Inclusive School Practices

Clark County School District (NV)

Summary Report

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The Clark County School District (CCSD) Student Support Services Division (SSSD) created the Inclusive School Practices (ISP) initiative seven years ago to support student-centered schools. The ISP initiative supported inclusive classrooms by emphasizing collaborative relationships between teachers and differentiated instructional practices to improve student outcomes among low achieving students. The District supported with professional development, consultant support, and funding for school supports. Beginning in the 2007/2008 academic year the CCSD Research Department began a three-year evaluation of the ISP initiative at the request of SSSD.

The three-year study documented how schools implemented inclusive school practices throughout CCSD. The first year examined the implementation of ISP at three schools new to the initiative. Principal perceptions and support were the focus of the second year. The third and final year examined the roles of the special education teachers and their interactions in the ISP classroom. Perceptions of parents, general and special education teachers, and principals were obtained through surveys and in-depth interviews. Additional data was acquired through classroom observations and student achievement measures.

This report summarizes the results of the three year study. Each group of stakeholders—parents, principals and teachers— results are presented. The analyses of the measured outcomes follow. Finally, recommendations that have been collected will be presented.

Stakeholder Perceptions

Parents

Parents whose children attended ISP schools had more favorable impressions of the schools and staff than parents whose children attended non-ISP schools. These parents saw ISP school staff as more welcoming and respectful. Parents perceived ISP schoolteachers as being higher quality teachers compared to the parent perceptions of non-ISP schoolteachers. The ISP school staff were perceived as being more positive. Those parents of ISP school students with IEPs reported that their children made greater gains in mathematics, organizational skills and social adjustment.

Principals

ISP school principals believed the ISP initiative was an effective strategy for all students and not just for students with IEPs. Most principals reported active engagement in the ISP initiative. Specifically, more than 70% attended the administrative and teacher professional development workshops. Principals then established professional development at each school, perceiving that teachers require additional professional development. Principles associated ISP with specific practices such as greater peer tutoring, more collaboration between teachers, which lead to increases in student achievement.

General Education Teachers

General education teachers reported favorable impressions of the ISP initiative. These teachers sought out professional development for inclusive classroom practices through the initiative sponsored workshops as well as other professional development opportunities. Other opportunities included book studies and workshops sponsored by the Curriculum and Professional Development Division. General education teachers reported high knowledge of

inclusive school practices and a strong sense of competence. It should be noted that both principals and special education teachers believed that general education teachers needed additional professional development. Perceptions of the general education teachers were collected only in their first year of ISP implementation and may not be representative of the larger teacher population.

Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers provided concrete outcomes associated with the ISP initiative. They specifically reported gains in academic content, student independence, self-concept and greater sense of belonging. The details provided were given in context by relating gains made by specific students. These teachers reported spending less time spent on behavior management. They saw students with IEPs more successful using inclusive school practices.

Special education teachers identified several issues related to inclusive school practices that they believed needed to be addressed. The largest issue was inconsistent communication between collaborating teachers. The details of this concern, and the others, are provided in the third year evaluation. Another issue presented was insufficient time available for planning collaborative activities. Reports of conflicts of “turf” between general and special education teachers were made at some schools.

There is consensus among the stakeholders that the ISP initiative is a successful approach for students who require additional support for their education. All participants believed students were making better achievement utilizing inclusive school practices. Students were benefiting with increased independence, social skills and sense of belonging.

Outcomes

Student Achievement

The ISP initiative benefited Title I elementary schools students that had higher CRT Reading scores than students at Title I schools who did not participate in the ISP initiative. No differences existed in the *non-Title I schools* regardless of ISP participation. Further, no differences existed between ISP and non-ISP middle schools.

No differences existed in student achievement for mathematics, reading, or science (CRT) between first year ISP elementary schools and first year control schools. Students with IEPs had higher science and reading scores at the first year ISP elementary schools, though only science scores were significantly different from the control schools. English Language Learners had higher science CRT scores at the ISP schools.

Analysis of the benchmark assessment AIMSweb found fourth grade students at the first year ISP schools had better reading comprehension than fourth grade students at the first year control schools. Fifth grade students with IEPs at the first year ISP schools had greater reading comprehension than those students at the first year control schools. Oral reading fluency scores were not different between the ISP and control school students.

When looking at ISP middle school students, schools with three or more years experience with the ISP initiative showed greater gains in reading and mathematics achievement than those students at middle schools that did not participate in the ISP initiative. Of the four types of middle schools (Title I ISP, Title I non-ISP, non-Title I ISP, non-Title I non-ISP) Title I ISP schools had the greatest gains. When looking at the middle school IEP population, no differences in achievement occurred between ISP and non-ISP schools.

Student Engagement

Principals and teachers reported greater student engagement at ISP schools compared to non-ISP schools. Classroom observations by outside observers confirmed high student engagement at the ISP schools. Observers identified more collaboration at ISP middle schools compared to ISP elementary schools. Title I elementary schools in the ISP initiative, on the other hand, tended to have less collaboration than non-Title I ISP elementary schools.

Student engagement correlated significantly to principal support for the ISP initiative. The degree of principal support correlated to the school culture of inclusion. Special education teachers reported principal support for inclusive classroom practices in general. Special education teachers also reported favorable conditions for collaborative teaching at most schools. Greater support from the principal was associated with stronger support and implementation of inclusive classroom practices; this in turn led to greater student engagement.

School Climate

ISP schools expressed greater equality among students and saw widespread benefits from the initiative. School staff consistently supported differentiated instruction and other related strategies. One consistent perception reported by students was a greater sense of belonging. Not all schools were as positive; several elementary school special education teachers reported issues regarding instruction and classroom ownership with general education teachers.

One key factor was the number of years a principal remained at a school. Longer school tenure for a principal correlated positively with greater implementation of inclusive classroom practices and student achievement. In addition, stronger principal support was associated with a more collaborative culture and a more positive outlook towards student achievement.

ISP Practices

Schools with more years of experience within the ISP initiative were more likely to have students working independent with less whole class instruction. These more experienced ISP schools were also less likely to have co-teaching as a predominant instructional model. The model One Teach and One Observe was more common. Middle schools were more collaborative instruction, or co-teaching, than elementary schools.

ISP schools with strong principal support had teachers with better organizational and instructional skills. Strong ISP school principals sought additional funding to support inclusive school practices. This strong ISP leadership was associated with higher student participation in peer tutoring. These supportive principals reported a more positive outlook about teacher collaboration and positive beliefs regarding student achievement.

Strengths

Almost every person surveyed or interviewed believed the ISP initiative had a positive influence on students' lives and that students were making gains in academic achievement, motivation, self-concept, and social skills. The test data suggested some academic gains were made in ISP schools and students were seen as more engaged.

School climate and culture was generally positive. The biggest factor in school climate was: 1) the degree of support and leadership offered by the principal, and 2) the length of tenure of a principal at a specific school.

Recommendations

Among principals and teachers, there is a consensus that ongoing professional development would add support to the ISP initiative. Additionally, teachers generated specific recommendations.

1. Hold an annual refresher course at the beginning of the school year.
2. Create a network where general and special education teachers from all ISP schools could share ideas and strategies.
3. Visit other ISP schools to gain and share ideas.

Lines of communication between administration, special and general education teachers need to be clearer. While some personnel reported clear lines of communication, many others did not. Reports of needing better communication were not inclusive of the entire school. Most special education teachers reported open channels of communication with administrators.

Communication between general and special education teachers appears to be more tenuous. The biggest obstacle appeared to be a lack of consistent structured time to plan and solve problems. The second largest obstacle appeared to be loss of autonomy by the general education teacher. Special education teachers reported conversations with general education teachers regarding classroom ownership. The special education teachers found these discussions stress-inducing. Principals reported the need for greater professional development for the general education teachers.

The last recommendation was the need for consistent scheduled collaborative planning time. Teachers reported consistently that collaborative planning was inconsistent and limited to emails, lunches and bathroom breaks. The lack of collaboration prevented cooperative teaching, accurate and timely differentiation in materials and instruction.

This study identified many of the same concerns and issues found in other research. However, this evaluation is more positive than previous studies. Teacher perceptions in general were more positive than McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) and others (Daam, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2001; Smith & Leonard, 2005; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Navarez, 2008). This study

further supports previous recommendations for ongoing professional development and strong leadership from site administrators. Having implemented such supports, SSSD has increased the likelihood for inclusion to be successful in CCSD schools.