

Improving Outcomes for
Students with Disabilities:
Network Insights



Brief 2:

Centering Students with Disabilities to Create Powerful Change

Authors: Ben Dalton, Jay Feldman, Jen Laird, RTI International

March 2024

Introduction

This is the second in a series of research briefs and related videos sharing best practices and lessons learned to help educators and policymakers create schools that support students with disabilities (SWDs). These briefs focus on using the principles of improvement science—a systematic method of ongoing testing and learning, i.e., continuous improvement—to better serve SWDs. These principles define continuous improvement as problem-focused; centered on students; iterative; disciplined; data- and evidence-based; and connected across schools, central offices, and other networks.

These lessons emerged through a 3-year Networked Improvement Community (NIC) focused on 10 charter management organizations (CMOs) working to create dramatic gains for SWDs who are Black, Latina/o, and/or experiencing poverty. Over 3 years, we interviewed CMO team members responsible for improvement efforts and collected data about implementation efforts and student outcomes. Although the research briefs are based on findings in the charter sector, the lessons learned are applicable to any school.

The briefs explore:



Brief 1:

Systems Change to Support Students with Disabilities

[View Brief 1 \[PDF, 12 pages\]](#)



Brief 2:

Centering Students with Disabilities to Create Powerful Change



Brief 3:

Champions for Change: Two Essential Roles for an Effective Improvement Team

[View Brief 3 \[PDF, 12 pages\]](#)



Brief 4:

Continuous Quality Commitment: Iterative Learning Cycles to Meet System Challenges

[View Brief 4 \[PDF, 15 pages\]](#)



Brief 5:

Get Ready, Stay Ready: Will and Capacity Checks Along the Improvement Journey

[View Brief 5 \[PDF, 15 pages\]](#)

Centering Students with Disabilities

Centering SWDs can result in powerful changes to charter school or CMO culture, structures, and practices that dramatically improve student outcomes. Generally, “centering” SWDs means incorporating SWD needs and voices into core planning and administrative activities at multiple levels. SWDs’ needs then become part of regular, ongoing conversations among staff and CMO leaders, ideally resulting in a mindset where each educator views each SWD as “their” student and part of “their” classroom, regardless of whether they are responsible for the student as a teacher or other staff member. In centering SWDs, decision-makers solicit and consider student voices, and improvement teams routinely view policies and practices from the perspective of how they affect SWDs.

CMOs that center SWDs can do so in a variety of ways. In this brief, we highlight three practices that CMOs in the NIC used to catalyze positive change:



Intentionally incorporating student voices: By soliciting and carefully considering SWD opinions and feedback, improvement teams can quickly identify the real stumbling blocks to improving learning under current systems and practices.



Creating inclusive structures: Orienting school policies, operations, schedules, and other practices around SWD needs first can address barriers to success without affecting (or even helping) general education students.



Embedding SWD topics in planning and administrative activities: Disrupting the siloed approach to teaching SWDs (where special education and general education staff plan and work largely separately) requires regular, ongoing discussion of issues affecting SWDs among staff members at multiple levels of the school and central office.



Intentionally incorporating student voices



Sitting in a room and letting kids tell you, ‘I’m not embarrassed to read anymore,’ will send shivers up your spine and matters more than that graph number going up.”

Glynis Shulters, Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools

Students are often the best source for quickly identifying key issues that limit their learning at school and in the classroom, identifying practices that are working well for them, and showcasing what’s worked in preparation for spreading practices to other teachers or schools in a charter system.

Schools and CMOs can incorporate student perspectives into planning and decision-making for improvement efforts in several ways:

- **Identifying issues.** Students often have different perspectives on the challenges they face than educators. They can help uncover the underlying causes of problems and evaluate the likely effect of potential improvement efforts. For example, Mastery Charter Schools had identified inconsistent classroom presence (low attendance and high suspension rates) as a major impediment to the academic progress of SWDs who had emotional and behavioral needs. Discussions with students and their families indicated that soft skills and an overall sense of belonging were critical to how SWDs with social and behavioral needs navigated challenging circumstances. Therefore, Mastery modified their policies to more productively respond to issues that could result in suspensions or missed class time.

Key Terms

Student voices: Opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of students, whether expressed through formal or informal feedback mechanisms.

Root cause analysis: A systematic investigation of the foundational and contributing causes of an identified problem.

- **Identifying promising practices.** Mastery's work to engage with students and other stakeholders also identified student needs related to postsecondary preparation—specifically, the lack of dual enrollment and internship opportunities. Mastery built a tracking system to identify students who were not making concrete plans for postsecondary education or work, which allowed staff members to better learn about individual student needs. In response to these needs, Mastery expanded workforce development training opportunities that could better match the range of SWDs' interests and capabilities.

- **Communicating impact.** Further along the continuous improvement journey, schools and CMOs must consider how to spread and scale tested programs and practices. Spreading programs means instituting those programs and practices in other settings; scaling means greatly expanding the number of students and staff involved. Student voices can help gain the interest and commitment of teachers and administrators who may not have been involved in the development work or who remain skeptical about likely impact. At Green Dot Public Schools, the improvement team leader sought to include student perspectives in capturing the effect that their efforts were having.



*You often see general administrators say ‘we have an idea about what every student should do and shouldn’t do.’ Instead, **special education is about the individual.** ... A lot of times it may feel uncomfortable ... but that’s actually the goal, to change things for that student.*

Anne McKetta, Director of Specialized Services, Mastery Schools



*Talking to kids about the impact that the program has had on them and how much they love it ... a lot of kids don’t love going to school. **Getting kids to love school while also growing them** and helping them really hit these rigorous outcomes that are going to help change their lives is everything.*

Glynis Shulters, Improvement Lead, Green Dot Public Schools



Creating inclusive structures

“

We design[ed] our school day with our students with disabilities first.”

Lacey Furey, Associate Director of Special Education, KIPP Northern California (Norcal)

School policies and structures are often created with a general education student in mind. SWDs are a secondary consideration whose needs must be accommodated instead of an integral part of planning. For example, using the word “accommodation” to refer to an adaptation designed for SWDs reinforces this mindset. In contrast, orienting policies and practices such as schedules, classroom organization, and planning time around SWDs’ needs from the beginning can help remove barriers to success. Below are two examples of how schools can prioritize SWDs to create inclusive structures and practices.

- **Schedule SWDs first:** KIPP Norcal scheduled coursework for SWDs before general education students while constructing the master schedule. This created space in SWDs’ schedules so they could enroll in elective courses, obtain necessary services in their required classes, and retake required courses, which collectively increased their engagement and sense of support at school. The KIPP Norcal improvement team noted that this change did not affect general education students’ access to classes. Prioritizing SWDs does not mean neglecting general education students.



- **Create protected planning time.** A number of CMOs in the NIC focused on improvements in co-planning and co-teaching between special education and general education teachers. As part of this effort, CMOs carved out time for co-planning, resulting in more-consistent collaboration between co-teachers and lessons learned that could be applied to all students. Staff at KIPP Norcal described one of the benefits of their scheduling process change:



“

*What we’ve seen is a shift in mindsets around [the idea that co-teachers] are both responsible for every kid in our class. **We’ve really seen a cool shift towards what inclusion really means and looks like.***

Meg Pantell, Special Education Improvement Lead, KIPP Norcal

Similarly, at Summit, an emphasis on building collaborative time and the use of a “support block planning tool” allowed co-teachers to set targeted goals for SWDs and discuss specific instructional strategies to help students meet those goals.

These policies should not limit general education students—indeed, they can benefit all students. Lessons learned in co-planning, for example, can boost teachers’ skills in differentiating instruction for students without disabilities. Inclusive policies can add options and boost learning for all students.





Embedding SWD topics in school planning and administrative activities

“

You need everybody who can make decisions at the organizational level, but you also need those who are making decisions ... with kids one-to-one on an everyday basis ...

Dr. Susana Campo-Contreras, Senior Director for Special Education and Psychological Services, Green Dot Public Schools

The entire school, central office staff, and community must participate and invest in improvement to make dramatic gains for SWDs. This engagement should be regular and ongoing, not periodic or ad hoc. This engagement should also involve instructional staff as well as school and central office leaders. Below are several ways that schools can embed SWD needs and concerns in their school and administrative activities.

- **Involving both frontline educators and administrative leaders.** Classroom teachers, other instructional staff, and school and district leaders must be involved in improvement efforts to ensure that the work does not become siloed or stall from lack of comprehensive buy-in. Noble Schools learned this lesson early. Their improvement team initially relied on special education teachers, but they needed more:



“

*We identified that **assistant principals and deans of instruction were the ones that needed to be at the table** in order to really create some larger and quicker impacts of academic change. ... When we did that, we started to see some major traction happening and it was super impactful to things not being delayed and happening automatically with greater buy-in.*

Bianca Severino, Senior Director of Student Services,
Noble Network of Charter Schools

Key Terms

Change idea: A specific, actionable idea for improving a process or outcome.

Improvement team: The team designing and leading a continuous improvement effort.

Green Dot had a similar journey but started from a different place. They began with upper-level CMO leadership managing improvement efforts but realized they needed teachers to be involved in planning and testing activities in order for changes to be endorsed and implemented well. Only integrated teams across multiple levels are effective in instituting powerful changes.

- **Involving general education practitioners.** As part of building integrated teams, improvement efforts must involve general education teachers. Green Dot focused on co-teaching and co-teaching routines, as did Collegiate. As mentioned, KIPP Norcal placed a significant emphasis on creating regularly scheduled, protected planning time. At Summit, the focus on co-teaching was part of building a comprehensive collaborative effort:



“

*Ultimately our change ideas focused on co-teaching and co-planning between special education and general education teachers and the **collaborative structures and opportunities to build collaboration at all levels of our network**. So at the classroom level, at the school level, across teams, at our district level, this facilitated improvements and careful data analysis along the way that helped us keep track of the progress of our most vulnerable students.*

Sharon Johnson, Senior Director of Specialized Programs,
Summit Public Schools

- **Establishing data routines:** Along with administrative meetings, routines, and agendas, it is important to make time for structured, evidence-based reflection to ensure that schools address SWD needs practically and productively. For example, Collegiate created a workbook tool for tracking student progress and identifying instructional needs related to specific content that students were required to master. Collegiate tested the workbook with general education and special education teachers and refined it using their feedback obtained through surveys. Subsequently, they trained all teachers on it. CMOs in the NIC also conducted regular data reviews that involved a broad group of CMO stakeholders—not just the improvement team. STEM Prep, for example, met as a community (beyond the improvement team) whenever they began encountering problems in the use of a grade book distribution tool. The tool helped teachers focus on specific learning targets and standards for their SWDs.

Note that the above examples all involve two components: (1) regular, ongoing activities and (2) the involvement of multiple levels of the school and district or CMO system. Without both of these components, it is difficult for schools to coordinate and sustain systematic changes that place SWDs at the true core of improvement efforts.



Conclusion

Centering student needs and perspectives can seem a vague and abstract concept at first glance. However, “centering” simply means making something the focus of someone’s time and attention. Schools can make SWDs a priority focus in many specific ways:

- Actively create opportunities to listen to and reflect on what SWDs are saying about their experiences
- Tackle policies and procedures from the perspective of SWD needs first
- Place topics related to SWDs on recurring administrative or planning meeting agendas
- Create integrated teams of general education and special education practitioners and leaders
- Regularly review data to evaluate SWDs’ progress and the effectiveness of improvement efforts

The practices described in this brief are not an exhaustive list of methods of centering SWDs in schools. Any approach that builds from a clear and thoughtful understanding of the challenges SWDs face, of the ways that current supports do and do not work for them, and of school and district practices is a firm foundation for prioritizing SWDs in ways that substantially improve their experiences and outcomes.

References

Brion-Meisels, G. (2015). Centering students in school-based support processes: Critical inquiries and shifting perspectives. *Teachers College Record*, 117(13). <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811511701301>.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Six Core Principles of Improvement. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-work/improvement-in-education/six-core-principles-improvement/>.

Lac, V. T., and Mansfield, K. C. (2017). What do students have to do with educational leadership? Making a case for centering student voice. *Journal of Research on Educational Leadership*, 13(1).

Mintrop, H. (2016). *Design-Based School Improvement: A Practical Guide for Education Leaders*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Osher, D., Fisher, D., Amos, L., Katz, J., Dwyer, K., Duffey, T. and Colombi, G. (2015). *Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline: An Educator’s Action Planning Guide*. Washington, DC: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. Retrieved from <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/addressing-root-causes-disparities-school-discipline>.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2023). Approaches to Root Cause Analysis. Retrieved from <https://oese.ed.gov/resources/oese-technical-assistance-centers/state-support-network/resources/approaches-root-cause-analysis/>.

CMO descriptions

Collegiate Academies

 New Orleans, LA  **5** schools  **3,000** students

Collegiate Academies is a charter network of five schools and 3,000 students in New Orleans, Louisiana. Collegiate's aim was to have 60% or more of students with individualized education plans (IEPs) who were eligible for alternative mastery criteria (April Dunn) master (Approaching Basic +) LEAP and/or April Dunn plans in core classes. Collegiate focused on co-planning and co-teaching, as well as ensuring that network and school-based leaders in both academics and special education were aligned on co-teaching practices and specially designed instruction. Collegiate focused on co-teaching because they saw this as a way to improve the outcomes of students with disabilities on rigorous, grade-level, and college preparatory content within an inclusive setting.

Green Dot Public Schools

 Los Angeles, CA  **18** schools  **9,945** students

Green Dot Public Schools is a charter network of 18 schools and 9,945 students in Los Angeles, California. Green Dot's aims were (1) to increase choices about college, leadership, and life by increasing the percentage of students with disabilities passing every class with a C or better from 29% to 50% at Watts and from 12% to 30% at Mae Jemison, and (2) to increase the 2+ years growth rate in reading from 20% to 40% for students with disabilities. Their problem of practice focused on establishing strong Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) structures and improving instruction at Tier 1 (universal), Tier 2 (additional), and Tier 3 (Intensified). They used the Student Work Analysis Protocol to identify and plan for high-leverage co-teaching models, interventions, and accommodations based on student-specific data. Additionally, they improved reading instruction by implementing an Oral Reading Fluency intervention and the Wilson Reading System.

KIPP Northern California



KIPP Northern California is a charter network of 19 schools and 6,300 students located across California. KIPP's aim was to have 75% of their 9th and 10th grade students with disabilities pass their English classes and 85% pass their math classes, allowing them to be on track to graduate and pursue the postsecondary path they choose: college, career, and beyond. KIPP implemented a common co-teaching agenda, used a student-centered schedule tool to ensure protected co-planning and co-teaching sections, and held biweekly goal setting touchpoints with students to provide targeted supports.

Mastery Schools



Mastery Schools is a charter network of 24 schools and 14,000 students located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Camden, New Jersey. Mastery had two aims. The first aim was to increase attendance rates to at least 90% and decrease the percentage of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities suspended 1 or more days. For this aim, they focused on developing a student-to-student mentorship to increase sense of belonging, established a teacher reflection protocol when a student referral occurs to develop teacher mindset and counteract unintentional bias, modified their discipline response plan so that it uses suspensions as last resort to reduce system policy barriers, and increased the quality of the evidence-based practice of behavioral feedback by implementing training, coaching, and technology enhancements.

Mastery's second aim was to increase postsecondary engagement (education, work force, military, job training) for students with disabilities. For this aim, they focused on developing inclusive school-wide postsecondary tracking systems for monitoring progress towards short-term and long-term goals, improved student-centered advising with multiple pathways with aligned requirements and team structures to help students meet these new requirements. Mastery also developed and implemented a senior seminar class aligned to multiple pathways, partnered with outside agencies to provide 91 seats in dual enrollment placements aligned to the multiple pathways, and developed and implemented a summer program to help graduating 12th graders transition from high school to their postsecondary placement.

Noble Network of Charter Schools



Noble Network of Charter Schools is a charter network of 18 schools and 12,000 students in Chicago, Illinois. Noble's aim was to ensure that students with an IEP met or exceeded their initial expected Lexile growth target, as measured by Achieve 3000 LevelSet. Noble focused on establishing a comprehensive system of professional learning that helps all educators teach adolescent reading strategies/skills in their classrooms across all content areas. In addition, Noble implemented evidence-based reading interventions to ensure that teachers are making necessary and timely adjustments that ultimately lead to independent reading growth.

Summit Public Schools



Summit Public Schools is a charter network of 12 schools and 4,000 students in California and Washington. Summit's aim was to ensure that all students with disabilities would end the year on track to master English and math grade-level content. Summit focused on strengthening their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) by leveraging flexible targeted tiered instructional groups, ongoing instructional planning collaboration cycles between general education and education specialists, and a site-based Diverse Learning Team structure to improve data-informed instructional practices for both general and special education teachers.

Acknowledgment

About the Pilot Community

The Networked Improvement Community (NIC) for Students with Disabilities was a pilot community of 10 charter management organizations serving diverse student populations across the country. Collectively, these CMOs serve more than 75,000 students. With support from technical assistance providers Marshall Street Initiatives, SWIFT Education Center, and research organizations NIRN, RTI International, and SRI International, our goal was to systematically improve the way we serve students with disabilities and bring these solutions back to school systems everywhere.

This work was made possible by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, guided by the belief that every life has equal value and everyone deserves to live a healthy and productive life.