

**Assessment of the Status of Inclusion in Danvers
Public Schools'
Elementary and Middle Schools**

**Assessment Conducted by Future
Management Systems
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Executive Summary

As a result of reviewing and discussing information contained in the a 2009 Rennie Center study¹, which points to inclusion as a practice contributing strongly to significant progress in improving academic growth of students with special needs, the Danvers school administration sought to undertake an assessment of the status of inclusion in Danvers elementary and middle schools. The assessment was completed in order to better understand the current scope and characteristics of inclusion in the district and the alignment of district practices with best practices outlined in the Rennie report.

The assessment involved site visits, record reviews, interviews with critical personnel, and reviews of survey and accountability data. Assessment activities were conducted with consideration of elements of best practices identified in the Rennie Center study report and alignment with practices in Danvers schools. Results of the assessment have been used to generate findings and recommendations for each of the elements considered: models of instruction, support and professional development for teachers, curriculum, assessment and data analysis, school culture, and district support.

The assessment generally found that while Danvers has a number of significant initiatives in place that can support effective inclusion of special needs students and assist in meeting the needs of all students, there are a number of ways in which these can be substantially strengthened. Additionally, there are instances in which ineffective use or lack of the best practice elements of the Rennie report provide cause for concern.

Models of instruction

Collaboration among general and special educators is a hallmark of successful inclusion. Expectation and systems for teachers to work collaboratively to solve problems around student learning vary greatly across the elementary schools and at the middle school. Some standard procedures that promote such collaboration, such as Student Study Team (SST), have become the norm in a limited number of schools. Although teachers appear to feel the level of cooperation among general and special educators is greatest at the elementary level, this cooperation seems to occur in pockets and does not always adequately support the strategies and accommodations needed for accessing the general curriculum. Successful models of inclusion limit the degree to which pull out support is provided. Pull out models of support continue to be heavily emphasized at the elementary level in Danvers, with the middle school providing a greater degree of collaborative instructional models.

¹ Seeking Effective Policies and Practices for Students with Special Needs, Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2009

Support and professional development for teachers

District-wide expectations regarding inclusion have not been clearly established across the district causing some confusion among some educators. Although substantial professional development has been provided to teachers across the district there has not been a clear focus or clear message regarding the relationship to instruction and learning for special education students. Additionally, teachers seem to feel they have not always been provided with the tools and support needed to address the needs of all students.

Curriculum

Danvers has made a strong commitment to aligning local curriculum K-12 with that of the state's curriculum frameworks over the past several years. However, general and special educators do not comprehensively appreciate that these standards and expectations apply to all students and that their collaborative work is needed to ensure access to the general curriculum. The work of data teams is establishing ways for teachers to connect issues of student achievement, curriculum standards and instructional models and to begin problem solving around those issues. However, this needs to be broadly established with all general and special educators.

Assessment and data analysis

Teachers in districts who were successful in significantly raising student achievement for the special education student subgroup analyzed and understood data at the student level. Danvers work with data teams is definitely moving the system in the right direction in this regard. Emphasis will also need to be placed on use of formative assessment data by all teachers, as well as data from MCAS.

School culture

The successful districts highlighted in the Rennie report all expressed the significance of school culture to their success with emphasis on joint ownership of student success and teacher collaboration and high expectations. Although teachers in Danvers reported high levels of cooperation among teachers, there was less acknowledgement of collaboration between general and special educators. While Danvers has established excellent opportunities for use of joint planning time, this does not appear to always be utilized for special and general educators work together. Teacher collaboration that promotes shared ownership of student learning was not evident in all schools. A renewed effort needs to be made by all involved to further establish and strengthen school cultures that maintain high curriculum, instruction and learning expectations for all and create a collaborative work environment among all teachers.

District support

Danvers has a record of having provided resources and support where needed in their educational programs. Although a number of related critical support elements have been put in place across the district, such as opportunities for joint planning time and investments in data teams, inclusionary programming appears to have grown without much attendance to many of the details necessary for it to be as effective as possible. A greater commitment to inclusion would be more evident through a focused approach to related professional development, established

district-wide expectations and the related leadership for inclusion and the collaborative work necessary for its effectiveness.

Assessment Process

The assessment process involved the following activities:

- Consultation with the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and Director of Special Education
- Site visits to each of the district's five elementary schools and to the middle school
- Interviews with each of those schools' principals
- Interviews with elementary and middle school special education team leaders, selected special education and curriculum staff and consultants working with the district.
- Review of survey data from Danvers School Climate Report completed by K12 Insight, which included parent, teacher and student responses in the areas of Student Support and School Culture and Climate
- Review of sample of special education records and documents from each site
- Review of documents related to pre-referral activities and procedures from each site
- Review of MCAS and accountability data for the district and for each site

As these activities were conducted, the following elements of inclusion and alignment with best practice were considered:

- Models of instruction
- Support and professional development for teachers
- Curriculum
- Assessment and data analysis
- School culture
- District Support

Results of the assessment have been used to generate findings and recommendations for each element considered. Findings and recommendations can be used to develop plans for future actions to support improvement of inclusive practices in Danvers elementary and middle schools and advance program development to improve the range of in-district special education services that encourage inclusion.

Recommendations

1. Establish district-wide expectations regarding inclusion and ensure that this message is consistently communicated to all staff at all levels by all district leadership.
2. Insure that a clear and consistent message is sent from the district Special Education department to all principals, special education staff, and teachers and general education teachers regarding the benefits of inclusion, and how it can be used as a tool.
3. Provide training and opportunities for building principals on the elements of successful inclusion programs.
4. Principals need to establish the expectation and develop mechanisms with teachers to work collaboratively to solve problems around student learning.
5. Consistently communicate the expectation of group ownership of student learning by all staff.
6. Principals at the elementary level should encourage special and general educators to examine ways in which greater emphasis is placed on providing collaborative approaches to general education classroom instruction.
7. SST needs to be instituted as a regular, frequent and formalized practice in each school as a proactive and first step in collaboratively addressing solutions to student learning problems.
8. Develop standardized systems at each site that provide ongoing support for teachers to gain the information necessary to provide for and accommodate students in an inclusive setting. This can range from better implementation of SST to formalizing how general and special educators use joint planning time or other methods to meet regularly to plan how to address individual learning needs and support access to the general curriculum.
9. Identify a differentiated instructional model and provide training for all teachers in using differentiated instruction to address the needs of all learners in their classrooms.
10. Clarify and more firmly and persistently substantiate at the site level the expectation that state and district curriculum standards and expectations apply to all students.
11. Establish a focus across the district on the provision of strategies and accommodations to assist all students in accessing and mastering the general curriculum. The work on math curriculum at the middle school could serve as the basis for a related professional development model, e.g. training on accessing the general curriculum, collaborative teaming on lesson planning and looking at student work, training in Universal Design for Learning.
12. Consistently communicate the necessity of collaboration by general and special educators in the development and implementation of strategies and accommodations to support access to the general curriculum.
13. The middle school co-teaching model should be monitored to ensure that flexible models of quality co-teaching are incorporated into every co-taught class.

14. At the time of annual reviews, at a minimum, IEPs should be reviewed to ensure that adequate flexibility is allowed for inclusion and that strategies and accommodations are emphasized that support access to the general curriculum.
15. All special education students should have some opportunity to be included with their same age/grade peers during the school day.
16. Develop a comprehensive, multi-year approach to the district's professional development plan that ensures consistent support for inclusion.
17. Establish and communicate the expectation that general and special educators will work collaboratively in pursuing solutions to student learning difficulties and will jointly participate in professional development offerings and opportunities.
18. Provide training to all staff about autism spectrum disorders and the implications for working with such students.
19. Continue the work of data teams and develop and plan ways in which connections from data to development of solutions to learning difficulties can be established with all teachers and ensure special educator representation on all data teams.
20. Establish the use of common assessments in mathematics at the elementary level.
21. Institute the use of formative assessments to identify gaps in student learning and use of the information to guide instruction at the individual teacher level.
22. Connect the assessment data and interventions of tiered intervention in math and reading at the elementary level with all other established practices of analyzing and discussing student learning.
23. At the site level, develop ways in which special and general educators can regularly utilize joint planning time for cooperative planning and dialogue about individual learning needs of students.
24. Bring teachers together to examine ways in which future scheduling can allow for the maximum amount of joint planning time.
25. Examine current district and site based procedures and encourage practices that bring teachers together to collaboratively address individual or group learning needs.
26. Provide opportunities for district principals to examine practices that successfully promote collaborative teaming, receptiveness to innovation, high expectations for all, and joint ownership of student learning.
27. Consider models for provision of more site based special education leadership that would assist principals in ensuring the quality of inclusive programs and practices.
28. Develop options for relieving the inequitable distribution of special education programs across schools at the elementary level.