the classroom. We talk about their self-esteem.”

**Other Strategies in the School Toolkit**

Interviewees describe a variety of instructional strategies and practices to improve student achievement. For some, the strategies and practices are among the “tools” they have acquired over time and use regularly. The strategies and practices are part of the school’s experience and are a valued part of the culture. For others, the newly
adopted strategies and practices are a result of learning or inquiry into addressing the needs of students. The following are some that are most common across schools.

- Literacy strategies – depending on school and school level, interviewees mentioned critical reading, several reading programs, and vocabulary development including phonics and developing academic language;
- Use of visuals and graphic organizers to assist students access text and outline their writing, and on-line videos to deepen understanding of concepts and information in real-time;
- Push-in support services, including occupational therapy, rather than pulling students from their learning time;
- Scaffolding instruction to build incrementally upon student knowledge and understanding, including pre-reading, and emphasis on foundational skills;
- Support classes for students with disabilities to ease transition into more rigorous content courses, including from ICT to general education and advanced placement courses;
- Skill development, including organizational skills, that lead to greater independence;
- Double period algebra classes;
- Summer bridge programs to prepare students for entering high school; and
- Advisory periods during which students’ progress is monitored.

**Finding 5:** Best practice schools highly value collaborative teaching arrangements. They prioritize preparation, adequate time and support to ensure that teachers can provide high quality instruction in ICT settings, which includes differentiated instruction for all students.

Despite the enormous popularity of co-teaching in best practice schools, the topic of effective co-teaching and inclusive education when mainstreaming students with disabilities is not straightforward. In particular, navigating through the design and implementation of successful ICT arrangements is a constraint that impeded many Phase One schools from serving students successfully using this model. Co-teaching involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher, both teaching a set of heterogeneous group of students – both general education and special needs students – in a shared classroom. Our data reveal that best practice schools take care to strategize, plan and invest in co-teaching arrangements to ensure effective co-teaching.

A general education teacher comments on her co-teaching experience, “I think there’s a very collaborative working environment here. So my co-teacher and I have worked together planning a lot. And I also have a lot of interaction with our counselors and deans and support staff.” A special education teacher provides an example of her collaboration with general education teachers, “I am neighbors with my sixth grade co-workers so that’s where I grab strategies from ELA teachers… My seventh grade teacher, I literally shadow her curriculum so I am using her charts and reading strategies, graphic organizers alongside her… then in 8th grade I do my own research but I am using reading and writing strategies that he is using.”

Best practice schools prioritize cooperation, collaboration, flexibility and effective use of support staff. Administrators empower both general education and special education teachers by providing sufficient time, space and resources to build trust, increasing the likelihood that teachers will meet the varied needs of the students.
A high school general education teacher shares, “the way I do co-teaching, there isn’t one of us that plans and one of us that worries about the special ed differentiation. You collaborate on trying to make sure that there are always multiple avenues for accessing the information for the special ed students and for our general ed students for making sure that there’s a way for visual learners to access the information, that there’s people who learn well through reading, that there’s something for them.”

A prominent theme running throughout the interview data is that of differentiating instruction to meet individual student needs. For example, a high school teacher elaborates on this practice, “We differentiate instruction – not just because of the special ed students, but because we have students from varying backgrounds and, from reading levels from third to eleventh grade, all sitting in one class. So regardless of whether I have an ESL student, a special ed student or even a general student, everything is differentiated for each student." A general education teacher offers the following example of taking the lead in organizing the content to address the multiple levels of students in her class. “I do it based on what I know about them as mathematicians. So we do a lot of assessment … that’s the information that drives small group planning. … I usually work with the top and the bottom so that if we have six groups … the teachers will work with the middle so that they can design one-mini lesson and tailor it up and down.” Similarly, an elementary school principal notes, “You will go into all of our ICT’s, and there is no understanding of who’s on what side of the classroom because we use lots of different models of teaching in there – parallel teaching, station teaching, co-teaching – the students are divided up according to needs, and therefore, there is mixed grouping to the extent possible.”

Best practice schools focus on getting inclusion right. As part of an inclusive mindset, teachers’ content knowledge and instructional skills are prioritized in a professional community that encourages sharing of experiences, insights and expertise around how to best differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students. An elementary school principal describes the importance of the collaborative nature of inclusion preparation, “…instruction is modified to the needs of those students. The teachers collaborate with planning, share materials, and plan lessons to the needs of the students. But our teachers will work with both general education and special education students.”

Emphasis on differentiating instruction permeates some schools, and extends beyond the expectations for teachers in ICT classes or those working with students with disabilities. A UFT chapter leader explains, “We have a tremendous emphasis on differentiated instruction here in the school … even in our regular classes, we try to differentiate between the different levels of the students … in a special education setting or an ICT setting, it would just be magnified, the amount of different levels that you would have.” Teachers rely on having materials to accommodate reading levels that span several years. A general education teacher provides an example, “so, differentiated instruction requires lots of visuals, readings that might be different and also exposing all students to the different materials we have in class with the same concept. Getting the ideas across to them by different means is very important.”

Teachers describe the benefits of planning for multiple levels of learners for their students and for themselves. “You have to be able to modify your lessons to meet the needs of all students in your class … if you don’t you are
going to have half of the class that is not going to get anything. I basically became the best teacher I could be... without a doubt”

**School Culture and Strategic Partnerships**

- **Finding 6:** There exists a school-wide belief that the entire school is responsible for all students. That is, best practice schools embrace a culture that embodies the idea “these are all our kids.”

A supportive school culture emerged as one of the important factors shaping the practices integral to achieving successful inclusion. In schools where inclusion is done well, school staff understand, adopt and internalize the Reform’s core principle of inclusion with a team approach to improving the outcomes for students with disabilities and all students. This middle school teacher explains the school’s approach, “I feel like there’s been a nice, sort of, blurring of kids with IEP’s...generally looking at students individually and assessing their needs...but a more holistic approach to looking at a classroom with the students and figuring out how to use the adults and the resources that we have to best meet everybody’s needs.” A high school assistant principal describes the school culture: “…we have this culture, like these kids are our kids...whoever needs the guidance, or the extra support will get it regardless of their identification.”

School staff collaborate with a shared sense of purpose and are welcomed as partners where they share a philosophy about inclusion for all. Special and general education teachers are integrated in the classroom with minimal hierarchy and equal levels of respect.

“One of the things that we have always, always done here is that, for the most part, no one in that class knows who is special ed. The ICT teacher works with absolutely everyone because let me tell you something – we have just as many gen ed kids who need the resources that the special ed kid next to them needs. And that’s a fact. So that special ed teacher is the one who will be able to identify that, and be able to give them those resources,” explains a high school principal.

Inclusive practices at best practice schools share a strong sense of community with the purpose of supporting every child according to their need whether the student has an IEP or not. A principal explains, “…the mission of our school is really to integrate a culturally diverse group of students academically, emotionally, socially and physically... that includes all children ... we believe in never being satisfied in pursuit of excellence, that everybody has to participate in order for us to succeed... the belief is that for all of our general [education students], all of our special education students should be accessing the same curriculum.” The key to success for many best practice schools is to find the right balance between high expectations and support, and pushing students to their capacity.

- **Finding 7:** Best practice schools seek expertise from District 75, Nest programs and community partnerships to enhance the knowledge of school staff pertaining to students’ disabilities and management techniques.

A strong school wide inclusion philosophy motivates staff to seek out information and expertise when it is not available in house to fully meet the needs of their students. An elementary school principal says, “You can’t do this work alone. But you really have to believe that these children are entitled to the very best education that we can give them, and it’s not all right to foster them off to someone else because it’s too hard, or you don’t have the resources, or any of the above.” Another elementary school principal expands on this idea: “It makes it complex, but
it makes it exciting, because you just don't know what's keeping a child from being successful...it's an intellectual enterprise...and then you put that teacher in there, and I want them to be a dog with a bone; I don't want them to stop until that student is making progress with reading." Such schools learn about cultural, pedagogical and behavioral structures to support the educational potential of their students with disabilities and organizations that surround them.

Interviewees discuss the benefits of working with a District 75 school or Nest program housed in the same building: “There have been days where...I've been the (only) one to help a kid who's in crisis...and a light bulb went off in my head...I'm living in a school of people that this is what they’re experts in, behavior,” recalls an elementary school principal, “so I walked down the hallway, and I always had a good relationship with the (District 75) principal, and I said, I need your help. I don’t know what to do, and she gave me this really good advice...it was just that thought that I wasn’t alone trying to figure this all out that was really very helpful.”

Another elementary school principal says, “Nest program has made me a better principal, in addition to providing a quality education for children on the autism spectrum, the ASD Nest structure has improved the education of all students in my school. The best analogy I can give is this, the Nest program has acted like a big rock that is tossed into a pond. The excellent structures and strategies outlined in this program have spread to include the entire school community. From the team meeting structure, to the language and strategies of Nest, we are a better school because of the ASD Nest program.” This approach also translates into a holistic vision for the school and its students. The same principal also says, “We’re teaching children who will be future adults to be more tolerant and understanding...we work very hard here in this school to make sure that everyone understands that everybody’s different, and it’s all OK.”

An elementary school guidance counselor describes how resources in the community are utilized: “Children with special needs very often have a combination of needs...there very often are emotional needs. For the last 25 years I’ve worked very closely with a child psychiatrist, local and excellent and we still work with him...he’s a quasi part of our school...There are kids who find school more difficult and more stressful because of their disability.”

These administrators and staff look beyond the latest initiative to make the most of all the resources that they can find and use this information to inform their teaching and relationships with their students and families. The attention to detail and level of specificity with regards to better understanding students’ struggles through the creative use of external resources is laudable. Whether it involves attending lectures, reading books about executive function, or studying whether a lack of reading comprehension or working memory is interfering with a child’s ability read, their approach makes these schools better able to serve their students.

Finding 8: The schools that are the most successful at Reform implementation have created a strong professional community and school culture that acknowledges the importance of students’ racial and ethnic background.

Interview data suggest that the organizational culture of schools has implications for student outcomes. Data provides important support for the claims that the organizational culture of schools is an essential element of successful Reform efforts. This high school principal comments, “…the social worker…she knows kids’ phone numbers. It’s a game we play sometimes, and we’ll name a name, and she’ll tell you what the kid’s phone number is, because she’s constantly calling the house for this, that...But it’s always been part of the culture of this school…and I try to push it...this is a friendly place, this is a warm place, this is an inviting place. Some kids need more nurturing, and they need a little more TLC and that’s something that I think that the teachers have all bought in to, the staff has all bought into…"
Strong school organization cultures have robust professional communities where teachers have a shared sense of purpose spearheaded by a visionary principal. A solid body of educational research suggests that the healthiest and most effective professional communities have a sense of trust, belonging, strong collaboration, continually develop professionally and take collective responsibility for students’ learning. In many ways, the characteristics listed are important elements in schools that are successful at implementing Reform and serving students with special needs.

For example, school administrators, staff and teachers at best practice schools are conscious and explicit about issues of race and culture, not shying away from the reality that achievement differences by race exist. These schools do not discourage, but facilitate conversations about weighty topics, including race and class. “...I mean we have the luxury of just focusing on poverty….if you think about a school in Ohio that has like eight percent special ed, you know, 30 percent students of color, and a fairly traditional breakdown of SES…they’ve got to focus on enough. We actually have an advantage….we have an advantage in that all our students are needy...I also think we have a very high vision of our school. It’s unique, with the CTE,” says a high school principal.

An important aspect of the school culture is that it promotes a clear, positive vision for the future and a shared focus on achievement with high expectations for all students. School staff address issues of inequity and race head on, which is critical for children in poor schools and communities. Interview data highlights the importance of a strong professional community in laying the groundwork for a safe, trusting and respectful space in which to have these conversations. Talking about race and educational inequality in a school can be difficult. Often, school staff and leadership express doubt and fear over raising matters of race and privilege and inequality and it is often the case that there needs to be a strong sense of trust and support for this to occur. A strong professional community with strong teacher-administrator and teacher-student relationships facilitates this critical dialogue.

One school moved beyond surface level strategies of integrating diversity in the school. When asked about race, this elementary service provider noted, “…Oh, that’s always a big conversation, because I know the school is trying to increase diversity in the school. And I know that they do outreach into certain communities to attract families of color. Also socio-economic – you know that’s another area where they’re trying to have a more diverse group of people coming in. Because unfortunately the school is predominantly white – Caucasian…but I know the school is making a concerted effort to attract families because they want the school to reflect more of the community.”

A special education teacher talks about staff diversity, “Teacher positions became vacant, which gave us the opportunity to take a look at hiring practices. And so we have a new committee…which is the undoing racism committee, and it’s a committee of staff, or people who work here, who have gone to Undoing racism training."

Racial and cultural barriers between students and teachers, for example, can present challenges as students adapt to school expectations, which can lead to inappropriate placements and impede positive student outcomes. This paraprofessional reflects on a cultural mismatch between students and teachers in the school: “Personally, I feel that some of our teachers can’t really relate to our students…I think we need more teachers that can relate to our students working in the school. Because I’ve noticed me and Tara, and actually all the paras are people – we’re ethnic, we’re people of color…and obviously, it is – that’s what our students are. So I feel that we can understand our students better, and they can understand us better. So it makes it easier for them to communicate with us, and build relationships. Like we’re talking about teachers that are coming from the suburbs, or Caucasian, compared to where we are all from the same neighborhood in a sense. So I think that’s a challenge, and I think that’s a difference, a huge one.”

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59 Darling Hammond, 2010, Patchen, 2004
Finding 9: Best practice schools embrace family-school-community engagement (FSCE). School staff are honest and collaborative with parents, and innovative strategies promote school-wide cultural awareness.

Best practice schools firmly believe that understanding and appreciating the families, neighborhood, and cultures that surround their students is an integral part of knowing and teaching them well. This means strategically breaking down barriers that typically contribute to disengaged families, stereotypes, and stigmas when schools rely solely on parents to come to them. “We do a lot of outreach to the parents…we are part of a whole team,” says an elementary school social worker. “I always say that we have the trifecta. We have a great administration, great teachers, and great parents; all of those things are working together…you really have a learning community where people want to try new things, learn new things,” remarks an elementary school reading specialist.

Parents are considered partners in their child’s education. When a student is identified for intervention services, the parents’ role throughout the process is considered key to its success, and communication about student progress is constant. An elementary school RTI coach says, “We have interim conversations with parents to let them know where their child is in this stage of RTI. So it’s nice for a parent to see, wow, your child’s in Tier two, and they’re going to be here for X amount of weeks, and here’s what we’re going to work on, and we assessed some of these areas, and they’re moving or they’re not moving…I think it gives parents a clearer sense as to the path that we’re going to take their child on.”

At IEP meetings, parents feel that staff are not only thorough in reviewing their child’s progress and goals but also value their questions and concerns, intentionally inquiring about the parent’s unique perspective of the child’s home life to see if anything can be done differently. “They go over everything. They tell you the progress of your child, how they’re doing…they go over the goals that they’ve had in the past…what to expect, what their next goals are…if you have any questions, are they having difficulties at home, is there anything that you may think they need to work on,” says a middle school parent.

School staff are clear with parents in defining their positions and raising awareness about services available both within and outside of the school. “I’m very honest with parents in terms of my role as a guidance counselor. I’m not a psychologist, I’m not a therapist, I’m not a psychiatrist. So if there’s bigger things going on that I feel need addressing, I will recommend outside counseling,” says a high school guidance counselor. “Educating the community is very important, and educating the parents early on in the year, saying ‘Yes, we have these services for your child. It might be something you want to explore if they’ve been identified.’ So that’s another part of the Reform. Letting the parents become educated on what it’s about is very important,” explains a high school general education teacher. “I feel like it’s my job to let them know, you have this resource out there. And you have this resource in the school…because sometimes they’re not even aware of what’s out there…I think my job is to empower them…let them know, you have options,” says another high school guidance counselor.
Best practice schools often breach the limits of the classroom and school building to creatively involve staff in meaningful and effective family engagement. In one example, home visits are used as a strategy to make parents of diverse backgrounds feel more comfortable with school involvement. A social worker explains “We need to dig a little bit deeper. And the parent didn’t like coming to school...so we just went one day to visit them, and we sat in their kitchen and talked about some of these issues...when you have someone in your home, it talks about their willingness to work with you, and be there with you in that space, and in the end it was something positive.” Another social worker from the same school discusses the practice: “For a parent to come to the school, for some parents, it’s a threat, they don’t know much about the school system, and it’s scary, especially if they are immigrants who don’t speak English...and going to their house, it’s like we are now vulnerable to them, we are showing them, this is OK,” says an elementary school social worker.

In regards to raising cultural awareness among staff an elementary school principal describes their partnership with a community based organization (CBO) working with teachers to improve home-school relationships and intentionally explore the teachers’ responsibility in that partnership. “What the group discovered along the way was that they had some ideas about the children in front of them, or not even – had no idea...for instance, many of our Mexican families are living tripled up in homes, and they didn’t really stop to think about the impact that has on student learning...many of our Arabic families who are Muslim, religion plays a really big role in that culture and boys and girls are not to touch, so what do we do when the kids are doing ballroom dancing?”

In another program facilitated by a CBO, school staff are encouraged to understand their students’ everyday surroundings and again consider its impact on their lives and their learning. “A lot of our teachers do not live in XXX, they’re commuting in mostly from Park Slope or downtown Manhattan, very different neighborhoods, so we brought experts in from the cultures to speak to them (teachers) and group leaders each week left them with a challenge. Go out and take a walk around the neighborhood. What do you see? What are the resources for your families here? What are the supports they have? And now that you know that, how does that affect the way you are going to teach these children?”

**Budget and System-Level Support**

- **Finding 10**: Best practice schools often have principals who find creative and innovative ways to meet their staffing needs, but most believe they have insufficient staff to fully support the programmatic and instructional needs of students with disabilities.

Creating, monitoring and managing a budget is paramount to successful reform and overall school success. Budgetary decisions heavily influence teaching, learning, governance, relationships, reform efforts and student achievement. New York City has adopted a decentralized funding system, a student-based budgeting framework driven by student enrollment. In best practice schools, savvy principals stick to a budget as best they can while still
allowing for budget revision and flexibility in order to allocate resources where they are needed within the new funding model.

This elementary school principal describes how he organizes monthly teacher and instructional staff planning time. For this principal, the allocation of staff, time, and money goes hand-in-hand with high levels of student performance, “...but this year, we wanted to give teachers the opportunity to make sure all of their units of study were, in fact, prepared properly before they began. So, this week, and part of next week, we brought in…six subs to handle...the second grade teachers, two in each class, ok, and that releases those six teachers to sit down for the day and work on the reading and writing components of the next unit of study. And that's done through all of the grades, K through five. ...at the end of unit two, we'll get six subs in our rotating basis...to come in and help them prepare for unit three. So on and so forth, until you get to the end of the school year...” This strategy provides teachers with sufficient review and planning time with all grade level staff, and allows the principal control over staffing, substitute teacher expenses and creates a climate that values collaboration and sharing. He continues, “...so that funding will pay for all those subs to come in, because it costs approximately $155 a day to have a sub. So, we’re allocating, roughly a little over $930 for just that. So, we felt this was a better use of our funds...because it gets teachers together to plan, and it’s also team building.”

High quality teaching is critical to the success of Special Education Reform and schools look for ways to manage the ever-increasing demand to provide it without undermining Reform. In one interview, an elementary school special education coordinator explains this challenge. “... We know what some of the children want or need. We don't have those programs nor do we have the financial ability to implement those programs. So how can I as a school service those needs...with those children coming in on the spectrum and I just don’t have the facility, the manpower, the placement for them. So, we’re doing the best that we can and we’re helping fulfill their needs knowing that this is not the placement for them. So, if someone could help guide us in, ‘Gee, I think we need this type of program, how do I go about it,’ that would be great...knowing that there would be a financial obligation on the other side because all these programs that they have for children with those such needs cost a lot of money.”

In some schools, supports to teach students with disabilities at high levels with their non-disabled peers are not where they need to be. School leaders may need additional support in figuring out how to better leverage their funding and staffing classrooms with qualified teachers. In spite of that, they find ways to make it work. This middle school special education teacher shares her thoughts about how Special Education Reform has had an impact on this issue in her school, “I think it has had an impact, because I think we are not staffed. We’re not able to service the children in everything that is needed, because of staffing, because we have to make it work for kids coming in...So if a kid comes in now in third grade who really needs a 12:1:1 class..., because that's how they will learn best, we don’t have that program. Now will we make it work? Yes, we’ll make it work. We’ll have a teacher, we’ll have as many periods as we have available to go into that classroom to help. But that child is going to be in a classroom of XX or XX students, and that’s not the best environment for that student. But we don’t have that class, and we still have to make it work.”

- **Finding 11**: Best practice schools receive adequate professional development, help with technical assistance and the use of data to monitor and improve student learning, but ask for more help with flexible programming.
implementation in a variety of ways. As reported in the previous report, the flow and management about information pertaining to the Reform is provided to schools primarily through Networks.

A parent describes how she got information about the Reform, “I was lucky enough to be on the School Leadership Team for the last two years, so we did have someone from the Network come and speak to us about the special education reform last year.” A high school principal was asked where he gets support for students with special needs, “Well, you know, we have a Network. We have point people that are…whose role is to support schools within the context of special ed.”

Almost all schools have positive working relationships with their Network leaders, however, the texture of the relationships vary. For example, in almost all schools Networks provide regular professional development and feedback about professional practice. This led to deeper understanding of Reform and alternative methods of instruction within entire schools and school clusters. As a high school special education coordinator put it, “Well, our Network has some pretty good people, you know…they’ve been on us regarding…what’s coming up, what changes need to be made. And basically what I’ve come to understand is that it really requires a granular approach towards each kid.”

An elementary school special education coordinator explains, “So whenever there is PBIS training that I go to and then there’s the special ed training, and if I don’t go we have a lead teacher for special ed and she goes…very helpful. You know, especially for someone like me who doesn’t have the special ed background…so that’s extremely helpful, but the PDs have been really good.”

Although most schools report receiving effective guidance with instructional strategies and technical support, in a few cases, support for effective staffing was insufficient. For example, a middle school principal explains his struggles with staffing, “Last year…they reduced us to four days, for both social worker and school psychologist. And this year we were reduced even further. So we are not in compliance with initial referrals, because the only way I’m going to get the services back is having that on record and documented. So, you know it's a catch -22. We’re still working to do the best for our students…I contact my Network. I have emails and memos to prove all my correspondence. Because I know I’m going to be out of compliance, I’m covering myself and my school community to make sure I’ve reached out for help. I’m yelling. Hey we’re drowning! We need help! ...So the bottom line is nothing can be done. That’s all that they’re telling me this year. Nothing can be done for this year.”

Student placements and the kind of services students receive are decided by student IEP teams. However, the responsibility to find flexible ways to mix and match specialized instruction and services based on student needs falls under the purview of the principal. Many principals expressed frustrations about insufficient resources and guidance with flexible programming. “Here we do some flexible programming where we can. I’ve had students leave after the close date. So if they left, I don’t necessarily fill those seats; that gives me the flexibility to move a student….but again, budgetary, they might tell me in July, you need to fill every seat, because they’re going to see one vacancy,” says a middle school principal.

This principal later adds, “I think nobody really was able to tell us how to do some flexible scheduling, especially in a school of our size...our students travel around in cohorts...that homeroom travels together, and that's a challenge....and sometimes I'm like rearranging the whole program for one student here and another student there, and it severely limits our ability to move other things around....if anything could be done on a citywide level to address programming that would be a wonderful thing. And the Network has not been effective in that. Nobody at central can really do it.”
Finding 12: The effectiveness of Reform implementation is, in part, dependent on the relationship between the Network team and the Principal.

Networks serve as facilitators of school change and reform implementation by offering an array of instructional and operational options designed to be responsive to individual school communities. This includes special education, attendance, student safety and school budgets. Some principals either evade Networks to their benefit or learn how to negotiate with Network teams within the system. This dynamic affects how Networks choose to spend funds and support schools and in turn how effective Principals and school administrators can be in their pursuit to uphold the requirements of the Reform. Most schools have strong working relationships with Networks and receive regular assistance and customized advice via workshops and help with data collection, SESIS and professional development trainings.

This high school special education coordinator explains, “[Our Network] has given us a great amount of training. To the point where – we were trying to get into a couple of training sessions that they had, but sending our staff out all the time wasn’t a great idea, either. So, we reached out to them, and Donna and Tom have come and done individual training sessions here for our school, and for Facing History, and for Hospitality and Management...we’ve had a great amount of support from them regarding what we had to do.”

A middle school assistant principal comments, “The staff here gets a lot of professional development. Teachers are going on professional development that’s been facilitated by our Network, that’s being facilitated by central DOE, or even Teachers College. So teachers get out a lot and get the professional development.”

An elementary school IEP coordinator shared, “…because they are so busy with numbers, and compliance, and whatever. There’s really, very little professional training. They occasionally will throw us an email that there’s something somewhere. It usually costs money and its usually after-hours….and I don’t think the teachers are trained. I think … they’re putting the cart before the horse.”

All schools, and in particular principals, are required to problem solve and negotiate how to best support students with disabilities and their staff, but the success of these negotiations seems to be based on distinctive factors like the ability of a principal to creatively budget and manage politically sensitive relationships with Network leaders. Managing these relationships well is critical because Network teams provide resources, instructional and organizational support for special education.

As this principal explains, “So budgetary wise, District 75 is more supportive and a little bit more generous because, you know, they were addressing more severely challenged students…So that is in fact a large juggling act in many respects because I’m dealing with a lot of different people still who don’t understand how my school is put together and all the different things it entails. So it creates a challenge in itself with that. Is it more work? Yes it is.” An elementary service provider notes, “I’m not sure that I fully understand it. But, I think the change in the school system, a change from districts to CFN’s has been detrimental to the running of the schools…I think the ambiguity of District 75…it’s caused a great hole in special ed services in the elementary schools…but I’m not a big fan of how the school system is structured.”

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Names were changed to protect confidentiality
CAUTIONARY CHALLENGES

Even best practice schools experience challenges seen in Phase One schools. Many school staff interviewed feel that an unanticipated increase of students with a wider range of disabilities that are more severe is the underlying cause of many of these challenges. In this section, we first identify themes that cut across our data on schools’ struggles, and then highlight areas of focus including budget constraints, engaging parents, and behavior management.

Best practice schools have a strong sense of identity as defined by their internal school mission, external reputation, admission process and student body. Though they have adopted successful organizational strategies and contributed positively to student achievement, greater access for more students with more severe disabilities (through the Reform’s home zone provision) present a new struggle for schools. Consistent with the forthright communication style at best practice schools, all interviewees were very honest about the ways in which the Reform causes them complications. The self-reflective nature of best practice schools allows them to easily identify problems, creatively craft solutions, and confidently explain where gaps remain.

Responses from best practice schools to increases in students with more severe disabilities varies. Most embrace the additional students but are conflicted when they lack resources to provide for their needs. Their dilemma is rooted in their desire to always move beyond technically fulfilling legal requirements to meet the needs of all students. Others are not accepting of students they are not accustomed to.

This discrepancy in understanding the schools’ responsibility for taking ownership of all students illustrates the conflicting interpretations of DOE’s Reform message and lack of accountability for ensuring successful Reform implementation that prioritizes the student’s needs. Further, some schools feel pressured to change already successful practices to accommodate the Reform goals. Negative unintended consequences of a fragmented system include when schools are encouraged to craft and implement IEPs around schools’ availability, not students’ needs, and less than honest parent communication. These exemplify policies that may not be compatible and pull school staff in different directions. In this way, students are now granted access to their community school, but not allowed mobility to transfer when necessary. In considering how best practices can be shared system-wide, it is important both at the central and the school level to heed the following pitfalls and ongoing challenges.

Budget Constraints

Best practice schools share the concerns heard from Phase One schools about their sense of inequity and the inadequacy of funding to fully implement the Reform. The school’s ability to match programs to the student’s best interest is still a point of great concern to schools. As we found in interviews with Phase One schools, the belief that the current per capita funding formula (previously restructured early on in the Reform) contributes to a reduction in services to students is widely held. Further, interviewees express similar doubts about whether saving money was the Reform’s real purpose.

Many express an especially firm belief in the necessity of monitoring student progress constantly and placing supports accordingly. This approach is seen as particularly important during periods of transition such as the movement towards less restrictive class settings. When they fall short, school staff and administrators are very clear that IEPs are driven by what is available, not always what is needed. Interviewees perceive that this pressure to conform IEPs is attributed to the Reform’s compliance-oriented mindset, further perpetuated by Networks that lack practical advice for crafting effective programming solutions.
As a result of the Reform, interviewees describe higher levels of administrative involvement to align service provisions and budget allocations. Staff understand that the process has changed, requiring all services as dictated on the IEP to be provided in the school building. They express concern that their principals are held to an impossible requirement that negatively impacts the psychologists’ ability to conduct evaluations and make appropriate service recommendations.

**Engaging Parents**

Ethical dilemmas about a perceived gap between available resources and appropriate programming carries over to the ways schools engage parents of students with disabilities. Best practice schools are accustomed to engaging parents in open discussion, going above and beyond to ensure they are partners in their child’s education and in the IEP process. However staff are not always confident in the proper support-level of students’ placements, given the constraints of perceived budget-strapped programming within their school buildings, where the Reform requires them to serve all students within their home zone. As a result, they are unclear and conflicted about how to communicate with the parents at IEP meetings and set realistic expectations Though this was also a concern in Phase One schools, this communications dilemma is emphasized further in best practice schools where practices recommended by the central administration appear them to conflict with their school philosophy.

Psychologists, teachers, and administrators all express discomfort when services do not line up with students’ needs. Staff have to earn and maintain parents’ trust, so they need to be able to make recommendations based on students’ needs, not schools’ available services, and feel comfortable that the recommendations that they make can be implemented. School staff express genuine confusion about exactly what they should tell parents when they believe that resources are not properly aligned to programs. This concern is particularly acute for parents and students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Best practice schools understand that just providing a parent their legal rights is not enough. If they cannot understand and navigate the process, they will not be able to challenge it.

**Behavior Management**

Best practice schools continue to struggle with students who have behavioral and emotional challenges. In some best practice schools, staff struggle to understand and define students’ behavioral challenges and effectively differentiate instruction for them. Concern about adequate training for teachers is also described, both in terms of classroom instruction and their expected role at staff team meetings. Teachers themselves also request more information about teaching students with a wide range of needs. In particular, they seek help to better understand a community that struggles with violence and substance abuse.

Other best practice schools are concerned about increasing numbers of students with disabilities who don’t fit neatly into their discipline policy and potentially blemish the school’s reputation. In these schools, it is implied that school staff perceive a distinct difference between new students who are classified as emotionally disturbed and the majority of the general education population to whom they are accustomed. This contributes to an authoritative approach to behavior, low expectations for the student, and frustration with students’ families. The tendency for some to sympathize with the well-behaved students, while alienating and pushing out those that exhibit disruptive behavior is also evident. In these instances, the burden to change so that academic expectations are met falls on students, not staff.

Some staff also doubt students’ placement in the school, and do not feel responsible for the issues that may arise. In these cases, some administrators focus on academic curriculum as a solution. Especially at the middle and high school levels, expectations for academic success can outweigh concern for students’ social and emotional needs.
As the Reform takes hold, the students in greatest need of emotional well-being seem to be continuously overlooked and treated separately.

While practices around behavior management were not specifically a part of our selection criteria for all 15 schools, this reveals that schools with a good reputation and successful student achievement data can be prone to fighting inclusive measures because they prefer to enroll students that are already high performing and well behaved. Though strict procedures can be a successful element of behavior management, discipline devoid of best practices can ultimately push students further away rather than draw them in, especially within a competitive setting where students are expected to fend for themselves.
PART THREE:
RECOMMENDATIONS
In this section, we put forth our recommendations for ways the city and schools can better serve students with disabilities. Craig Haas, a licensed special education administrator, once wrote, “Too often, special education is viewed as a place or static state, when the truth is that special education is a series of interventions, modifications, and accommodations afforded to students who are unable to access a curriculum under routine circumstances.”\(^{61}\) Our recommendations are essential to understanding how teaching and administrative practices together form school-wide and system-wide structures conducive to better inclusive practices with higher performance for students with disabilities.

**City Level**

**Recommendation 1:** *We recommend that the DOE continue to expand the process for seeking out best practices among New York City public schools and make information about best practices accessible system wide.* Information sharing should include reports made available centrally as well as hands on learning through professional development workshops and conferences. Further, learnings from best practices can be helpful in crafting policy and resource allocations that meet the needs of schools and guide schools in using their resources wisely.

**Recommendation 2:** *In the face of increased staffing needs due to the Reform, the DOE should increase efforts to partner with city agencies and workforce programs to tie the need for more related service providers to job seekers and training programs.* The DOE should target additional funds to areas of the greatest need, including funds for more teachers, service providers, assistive technology, and data systems. This strategy should also include incentives for bringing highly qualified staff to low performing schools and hard-to-staff schools.

**Recommendation 3:** *The DOE’s support structure for schools must be defined by supportive, open, and transparent relationships between staff at both the school and the Network levels.* Central office needs to increase and improve communication across relevant divisions and recognize when school-level policy is effective and sometimes get out of the way of those already doing great work. We also reiterate Recommendation 8 from our previous report\(^{62}\) which states that the Networks must uphold their responsibility to assist when administrators struggle to create quality programs for their students.

**Recommendation 4:** *The DOE should continue to expand the publicly available materials and practices clearinghouse that pools resources pertaining to understanding and educating students with various disabilities.* This can include programs, practices, books, and articles. It should be publicly available and easily accessible to schools through a web-based portal. Sharing information internally across programs, between schools, and from community based organizations should be emphasized at the school-level.

**Recommendation 5:** *The DOE should expand support systems that enforce positive behavior strategies which incorporate the students’ social and emotional health alongside their academic growth.* School staff must be given the tools to understand the classification of emotional disturbance and implement effective behavioral practices. DOE should provide schools with detailed information to better understand, classify, and monitor behavioral challenges for all students. Doing so should help ensure that students are not left behind in the movement towards less restrictive environments.

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\(^{61}\) Craig Haas, 2013. Licensed Special Education Administrator, Edwards Middle School

Recommendation 6: The DOE should facilitate and continue to provide supports for school-based professional development that clarifies what successful implementation of rigorous curriculum looks like. Professional development around the instructional core is necessary to ensure teachers have a deep understanding of the intersection between themselves, students, content, and the central task at hand. This should contribute to teachers’ ability to differentiate instruction and make rigorous curriculum accessible to improve student learning. This should also be applicable to a classroom with a group of students that has a wide range of needs.

Recommendation 7: We reiterate Recommendation 16 from our previous report, which states that “funding mechanisms need to support schools in serving students well while reinforcing the Reform as a DOE priority.” Further, we repeat our recommendation that transition funding should be instituted in such a way as to both “incentivize Reform implementation while also ensuring that there are sufficient resources to provide students with needed support.”

School Level

Recommendation 1: School leadership must put time, space and resources in place that foster collaborative exchanges, planning, and a commitment to policy goals amongst all members of the school community. This kind of collaboration and communication should lay the groundwork for all other practices, systems, and structures. The goal should be to build a professional community that encourages teamwork and student-centered planning.

Recommendation 2: School staff must take a detailed and data driven approach to understanding each student’s strengths and weaknesses using the least restrictive appropriate setting. This applies to students who require intervention services (such as RTI) and those that already have an IEP. Regular team meetings, specific timelines, and shared knowledge among staff should all contribute to understanding students’ specific strengths and weaknesses, considering the least restrictive setting appropriate, and constantly monitoring progress to make adjustments accordingly.

Recommendation 3: In building a strong sense of professional community, schools should be explicit in their exploration of race, culture and class in the classroom and throughout the school. Further, cultural awareness and family engagement should be emphasized as schools strive to develop trusting relationships with students and families rather than alienate them. School leaders should think through the possibilities as well as difficulties of explicitly addressing race and educational equity. This knowledge should pertain to the individual needs of each student, and schools should support the work of staff who address these issues successfully.

Recommendation 4: Schools should be held accountable by first ensuring that the IEP matches the students’ needs, then checking for the provision of those services, evaluating that the services offered are of high quality, and lastly, monitoring student progress. Schools should not let compliance responsibilities solely define their work, funding allocations, and programming.

Recommendation 5: Schools should look for ways to creatively repurpose existing resources to meet the needs of all students with disabilities. As we have learned from best practice schools, schools must think creatively about their existing resources. When schools receive new financial resources, they should also be aligned towards specific objectives and used strategically. In this way, schools should be creative and purposeful in regards to their budgetary planning.

Recommendation 6: Parents’ input needs to be prioritized at IEP meetings and parents should be made aware of their right to bring someone who can help them. This recommendation from our previous report64 extends school-family engagement beyond the legal requirement of a parent’s signature on their child’s IEP to account for the spirit of the law. Parents should be provided thorough access to information and supports so they can effectively advocate for their child and be respected partners in this process. We also emphasize that parent advocates speak the parent’s home language and be familiar with the IEP process.

The following fourteen tables and descriptive analysis include data from four groups of schools:

1. All Phase One Schools refers to the 260 schools that participated in Phase One of the Reform in the 2011-2012 school year;

2. Comparison Schools refers to the non-Phase One public schools chosen by the DOE in the 2011-2012 school year for the purpose of statistical comparisons. The schools were selected on the basis of their student demographics and performance are similar to those of Phase One schools;

3. 25 Phase One Schools refers to the schools that participated in data collection for our last report, Getting it Right; and

4. 15 Best Practice schools refers to the schools that participated in data collection for this report.

Tables 1 - 4 report data on all schools, Table 5 reports data on best practice schools, Tables 6-11 report data by elementary, middle and high schools, respectively, and Tables 12 through 14 report data on Graduation and Dropout Rates. Tables 1 and 3 are summary tables; they summarize all the quantitative data we received on students with disabilities for the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years, with the exception of Graduation and Dropout data, which is summarized in Table 12.

** In 2012 New York City adopted Common Core Standards and administered new tests. These new tests are more rigorous, use different metrics than previous tests and provide a new and different baseline from which to judge student learning. Thus, we do not compare test score results from 2011-2012 with those from 2012-2013. For these reasons, test score results are displayed only and excluded from any further analysis.
## TABLE 1: DATA SUMMARY 2011-2012

**All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools**

**2011-2012 SwD Data**

### Demographics/Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Phase One Schools</th>
<th>Phase One Comparison Schools</th>
<th>25 Phase One Schools</th>
<th>15 Best Practice Schools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics/Background</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment^2</td>
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<td>159,343</td>
<td>12,262</td>
<td>10,086</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total SwD^3</td>
<td>22,234</td>
<td>24,623</td>
<td>2,184</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent SwD</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage Students w/ IEPs Present</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage Students w/ IEPs Absent</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recommendations^4 to LRE^5</td>
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<td>4791</td>
<td>441</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent LRE^5 of Recommendations^4</td>
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<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<td>33%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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### Achievement Data**

#### ELA and Math Exams

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<tr>
<td>SwD Tested Grade 3-8 ELA 2012</td>
<td>9,146</td>
<td>11,386</td>
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<tr>
<td>SwD Proficient Grade 3-8 ELA 2012</td>
<td>1,195</td>
<td>1,370</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent SwD Proficient Grade 3-8 ELA 2012</td>
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<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>SwD Tested Grade 3-8 Math 2012</td>
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<td>SwD Proficient Grade 3-8 Math 2012</td>
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<td>3,233</td>
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<td>Percent SwD Proficient Grade 3-8 Math 2012</td>
<td>30%</td>
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#### Regents Exams

**Comprehensive English**

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<tr>
<td>Total SwD Taking 2012 Regents</td>
<td>2,268</td>
<td>2,390</td>
<td>186</td>
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<tr>
<td>SwD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents</td>
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<td>1,522</td>
<td>96</td>
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<td>SwD Scoring 65 or greater on Regents</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent SwD passing Regents^7</td>
<td>35%</td>
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**Integrated Algebra**

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<td>123</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent SwD passing Regents^7</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
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1. This table contains data for elementary, middle, high, secondary, K-8, and K-12 schools.
2. Data on enrollment is based on the Audited Register (AR) for October 31st, 2011.
3. Data on students with disabilities (SwD) was pulled from the Child Assistance Program (CAP) register data snapshot for 2011-12 pulled on August 2, 2012.
4. Includes reevaluations and triennial evaluations
5. Here LRE is defined as recommendations to a setting *other than* a self-contained setting for the majority of the school day.
6. Here MRE is defined as recommendations to a self-contained setting for the majority of the school day.
7. Although 65 is the pass rate for Regents exams for students w/o IEPs, more students with IEPs than are indicated here would have passed the Regents as a result of the different thresholds for students with IEPs.
Table 2 includes 2011-2012 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations) from Table 1.

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- Daily attendance is roughly the same for all schools with the exception of best practice schools, where the daily attendance rate is considerably higher (93%).
- Best practice schools have the lowest percent of recommendations to the Most Restrictive Environment (MRE) (20%) and the highest percentage of recommendations to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (80%).

**Table 2:**
*All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools*
*2011-2012 SwD Data*
### TABLE 3: DATA SUMMARY 2012-2013

*All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools*

**2012-2013 SwD Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics/Background</th>
<th>All Phase One Schools</th>
<th>Phase One Comparison Schools</th>
<th>25 Phase One Schools</th>
<th>15 Best Practice Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>129,327</td>
<td>156,733</td>
<td>12,876</td>
<td>10,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SWD</td>
<td>22,741</td>
<td>27,374</td>
<td>2,509</td>
<td>2,110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent SWD</td>
<td>17.60%</td>
<td>17.50%</td>
<td>19.50%</td>
<td>19.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students with IEPs Present</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>86.9%</td>
<td>89.2%</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students with IEPs Absent</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Initial Referrals</td>
<td>2,201</td>
<td>2,414</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Referral Rate</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations² to LRE³</td>
<td>4,883</td>
<td>5,006</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent LRE³ of Recommendations²</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations² to MRE⁴</td>
<td>2,267</td>
<td>2,643</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent MRE⁴ of Recommendations²</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Achievement Data

**ELA and Math Exams**

| SWD Tested Grade 3-8 ELA 2013                      | 8,074                 | 11,314                      | 944                  | 553                      |
| SWD Proficient Grade 3-8 ELA 2013                | 384                   | 548                         | 45                   | 76                       |
| Percent SWD Proficient Grade 3-8 ELA 2013        | 4.8%                  | 4.8%                        | 4.8%                 | 13.7%                    |
| SWD Tested Grade 3-8 Math 2013                    | 8,145                 | 11,406                      | 949                  | 555                      |
| SWD Proficient Grade 3-8 Math 2013               | 657                   | 881                         | 75                   | 151                      |
| Percent SWD Proficient Grade 3-8 Math 2013       | 8.1%                  | 7.7%                        | 7.9%                 | 27.2%                    |

**Regents Exams**

**Comprehensive English**

| Total SWD Taking 2013 Regents                     | 1,939                 | 2,214                       | 166                  | 158                      |
| SWD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents              | 1,188                 | 1,394                       | 93                   | 68                       |
| SWD Scoring Greater than or equal to 65 on Regents| 751                   | 820                         | 73                   | 90                       |
| Percent SWD Passing Regents w/ 65 or higher⁵     | 38.7%                 | 37.0%                       | 44.0%                | 57.0%                    |

**Global History**

<p>| Total SWD Taking 2013 Regents                     | 2,224                 | 2,058                       | 202                  | 191                      |
| SWD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents              | 1,567                 | 1,435                       | 115                  | 109                      |
| SWD Scoring Greater than or equal to 65 on Regents| 657                   | 623                         | 87                   | 82                       |
| Percent SWD Passing Regents w/ 65 or higher⁵     | 29.5%                 | 30.3%                       | 43.1%                | 42.9%                    |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Phase One Schools</th>
<th>Phase One Comparison Schools</th>
<th>25 Phase One Schools</th>
<th>15 Best Practice Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrated Algebra</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SWD Taking 2013 Regents</td>
<td>2,895</td>
<td>3,199</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>2,084</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD Scoring Greater than or equal to 65 on Regents</td>
<td>1,035</td>
<td>1,115</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent SWD Passing Regents w/ 65 or higher</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SWD Taking 2013 Regents</td>
<td>2,234</td>
<td>2,254</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents</td>
<td>1,444</td>
<td>1,433</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD Scoring Greater than or equal to 65 on Regents</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>821</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent SWD Passing Regents w/ 65 or higher</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. History and Government</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SWD Taking 2013 Regents</td>
<td>1,622</td>
<td>1,861</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>1,229</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD Scoring Greater than or equal to 65 on Regents</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>632</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent SWD Passing Regents w/ 65 or higher</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 This table contains data for elementary, middle, high, secondary, K-8, and K-12 schools.
2 Includes reevaluations and triennial evaluations
3 Here LRE is defined as recommendations to a setting other than a self-contained setting for the majority of the school day.
4 Here MRE is defined as recommendations to a self-contained setting for the majority of the school day.
5 Although 65 is the pass rate for Regents exams for students w/o IEPs, more students with IEPs than are indicated here would have passed the Regents as a result of the different thresholds for students with IEPs.
Table 4 includes 2012-2013 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations) from Table 3.

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- Daily attendance has remained roughly the same in all schools, with no major change from the previous year.
- The percent of recommendations to the Most Restrictive Environment (MRE) and the percent of recommendations to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) remained virtually the same in all schools, with no major change from the previous year.
- It is notable that the percent of recommendations to the Most Restrictive Environment (MRE) is lowest in best practice schools (21%) compared to all other schools and the percent of recommendations to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is highest in best practice schools (79%), with no major change from the previous year.

**Table 4:**
*All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools*
*2012-13 SwD Data*
Table 5 includes 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 percentages from our 15 best practice schools on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations) from Tables 1 and 3.

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- The percent LRE of recommendations, and the percent MRE of recommendations are relatively stable and consistent between the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years.
- There is a four percentage point decline in daily attendance rates from 93% in 2011-2012 to 89% in 2012-2013.

Table 5:
15 Best Practice Schools
2011-2012 and 2012-2013 SwD Data
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Table 6 includes 2011-2012 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations).

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- Data across all elementary schools in 2011-2012 shows that attendance is relatively homogeneous across all school types, with a slightly higher percentage in the 15 best practice schools (94%).
- However, the percent LRE of recommendations is higher among the 15 best practice schools, (75%) compared to (58%) for the 25 Phase One schools, (59%) for All Phase One schools, and (60%) in Comparison schools.
- The percent MRE of recommendations is also lowest in best practice schools, (25%) compared to (40%) in Comparison schools, (41%) in All Phase One schools, and (42%) in 25 Phase One schools.

Table 6:
Elementary Schools: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2011-2012 SwD Data
Table 7 includes 2012-2013 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations).

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- Data across all elementary schools in 2012-2013 shows that daily attendance is relatively homogenous across all school types, with a slightly higher percentage in the 15 best practice schools (94%).
- In the 15 best practice schools the percent LRE of recommendations (75%) remained the same across the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years.
- However, the percent LRE of recommendations is higher in the 15 best practice schools (75%), than the 25 Phase One schools (63%), All Phase One schools (60%), and Comparison schools (60%).
- The percent MRE of recommendations continues to be lower in the 15 best practice schools (25%) as compared with the other schools, 25 Phase One schools (37%), All Phase One schools (40%), and Phase One Comparison schools (40%).

Table 7:
Elementary Schools: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2012-2013 SwD Data
MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Table 8 includes 2011-2012 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations).

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- In 2011-2012, the best practice middle schools registered 63% LRE of recommendations, compared to 75% for best practice elementary schools and 93% best practice high schools.
- The percent MRE of recommendations also seems slightly elevated in comparison to the data on elementary and high schools. Best practice middle schools recorded 37% MRE of recommendations, as compared to 25% in best practice elementary schools and 7% in best practice high schools.
- The 25 Phase One schools have the highest percent LRE of recommendations at 70% and the lowest percent MRE of recommendations at 30%.

Table 8:
Middle Schools: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2011-2012 SwD Data
Table 9 includes 2012-2013 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations).

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- Best practice schools have the highest percent LRE of recommendations (75%).
- Best practice schools jumped from 63% LRE of recommendations in 2011-2012 to 75% in 2012-2013 and Comparison schools jumped from 52% LRE of recommendations in 2011-2012 to 60% in 2012-2013.
- The percent MRE of recommendations for best practice middle schools fell from 37% to 25% in 2012-2013.

Table 9:
Middle Schools: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2012-2013 SwD Data
HIGH SCHOOLS

Table 10 includes 2011-2012 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all recommendations, and Percent MRE of all recommendations).

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- High school data for 2011-2012 illustrates that the percent LRE of recommendations is higher in high schools than in elementary and middle schools. Best practice schools reported 75% LRE of recommendations in elementary schools vs. 93% in high schools.
- There is a notable dichotomy between the percent MRE of recommendations across schools: 7% in best practice schools and in 25 Phase One schools, 21% in All Phase One schools and in Comparison schools.

Table 10:
High Schools: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2011-2012 SwD Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Students with IEPs Present</th>
<th>Percent LRE of All Recommendations</th>
<th>Percent MRE of All Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Best Practice Schools</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Phase One Schools</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Phase One Schools</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase One Comparison Schools</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11 includes 2012-2013 percentages on selected variables (Daily attendance, Percent LRE of all students, and Percent MRE of all students).

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- In the 2012-2013 high school data, we observe a slight decrease in the LRE of recommendations in best practice schools. Best practice schools decreased from 93% in 2011-2012 to 87% in 2012-2013.
- Concurrently, there was also an increase in percent MRE of recommendations in best practice schools. Best practice schools increased from 7% to 13%.
- We observe the percent MRE of recommendations for all Phase One schools and Phase One comparison schools almost doubles from the 2011-2012 to 2012-2013 school years.

**Table 11:**

*High Schools: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools 2012-13 SwD Data*
### TABLE 12: GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES BY COHORT

*All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools*

*2009-2010 and 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 SwD Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Phase One Schools</th>
<th>Phase One Comparison Schools</th>
<th>25 Phase One Schools</th>
<th>15 Best Practice Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Data 2010-2011 (August 2011)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SwD in Cohort</td>
<td>1,458</td>
<td>1,518</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Graduates</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate SwD</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout Rate SwD</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Data 2011-2012 (August 2012)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SwD in Cohort 2012</td>
<td>1,536</td>
<td>1,709</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Graduates SWD 2012</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>760</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate SWD 2012</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout Rate SWD 2012</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13 includes 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 percentages on Graduation Rates from Table 12.

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- In the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 cohort, there is a notable difference between graduation rates between Comparison schools (45%), All Phase One schools (39%), 25 Phase One schools (72%) and 15 best practice schools (51%).
- In the same cohort, the 25 Phase One Schools have the highest graduation rates (72%).
- In the 2011-2012 school year, best practice schools have slightly higher graduation rates than other schools – best practice schools (65.2%), 25 Phase One schools (64.4%), Comparison schools (44.5%), and All Phase One schools (41.6%).
- Data for all best practice schools across both cohorts and schools years shows that graduation rates have increased significantly from 51% in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 cohort to 65% in the 2011-2012 school year.

**Table 13:**
Graduation Data: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2009-2010 and 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 SwD Data

![Graduation Rates 2010-2011* & 2011-2012**](image-url)

* Based on Graduation Data collected for 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 cohorts
** Based on Graduation Data collected for 2011-2012 school year
Table 14 includes 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 percentages on Dropout Rate from Table 12.

These are some noteworthy points we observed from the data:

- The 25 Phase One schools have lower dropout rates than all other schools for both cohorts and school years.
- In the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 cohort, the dropout rate was (10%), as compared to best practice schools (15%), Comparison schools (20%), and All Phase One schools (21%).
- In 2011-2012, the dropout rate was (7.9%), as compared to best practice schools (10.9%), Comparison schools (22.5%), and All Phase One schools (22.5%).
- Data for all best practice schools across both cohorts and school years show that dropout rates have declined slightly from 15% in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 cohort to 11% in the 2011-2012 school year.

**Table 14:**
Dropout Rate: All Phase One, Comparison, 25 Phase One, and 15 Best Practice Schools
2009-2010 and 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 SwD Data

---

**Dropout Rates**
2010-2011* & 2011-2012**

* Based on Dropout Data collected for 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 cohorts
** Based on Dropout Data collected for 2011-2012 school year
DEFINITION OF TERMS FOR QUANTITATIVE DATA AND ANALYSIS

What is an IEP?

An Individualized Educational Program (IEP) describes the special education and related services specifically designed to meet the unique educational needs of a student with a disability. An IEP is the guiding document for a student’s educational program. It includes all of the goals, objectives, present levels of performance and related services that are recommended for the student.

What is Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)?

The definition of LRE refers to a programmatic setting and varies by context and student. IDEA defines Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (Sec. 612 (a)[5]). In this report, the data used as a measure of LRE, consisted of recommendations made during reevaluations and triennial IEP meetings to any setting other than a self-contained classroom environment for the majority of the school day.

What is Most Restrictive Environment (MRE)?

In this report, the data used as a measure of MRE, consisted of recommendations made during reevaluations and triennial IEP meetings to self-contained classrooms for the majority of the school day.

How is Graduation Data defined and calculated for students with disabilities?

High School graduates with an IEP are defined as those students earning a local, Regents, or Advanced Regents diploma and exclude those earning either a special education (IEP) diploma or GED. The New York State calculation method was first adopted for the Cohort of 2001 (Class of 2005). The cohort consists of all students who first entered 9th grade in a given school year (e.g., the Cohort of 2006 entered 9th grade in the 2006-2007 school year).

How is Dropout Data defined for students with disabilities?

A dropout is an individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year; was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year; has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education program; and does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death.

How is Daily Attendance defined for students with disabilities?

The variable “Percent Students with IEPs Present” refers to student daily attendance.

65 Source: DOE.
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this report, *Bridging the Gap*, we focus our analysis on 15 best practice schools. For this work we sought schools that represented an array of successful approaches and experiences educating students with disabilities under New York City Special Education Reform. The study uses a mixed method design which concurrently includes quantitative and qualitative methods to provide multiple metrics and contextual information to analyze best practices.

Qualitative indicators

School sample

We used a purposive sampling method to identify best practice schools:

- Geographic variability. Schools chosen were distributed across all five boroughs of New York City.
- School level variability. We took care to include elementary, middle and high schools in the sample selection.
- Children First Network variability. Network leaders from each Network were asked to recommend two best practice schools in their Network for the study.
- Quantitative data. We analyzed 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 DOE school- and student-level quantitative data on daily attendance, graduation rates, dropout rates, and movement to least and most restrictive environments.
- Anecdotal and public information about schools that serve students with disabilities well was deliberately taken into account in school selection (such as *Inside Schools* list of Noteworthy Special Education Schools).

School interviews

Using the above mentioned criteria, from May through June and September through October 2013, P&A visited and conducted confidential in-depth interviews in 15 best practice schools. At each school, interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, paraprofessionals, a special education coordinator (such as an assistant principal), an IEP coordinator (usually a school psychologist), a service provider (such as a guidance counselor or social worker), a United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter leader, parents, and students at the high school level. At total of 142 interviews were conducted in best practice schools, and a total of 269 interviewees participated.

School visits were conducted over a two-day period by one member of the research and interview team. Perry and Associates Inc. (P&A) took steps to ensure the privacy of individual research subjects and individual schools remain anonymous. Principals were asked to select interviewees that matched P&A’s selection criteria. Most interviews were 45-60 minutes and principals had flexibility in selecting many of the interviewees. Principals were interviewed twice – at the start and end of the school visit. Interviewees were asked about the following topics: Special education goals, implementation, reform resources, support and professional development, students with disabilities, college and career beyond high school, perceived reform/policy challenges and successes, and best practices. For copies of best practice interview protocols, please contact P&A using the information listed on the inside cover.

Analysis

All 142 interviews were transcribed and entered into qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti. This included field notes and observations from the research team after each school visit. Interviews were divided among four coders and coded for important themes. Themes were synthesized, analyzed, and findings emerged. Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process, focusing data, organizing it, drawing and verifying conclusions. Continual reflection,
reorganization and recreation of themes and codes with the research team members contributed to this study’s validity. Findings were selected for their salience and relevance to practice and policy, rather than just their frequency. Conclusions are substantiated by multiple quotations from participants, field notes, and observations.

**TABLE 1**

*Count of Best Practice 2012-2013 schools by school type and borough*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manhattan</th>
<th>Bronx</th>
<th>Brooklyn</th>
<th>Queens</th>
<th>Staten Island</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**List of Networks with “Best Practice Schools” interviewed for this Study**

N102, N106, N202, N203, N209, N404, N405, N408, N531, N535, N563, N605, N751

*Note: This reflects Network affiliations during the 2012-2013 school year and reflects Network changes since the 2009-2010 school year.*

**Quantitative indicators**

In addition to the geographic, Network and school tier criteria, quantitative criteria were used in selecting best practice schools. Percent enrollment of students with disabilities in best practice schools ranged from seven percent to thirty five percent, with an average of seventeen percent. In addition to the abovementioned selection criteria, the following data were considered:

A) Number of Students with Disabilities (SwD) tested and proficient in ELA.
B) Number of SwD tested and proficient in math.
C) Graduation rates.
D) Dropout rates.
E) Referral rates.
F) Percentage of students with IEPs present.
G) Percentage of students with IEPs absent.
H) Percentage of student recommendations to Least Restrictive Environments (LRE).^{67}
I) Percentage LRE of school.
J) Percentage of student recommendations to More Restrictive Environments (MRE).^{68}
K) Percentage MRE of school.
L) Percentage of students passing Regents in Comprehensive English.

^{67} Here LRE is defined as recommendations to a classroom setting other than a self-contained classroom for the majority of the school day.

^{68} Here MRE includes recommendations to a self-contained classroom setting for the majority of the school day
M) Percentage of students passing Regents in Integrated Algebra.
N) Percentage of students passing Regents in Global History.
O) Percentage of students passing Regents in Living Environment
P) Percentage of students passing Regents in U.S. History and Government

Limitations

Test Score Data

In 2012 New York City adopted Common Core Standards (CCS) and administered new tests aligned with them. These new tests are more rigorous, use different metrics than previous tests and provide a new and different baseline from which to judge student learning. Because it is impossible to measure growth or conduct any value-added analysis, it is important not to compare test score results from 2011-2012 with those from 2012-2013. Scores on Common-core aligned standardized tests are significantly lower than expected. Common core supporters say the drops in scores do not reflect a drop in student performance. Critics say the tests are poorly constructed and the roll out was mishandled. For these reasons, test score results are displayed only, but no analysis is conducted across years on this data.

Suspension Data

Being sensitive to suspension data, we requested suspension data from the New York City Department of Education. Although we did receive suspension data from the DOE, three quarters of the suspension data provided to us is suppressed, as per FERPA regulations. Our preliminary analysis with limited data was incomplete and inconclusive. Despite these limitations, this report provides valuable insights into performance, educational setting, enrollments, graduation and dropout rates for students with disabilities.

69 Suppression is used to remove all data below a specified population size. In this case, no data are to be released for values below a population size of 10.