



## Challenging Change:

*How Schools and Districts are Improving the Performance of Special Education Students*



**National Center for Learning Disabilities**  
*The power to hope, to learn, and to succeed.*

# Challenging Change:

## *How Schools and Districts are Improving the Performance of Special Education Students*

A publication of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc. made possible by the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation.

### **Our Mission**

The National Center for Learning Disabilities works to ensure that the nation's 15 million children, adolescents and adults with learning disabilities have every opportunity to succeed in school, work and life. NCLD provides essential information to parents, professionals and individuals with learning disabilities, promotes research and programs to foster effective learning and advocates for policies to protect and strengthen educational rights and opportunities.

**Project Director:** Laura Kaloi, National Center for Learning Disabilities

**Authors:** Candace Cortiella and Jane Burnette, The Advocacy Institute

**Publication Design:** Deb Tanner



381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401, New York, NY 10016-8806

Telephone 212.545.7510 Facsimile 212.545.9665

[www.LD.org](http://www.LD.org)

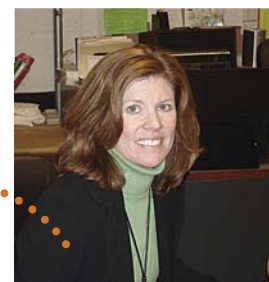
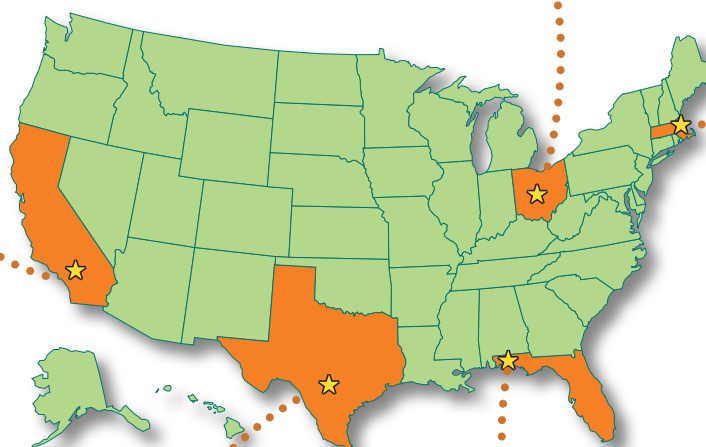
# Dedication

The National Center for Learning Disabilities dedicates this publication to the five education professionals who generously contributed their time and energy to help us tell their stories. We appreciate their commitment to all children, and, in particular, to children with disabilities. We appreciate their courage to move forward with bold instructional changes, adopt practices some may have opposed, and build new collaborative relationships to bring about needed improvements. Most of all, we appreciate their firm belief that all children can learn.

**Tamu Gibbs**  
Principal  
Worthington Hills  
Elementary School  
Ohio



**Jim Canter**  
Assistant  
Superintendent  
Curriculum and  
Instruction  
Snowline Joint Unified  
School District  
California



**Deborah Rooney**  
Principal  
Mary Lyon School  
Massachusetts



**Judith Higgins  
Moening**  
Executive Director  
Special Education  
North East Unified  
School District  
Texas



**Lois Handzo**  
Director  
Student Intervention  
Services  
Okaloosa County  
School District  
Florida

# Foreword

by Karin Chenoweth



Not long ago I sat in a meeting permeated with a sense of urgency because it was a high school in danger of not meeting federal Adequate Yearly Progress standards. Faculty member after faculty member described “interventions” they were using to help students pass end-of-course exams. Then the head of the special education department reported that in order to help students with learning disabilities pass the state test in biology, the primary “intervention” was that the students were now being enrolled in biology classes. This marked a change in practice and goes a long way in explaining why so few had passed the biology test the previous years—students with learning disabilities hadn’t even taken biology before taking the state tests! Mind you, she was not talking about students with severe cognitive disabilities but students with learning disabilities who were seeking regular high school diplomas.

Reading this report reminded me of that meeting and of the fact that for too long, students who are capable of learning complicated material have been excluded from the general curriculum. Because they had some kind of disability—such as a learning disability—they were not expected to meet generally accepted academic standards. I can’t even remember all the times I have heard the sentiment, “If they could meet standards they wouldn’t have a disability,” a statement that betrays both a profound misunderstanding of disabilities and the role special education services is supposed to play, which is helping to shape and scaffold instruction in order to provide access to the general curriculum.

This report also helps remind us that it has only been in the past few years, since the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (otherwise known as No Child Left Behind), that the nation has said that all students who do not have severe cognitive disabilities are expected to meet standards. The assessment and data reporting systems put in place as a result have been crucial to our understanding how deep that challenge is, and how much needs to change in how we organize instruction. But they have also allowed us to identify schools and districts that have something to teach us about these things.

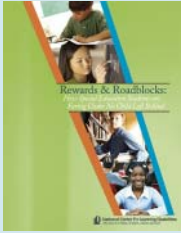
Through the leadership of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, this report identifies just a small handful of examples of schools and districts that have traveled down the road of organizing instruction around the needs of individual students, but even this small sample helps us see the kinds of things that are necessary—comprehensive curricula tied to clear standards so that teachers know what to teach; good data systems so that teachers know which students need additional help; and time and opportunity for teachers to consult and learn from each other and experts in the field.

I have not visited the schools and districts discussed in this report, but I am sure all of the educators represented would be quick to point out their schools' flaws and shortcomings. It is important to remember that success does not mean perfection but steady improvement, and improvement requires trying, assessing, revising, reflecting, and making changes based on past experience. That is just what is described in this report, which should give hope to all of us that high achievement for all students is within our reach. As one educator in this report says, "This is not a special education issue. This is an instructional issue."

Karin Chenoweth is a long-time education writer and author of *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Harvard Education Press, 2007). She is currently with The Education Trust.

# Introduction

This report builds on the National Center for Learning Disabilities' (NCLD) previous report, *Rewards and Roadblocks: How Special Education Students are Faring Under No Child Left Behind*, released in June 2007.



Thomas Hehir, Ph.D., director of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education School Leadership Program and former director of the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, said this about *Rewards and Roadblocks*: "The National Center for Learning Disabilities has provided a review of the evidence that links improved outcomes for students with disabilities with No Child Left Behind. Though more needs to be done, students with disabilities appear to be benefiting from NCLB, greater access to general curriculum, and better inclusive practices. The report provides meaningful evidence and recommendations for our nation's policy makers, and NCLD should be applauded for making it available."

The improvement efforts highlighted in *Rewards and Roadblocks* compelled NCLD to produce a report dedicated entirely to a review of the activities that schools and districts have undertaken to increase the academic success of their special education students. These activities include a variety of strategies for success—strategies selected for the unique circumstances of each school or district and combined in specific ways to work within their individual environments. The creators of these efforts did not try to reinvent the wheel—they relied upon techniques developed and proven by research to be effective in improving student learning.

Some of these schools and districts have used results of the testing requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—known as the No Child Let Behind Act (NCLB)—to increase their success. On a national level, NCLB represents an effort to both ensure and increase student achievement, particularly for groups of students who historically perform poorly.

Most agree that one of the most valuable aspects of NCLB is its requirement for separate reporting of the scores of certain groups of students, including students with disabilities, in order to ensure that all students are both included in the testing and achieving at the expected rate of proficiency. This requirement is intended to provide greater transparency for those looking at student performance and to focus more attention on particular groups of students who, until now, may have been overlooked.

Low expectations for students with disabilities led some schools and districts across the nation to react negatively to the idea of including students with disabilities in state testing and school accountability. Since the curriculum of many students with disabilities was not focused on state standards—the standards on which the general education curriculum is based—they were not expected to perform well on testing geared to those standards. These schools particularly did not want to focus attention on the scores of students with disabilities by reporting them as a separate group. The effect was to marginalize students with disabilities by excluding them from the testing, using alternate testing more frequently than necessary, or testing them well below their enrolled grades.

The initial poor performance of students with disabilities in many schools is not startling. Before the enactment of NCLB, many students with disabilities were not included in state assessment programs, nor were they taught to states' challenging academic content standards. What is remarkable is the amount of progress that some schools and districts have made in improving their educational programs for students with disabilities. The testing and reporting requirements of NCLB caused these schools to take a hard look at their instructional approach and expectations for students with disabilities, recognize the need for improvement, and take action. While many continue to lament NCLB's mandates regarding students with disabilities, some schools have used them as valuable tools for change.

This report looks at the activities undertaken by five schools or districts to improve the learning of students with disabilities. Some of them developed their programs in response to poor showing on NCLB's required tests and designed successful programs to improve. It is significant that they have used NCLB scores both as measures of success and as a tool for educational decision making in their improvement efforts. Other schools presented here had different motivations. Regardless of their motivation, all have achieved success by embracing change to tackle their challenges and by challenging themselves to change, the result is meaningful reform.





The **Mary Lyon School** in Massachusetts is a school designed from the start to incorporate strategies that benefit students with disabilities. It is a small school, rich in resources, that has used these resources in novel ways to benefit its students. It is a young school, started in 1992 by a principal who was considered an expert in behavior management. Forty one percent of its students have disabilities, primarily emotional or behavioral disabilities. Its small classes are fully integrated, with about one third of the students in each class having special needs. All teachers are dually certified in general and special education. Mary Lyon School has a total commitment to inclusion, a commitment so strong that all students are prepared for participation in the general statewide testing. On these tests, its students with special needs have consistently shown exemplary performance, sometimes outperforming those without disabilities.



In Florida, the **Okaloosa County School District** pushed to include more students in general education programs, which led to extensive change. The district cut its central office spending to cover the costs of change. Now, more than 65% of the district's students with disabilities spend all or most of their school day in general education classes, with the district's high schools running closer to 80%. Students with disabilities are encouraged to sign up for advanced placement and honors classes. Since its push for inclusion began in 2001, the number of students with disabilities who pass Florida's state achievement tests has increased from 41% to 69% in reading and from 47% to 78% in math.



In Ohio, **Worthington Hills Elementary School** stands out in its district for taking bold steps to improve its education for students with disabilities. A school of 430 students outside of Columbus, Worthington Hills has consistently achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP). Still, because its district failed to achieve AYP for two consecutive years, every school in the district is required to improve the academic performance of students with disabilities. Worthington Hills' first step was to improve access to the general curriculum by focusing on grade level standards in IEPs, in line with Ohio's move to align IEP goals with state standards. The next year, Worthington Hills staff implemented a full inclusion model—putting the special education teacher in the regular education classroom—for its upper grades. General education teachers began to take “ownership” of special education students, and scores are on the rise.



In Texas, **North East Independent School District**—a school district with a long history of strong performance on state tests and a high percentage of college-bound students—found itself facing a challenge when 10 of its 61 schools failed to make AYP as required by NCLB. The performance of students with disabilities played a major factor in these results. The district faced this situation head on, developing an aggressive, three-pronged improvement plan. First, more students were moved out of pull out programs and into the general education classroom for more of the school day. Second, the number of students taking “out of level” tests, i.e., tests designed for students in lower grades, in statewide testing, was dramatically reduced. Third, the district formed “data coaching teams” that worked with each principal to examine student achievement, providing a method of using test data to improve instructional decisions so teachers could address each student's individual needs. Scores improved. In 2006-07, 83% of special education students taking the Texas regular state assessment in reading performed at the proficient level and 74% performed at the proficient level in math.



In California, **Snowline Joint Unified School District** was a district whose special education students had scored below the state's required rate of proficiency in English/Language Arts for two consecutive years—2003 and 2004. Snowline's plan of action involved a process structured around data and standards. The district focused on collaboration among general and special education teachers, analysis of assessment data, and development of data-based classroom strategies and student interventions to improve achievement. Since 2003, the percentage of Snowline's students with disabilities who met state standards in math and English has tripled.

The schools and districts profiled in this report have high expectations for the future of their students. They have applied ingenuity to implement their improvement programs. Each program has a multitude of components and characteristics. As you read their stories, notice the creative ways in which the schools approach the different aspects of their programs.

Notice how they:

- included students with disabilities in general education classrooms,
- used data to adjust instruction to each student's individual needs,
- changed the ways that teachers work together, and
- restructured administrative organizations and procedures.

Each school or district is unique, yet each has improved its students' success.



## Mary Lyon School



### School Profile

	Students with Disabilities	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Proficient
Mary Lyon	41%	55%	48%	3%
Boston School District	20%	71%	86%	18%
Massachusetts	17%	29%	29%	6%

Sources: Boston Public Schools at a Glance; MA Dept. of Education.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Deborah O. Rooney, Principal**

*"The Mary Lyon School's full inclusion model is what allows us to support our students to achieve success. We believe that if students have a strong foundation in math and literacy skills, they can do well on MCAS testing, no matter what the test brings. Each of our teachers has been trained in a variety of safety net programs that they are able to use to provide additional scaffolding to meet the needs of each and every student in their class. When we find an approach that works with a student, then we make sure that every teacher is trained, so that the student can be given the same support year after year, building upon the work that has already been done. Our teachers are able to teach lessons to the whole group based on MA standards, and then provide additional individualized support for students during guided practice. We take the time to learn about each student's learning style and adapt our instruction to meet their needs. We believe that it is our job to present the curriculum in a way that makes sense to them, not their job to try to understand us. Our students are thinkers and problem solvers. We teach them that effective effort is the key to success. If they work hard and try their best, they will achieve great results."*

The Mary Lyon School serves approximately 120 students in Grades K-8 in the Brighton section of Boston, Massachusetts. Many of its students have special needs, primarily neurological, emotional or behavioral disabilities (see profile). If not for the Mary Lyon School, these students may have been sent to segregated private day schools, psychiatric units and even residential treatment facilities. The school was started in 1992 by a principal who was considered an expert in behavior management, and its staff is exceptionally well qualified.

Current principal, Deborah Rooney, describes the school as "a school like no other! The Mary Lyon is a school that understands that students with special needs can learn, given access to a rigorous curriculum with appropriate scaffolding to support them as they learn new concepts, a staff that is dedicated to figuring it out, and families who are willing to work with the school based team to design effective treatment plans that address both cognitive and social emotional needs of the students."

Mary Lyon serves all of its students with special needs in a full inclusion model. There is a single classroom for each of the nine grade levels, with each class



including 10 typically developing students and 5 students with severe emotional or behavioral problems. The school does not use resource rooms or pullout programs—all students receive services in the same environment. The school also offers both before- and after-school programs.

Each class is taught by a master teacher, an assistant teacher, and an after-school teacher. In some classes, the assistant teacher is a graduate intern assigned for the full school year. The school tries to ensure that the grade-level teams represent different racial and cultural backgrounds and genders so that students will be able to see their teachers work together and solve problems in harmony.

**Philosophy and Focus.** Consistent with its emphasis on inclusion, the school's overall focus is to provide instruction for all students that will enable them to master the academic and social skills needed to be successful in 21st century workplaces. Decisions ranging from organizing schedules to selecting staff to solving instructional issues are geared toward this goal. A strong focus on MCAS, Massachusetts' statewide test, permeates the school.

The school's philosophy views both teachers and students as people in development. Analysis of periodic student assessment data is used to inform curriculum and instruction, and MCAS data are analyzed to identify gaps in the curriculum. In addition to analyzing the data

## Massachusetts Testing

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is used to test all public school students in Massachusetts, to measure performance based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework learning standards, and to report on the performance of individual students, schools, and districts. MCAS tests four content areas: English/Language Arts; Mathematics; Science and Technology/Engineering; and History and Social Science.

The MCAS program is also used to hold schools and districts accountable, on a yearly basis, for the progress they have made toward the objective of the No Child Left Behind Act that all students be proficient in Reading and Mathematics by 2014. Students must pass 10th Grade tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics to be eligible for a high school diploma.

## What Works at Mary Lyon

- Total commitment to inclusion
- Use of dually-certified teachers
- Small class sizes
- Schoolwide behavior management program
- Creative scheduling
- Extra planning time
- Professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals
- Frequent communications with parents
- Strong before-school and after-school programs

themselves, teachers ask their students to tell them what they didn't understand on exams that they have taken. Teaching modules are then built around any identified gaps or problem areas. The school has a formal structure that allows teachers to discuss their mistakes, and problem solving is ongoing and collaborative. In the spirit of a learning community, individual teachers research and share the latest thinking in content instruction at regular bi-weekly curriculum planning meetings.

Another aspect of the school's philosophy is its strong commitment to parent involvement. The school develops individual student communication plans to manage its connections with every family. The principal meets personally with each family, and teachers routinely call parents. Many parents receive daily logbooks detailing their child's academic and social progress, with reports sent home every two weeks. The school also holds MCAS information meetings where parents can see rubrics and test questions. According to one Mary Lyon parent, the school's commitment to parent involvement "reflects their dedication to truly serving students with special needs. The school is just as committed to the success and achievement of the special needs students as to any other children in the school. As a parent, it's reassuring that home and school are working together toward common goals."

Behavior management is infused throughout the school. All students are taught coping strategies so that they can focus their thoughts. They are also taught to mediate interpersonal conflicts that could interfere with their



The school is just as committed to the success and achievement of the special needs students as to any other children in the school. As a parent, it's reassuring that home and school are working together toward common goals.

– Mary Lyon parent



ability to complete their work and master the instructional standards of the school system. Students are specifically taught how to help and support peers who are having difficulties, how to work cooperatively with each other, and how to solve conflicts. They are taught not to tolerate abuse. All teachers have received training in how to deescalate conflicts. The school aims for a well-run, quiet and productive learning environment for all.

**Curriculum and Instruction.** The school's commitment to total inclusion ensures that special education students have access to the regular education curriculum, and dual certification of teachers produces a blend of curriculum and teaching strategies. While using the best-qualified staff at all levels may be expensive, the total lack of pull out programs results in savings.

Instruction is directed to mastery of the material, with the target of enabling all students, including those with complicated learning styles, to master at least grade level curricula. Any child who has measurable developmental delay is expected to achieve to his or her individual, maximum feasible potential. The approach is to teach concepts until all students achieve a mastery level of performance in a particular standard area, then re-teach the concept in a different way until the student reaches mastery level performance.

Instructional decisions are informed by real data. Teachers constantly assess and determine what a child needs in order to thrive. Data from state tests, the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and school-designed assessments are also used to modify classroom instruction. Identified problem areas may become “problems of the week” and the focus of staff development; areas of weakness are identified for next year's teachers who are responsible for remediating areas of weakness for each student.

**Teacher Qualifications.** In addition to a principal who holds a Master's degree and principal's license and is dually certified in general and special education, staff includes a dually-certified program director who holds three Master's degrees and a principal's license, and two clinicians (a licensed mental health counselor and a licensed clinical social worker). All teachers hold Master's degrees and are dually certified in general and special education. Many of the school's paraprofessionals are enrolled in teacher training programs leading to a Master's degree and a dual license in general and special education.

The after-school program is operated through a contract with the Walker School, a school for students with behavioral and neurological disabilities. The Walker School provides staff for the after-school program as well as training in therapeutic crisis intervention.

Teachers at Mary Lyon receive additional professional development throughout the school year that usually exceeds the 30 hours included in the Boston Teachers' Union contract. All teachers and paraprofessionals receive 12 hours of instruction on how to deal with students who present severe behavior problems, as well as ongoing development through communications and collaboration with other staff. Teachers also participate in weekly curriculum meetings in English/Language Arts and Math after school. They are encouraged to attend conferences and workshops annually and to build their skills in identified areas to better understand the needs of students with disabilities.

**Scheduling.** A number of creative scheduling options were developed by Mary Lyon School's first principal, Mary Nash. She organized the school day to provide teachers with daily common planning and problem solving time. To do this, Nash negotiated an agreement with the teachers so that teachers could come to school a half hour early one day each week for grade level meetings, in which

the therapeutic treatment plans for students are designed. In return, teachers receive a longer lunch hour daily. These practices were not covered by the union contract, yet agreed to by all staff.

Common planning time, both formal and informal, keeps teachers on the same page in terms of approach to individual student learning and allows them to share ideas to improve individual students' performance. Planning time occurs before, during, and after school. Daily team meetings focus on individual students and all people who work with the student must attend these meetings, including the clinician, paraprofessionals and assistant teachers, after school teachers, itinerant service providers, and sometimes parents and outside therapists and psychiatrists. The elementary school schedules a two-hour literacy block, and one and a half hours for math and science. The middle school has a two-hour block for math and science, and a two-hour block for humanities.

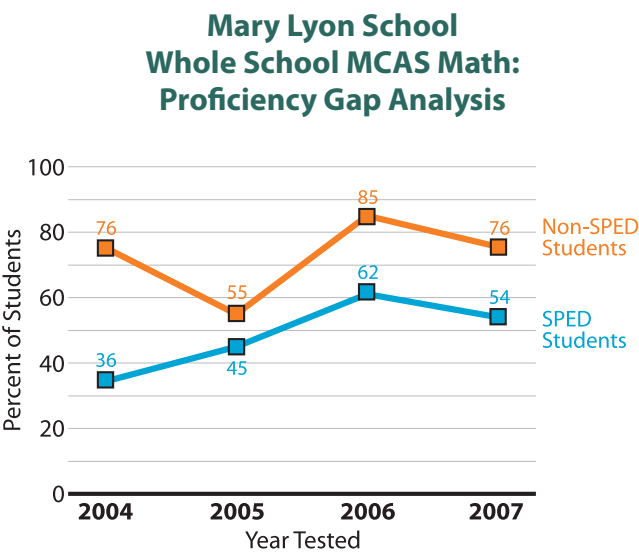
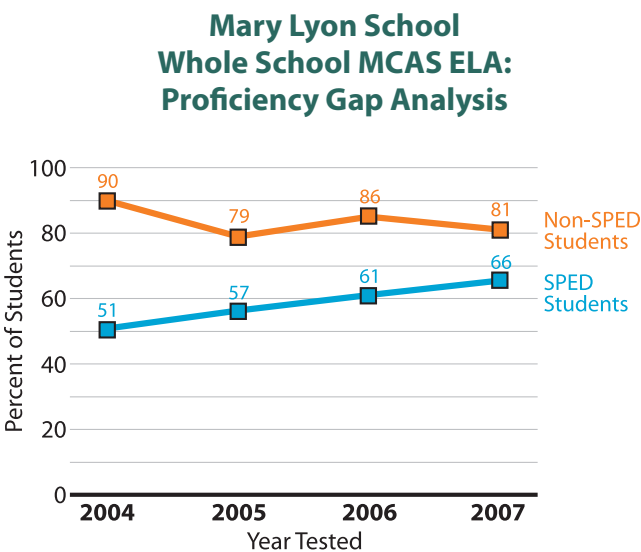
Teachers are also given the opportunity for flextime, which allows them to run the before- and after-school programs.

**State Testing and Accommodations.** With more than 41% of its students identified as having special needs, Mary Lyons' proportion of students with disabilities is

substantially higher than both the district and statewide averages. Its philosophy toward inclusion is so strong that all students are prepared for general testing with traditional accommodations rather than for alternate testing. Accommodations that are not allowed on the MCAS are not written into students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to be used during instruction because the school believes that students must learn to succeed under real world conditions.

The school takes several steps to maximize MCAS achievement. The principal meets with each parent and discusses the MCAS, and, as part of the discussion, the parent is encouraged to be confident of the child's success on the exam. The school places a major emphasis on teaching students how to take the test. Following the February school vacation, the school increases its focus on MCAS preparation, including visual wall art reinforcing key themes and stressing the importance of the MCAS exam. Staff also work with students to increase their coping skills and to reduce test anxiety.

**Results.** Mary Lyon students with special needs have consistently shown exemplary performance on the MCAS. In 2007, 54% of the 8th graders scored as advanced in math, placing the school at 4th in the state.





## Okaloosa County School District



### School Profile

	Students with Disabilities	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Proficient
Okaloosa County School District	16%	30%	27%	3%
Florida	15%	45%	53%	8%

Sources: FLDOE/eias, Okaloosa County School District Management Information Systems.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Lois Handzo**, Director  
Student Intervention Services

*"Accountability requirements have created the need for educators to focus on current academic achievement, grade level expectations, performance mastery, and assessment data. However, educators must look beyond the daily academic environment and realize that their students are the future. These students, including those with disabilities, will be seeking employment in a competitive workforce. It is critical that students with disabilities be provided the same opportunities as their peers to gain the education and skills necessary to transition from school to the world of work. Students with disabilities want to be challenged in the classroom with the same rigorous curriculum as their peers. To assist these students in rising to the challenge, instruction must be differentiated to accommodate individual learning styles, and supports must be in place to ensure success. All students must be given opportunities to learn to the best of their abilities — their future depends upon it."*

Okaloosa County School District, located in Fort Walton Beach on Florida's panhandle, has 39 schools serving more than 30,000 students ranging from pre-kindergarten to vocational adult education. More than 2,500 teachers serve these students. The district serves three military bases. About 16% of Okaloosa's students qualify for special education services—called Exceptional Student Education or ESE in Okaloosa. Despite budgetary constraints, the school district provides an exemplary educational program that results in continued high performance of its students. Okaloosa is now the highest-rated school district in the state.

The District Superintendent, Alexis Tibbetts, describes the district as "a blend of rural, military and cosmopolitan communities coming together to provide exemplary educational programs for students and families. Our parent population values education and sends us students disciplined, motivated and ready to learn. Our teachers are highly trained professionals in their areas of expertise. There is a cooperative spirit between general education and ESE teachers."

**Philosophy and Focus.** In 2001, Okaloosa began an aggressive push to include its special education students in general education classroom. Efforts to include more students in general education classrooms had been in place in Okaloosa since the 90's. But when Don Gaetz, now a Florida state senator, became superintendent in 2000, he found far too many special education students in separate classrooms. According to Gaetz, "We tried to eliminate special education ghettos and stop the segregation."

Nationwide, approximately 54% of students with disabilities spend all or most of their school day in general education classrooms. In Okaloosa, that number exceeds 65%, with the district's high schools running closer to 80%. Researchers agree that many special education students make better social and educational gains when they are included in general education classrooms rather than separate classes or facilities. Okaloosa also has a policy of encouraging students with disabilities to sign up for Advanced Placement and honors courses.

To fund its inclusive approach to special education, Okaloosa has made cuts in central office spending. Administrative positions were cut, slashing administrative costs that could then be redirected to schools. Initially, more than 40 administrative positions were dropped, saving the district about \$6 million a year. By making such deep cuts in central-office spending, the district was able to push more resources into classrooms. Schools receive 92% of the base student allocation received from the state, as well as additional funds based on student characteristics. This decentralization has allowed schools the latitude to hire the special education and other personnel most needed by their individual populations.



**We tried to eliminate special education ghettos and stop the segregation.**

– Dan Gaetz, Superintendent, 2000



## What Works in Okaloosa

- High expectations for special education students
- Commitment to mainstreaming special education students
- Shifting money from administration to direct services
- Strong collaboration between general and special education teachers and team teaching
- Frequent progress monitoring
- More intensive services for low-performing students
- Decentralized decision making
- Prohibiting social promotions

The district prides itself on cost containment while focusing on strong support for special education students. Overall, Okaloosa spends a little more than \$9,400 a year per special education student—nearly \$1,300 less than the state average—while producing significantly better performance by special education students on state assessments.

**School Performance Plans.** Each school in the district develops a performance plan each year. This "School Performance Plan" is the guiding document for a school's major initiatives for performance. A committee of parents, faculty members, administrators and community members develops the plan, which is then approved by the School Advisory Council. School performance plans are written to reflect the data trends at each school. Based on in-depth analysis of data, the schools develop strategies and innovative instructional methods to improve the performance of each target group in reaching NCLB and district goals. Professional development activities are embedded within these plans to provide the students with quality instruction.



**Curriculum and Instruction.** The district uses results from Florida’s achievement test, known as FCAT, and other standardized exams to monitor student progress. All students who fail FCAT in reading and math are required to take remedial courses in those subjects in addition to their regular coursework.

The school district ended social promotion—a policy that let elementary students advance to the next grade even when they failed standardized tests. Instead, it provides more intensive instruction to these students, both during and before/after the school day. Students who are not promoted are assigned new teachers the following year, and individual learning plans are developed for them. In addition, the school year is extended through Summer Intensive Studies and/or Extended School Year Services.

The progress of every special education student is monitored frequently, with grades tracked by computer, sometimes as often as daily. At the high school level, each student with a disability is assigned to a special education teacher who tracks the student’s daily academic progress and makes sure general education teachers are fully informed about the student’s disabilities and needs.

In keeping with its push to inclusion, Okaloosa instituted “team teaching”—an instructional approach that pairs general education teachers with special education teachers to work together in classrooms of both general and special education students. Extra help and training is provided to general education teachers to enable them to understand the instructional needs of students with disabilities. The result is an unusually high degree of coordination between special and general education teachers. Okaloosa also works closely with the local office of the Florida Inclusion Network, whose facilitators can provide workshops, school-based learning opportunities, consultation, and resources to support the education of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and settings. Training with individual schools includes general education and special education teachers collaborating as teams to develop methods of planning and working together to implement inclusive practices. The Florida Inclusion Network also provides resources for families as they collaborate with the school to plan inclusive educational opportunities for their children.

**Results.** Since its push for inclusion began in 2001, Okaloosa’s special education students have shown significant improvement in academic achievement. The number of students with disabilities who pass state achievement tests has increased from 41% to 69% in reading and from 47% to 78% in math.

Since the 2001-2002 school year, the additional support provided to all students—intensive reading and math courses, before and after school tutoring, a collaborative partnership with AmeriCorps to provide tutoring to students during the school day, and differentiated instruction—has contributed to the notable improvement in assessment scores and the mastery of the grade-level Florida standards for both general education students and special education students. These supports, which facilitate improvement, are also evident in the fact that in 2002, 74% of Okaloosa County’s schools earned the designation of “A” schools by the state of Florida. In 2007, the percent of schools earning an “A” was 94%, with the remaining 6% earning a “B”.

Special education graduates appear to be doing well after graduation, as well—within six months of graduation, about 68% of Okaloosa’s special education graduates are either employed or pursuing additional education.

## Florida Testing

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is part of Florida’s overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards. The FCAT, administered to students in Grades 3-11, includes criterion-referenced tests (CRT) in Mathematics, Reading, Science, and Writing from the Sunshine State Standards (SSS); and norm-referenced tests (NRT) in Reading and Mathematics, measuring individual student performance against national norms.

In 2003, Florida law began allowing districts to waive the FCAT requirement for students with disabilities who take the test at least three times, maintain a 2.0 average on all required courses and take tutoring and remediation courses.



## Worthington Hills Elementary School



### School Profile

	Students with Disabilities	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Proficient
Worthington Hills	10%	4%	9%	—
Worthington School District	10%	14%	20%	4%
Ohio	14%	35%	24%	2%

Sources: 2006-2007 School Year Report Cards, Ohio Department of Education Enrollment by Student Demographic.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

#### Tamu Gibbs, Principal

*"The Worthington Hills inclusion model involves the special education teacher, known as an Intervention Specialist in Ohio, collaborating and/or co-teaching with the four content area teachers (science, social studies, and mathematics and language arts). In essence, the Intervention Specialist co-teaches language art with the regular education content teacher. The Intervention Specialist also spends time in the math class providing additional instructional support.*

*The inclusion model allows students to remain in the regular education environment for the majority of their instructional time with support being given by the Intervention Specialist. This allows students to be included in the regular classroom and have individualized support from the intervention specialist—the best of both worlds. Parents and students have shared that they are happy that children remain in the regular educational environment for the majority of the day. In addition, teachers have enjoyed collaborating when planning, implementing, and reflecting on their instructional practices."*

Worthington Hills Elementary School is located in Worthington, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus. The school serves approximately 430 students in grades K-6. Students with disabilities make up just over 10% of the school's enrollment. In the 2006-2007 school year Worthington Hills earned a rating of "excellent" from the Ohio Department of Education—a distinction awarded to less than one-third of Ohio schools. Student proficiency in both reading and mathematics far exceeds the state average. For example, 96.6% of Worthington Hills' sixth grade students scored proficient or higher in reading vs. the state proficient level of 77.7%. In 4th grade mathematics, 96% of Worthington Hills' students scored proficient or above while the state average was 75.9%. It is this level of performance that has enabled Worthington Hills to achieve AYP, as required by NCLB, for several consecutive years.

Current principal, Tamu Gibbs, describes the school as "a high performing school which is committed to meeting the needs of all students. This means disaggregating our data to make sure that all students are progressing academically." Gibbs has taken the many challenges of NCLB personally—she is

pursuing a Doctorate in Educational Administration at Ohio University. Her doctoral dissertation is focused on strategies suburban principals are employing to close the achievement gap for subgroup students in grade 3-8 in reading on the Ohio Achievement Test.

The Worthington School District—where Worthington Hills Elementary is located—has failed to achieve AYP for two consecutive years in both reading and math. This designation requires every school in the district to focus its attention on improving performance among the groups of students who have been falling short of the required proficiency level—in this case, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency.

And, while Worthington Hills Elementary achieved AYP, it did so in part because it was not required to achieve AYP among its group of special education students due to the ‘minimum group size’ established by the state.

**Philosophy and Focus.** Worthington School District is committed to the philosophy that all students can learn. To that end, it created “Worthington 2020: Creating Tomorrow for ALL Children”—the renewal of the educational program. In addition, Worthington administrators are participating in a 3-year comprehensive professional development program. The program—developed by the Mid-continent Research for Education

## What Works at Worthington Hills

- Special education services delivered within general education classrooms
- Thorough knowledge of state academic content standards by special education teachers
- Reading intervention program delivered within general education classrooms
- Shared responsibility for special education students
- Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) focused on grade-level academic content standards
- Common planning time for special education and regular education content teachers
- On-going communication and collaboration with parents
- Belief that all students can learn

and Learning (MCREL)—includes assisting district leadership in bridging the gap between research and practice; drawing upon more than 30 years of educational research. The training has helped Gibbs learn from



her peers within the district while also providing her a venue for sharing information about what's working at Worthington Hills Elementary.

The school's focus on state academic content standards as integral to the development of IEPs for special education students is a direct result of Ohio's move to align IEP goals with state standards. The state developed and distributed a CD entitled *"Standards-Based Education in Ohio: Providing Access to the General Education Curriculum for Students with Disabilities"* that covers the state standards and how they should be applied to the development of IEPs and special education programs. In 2007, Ohio developed its *Individualized Education Program (IEP) Inter-Rater Agreement Tool*, which is used to identify strategically designed IEPs that support improved student performance. The tool is helping parents and educators across the state gain a better understanding of what is important in an IEP so that it leads to improved teaching, learning and results for students with disabilities.

**Curriculum and Instruction.** Worthington Hills set out to implement a series of instructional changes for its special education students. When Gibbs arrived at Worthington Hills three years ago, special education services were delivered through the traditional "pull out" model—a special education teacher would take eligible students out of their general education classes into a separate room (often referred to as a "resource" room) everyday to work on specific skills as specified in each student's IEP. Gibbs questioned the value of such a model, given the poor academic achievement of special education students. During the following year the school worked to improve access to the general curriculum through a clear focus on the grade level state standards when developing and implementing all student IEPs. Yet little improvement in academic achievement was realized.

A bolder step was taken at the beginning of the 2007-2008 school year. Sweeping aside the traditional "resource room" model, Worthington Hills staff implemented a full inclusion model—putting the special education teacher in the regular education classroom. Beginning with 5th and 6th grades, this approach strengthened the relationship between special and general education. The general education teachers began to take more ownership of the special education students. And the students feel better



The inclusion model has afforded us the opportunity to engage students in targeted learning, provide immediate feedback, and present various intervention strategies to ensure their success.

– Kathy Mikkelson, Special Education Teacher



about themselves—remaining in the general education classroom erases the stigma frequently attached to special education. Gibbs observes "the regular education and special education teachers work collaboratively to plan, implement, and reflect on their instructional practices. In addition, all students are present in the regular education environment throughout the entire instructional time. In fact, it would be hard for a visitor to decipher the special education children from the regular education students. Furthermore, it would be equally difficult to identify the regular education teacher and the special education teacher."

This approach didn't happen without lots of preparation. The special education teacher spent time working with the regular education teachers, because this model requires regular education teachers to have an in-depth understanding of each student's individualized education program (IEP). In addition, it was important to meet with parents and students to explain the new inclusion model. In some cases, IEPs needed adapting to allow for services to be provided in the regular education classroom.

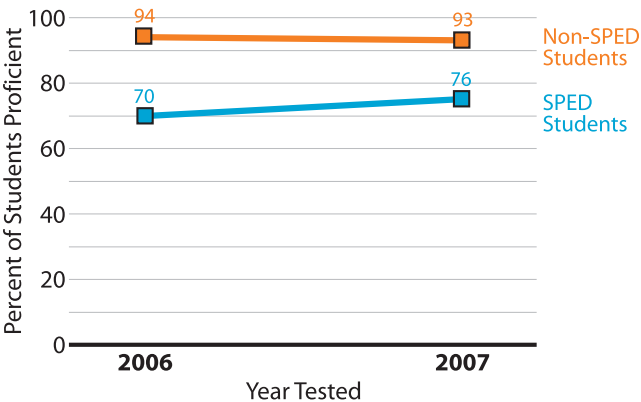
Special Education Teacher, Kathy Mikkelson says "It has been a wonderful experience being part of an intermediate classroom team. Co-teaching 5th and 6th grade Language Arts has provided us with valuable information about all our students. The quality of student work along with increased level of participation has been evident with team teaching. The inclusion model has afforded us the opportunity to engage students in targeted learning,



provide immediate feedback, and present various intervention strategies to ensure their success.”

**Results.** Worthington Hills special education students have shown improvements in reading. Performance at the proficient level among students with disabilities rose from 70% in 05-06 to 76% in 06-07 (see chart). The changes are new and limited to the upper grades, so achievement is expected to improve as all grades convert to an inclusion model of delivering special education services. Meanwhile, the school continues to work hard at blurring the lines of special and general education, improving access to grade-level standards, and promoting academic excellence for all students.

**Worthington Hills Elementary School  
Third through Sixth Grades: Reading**

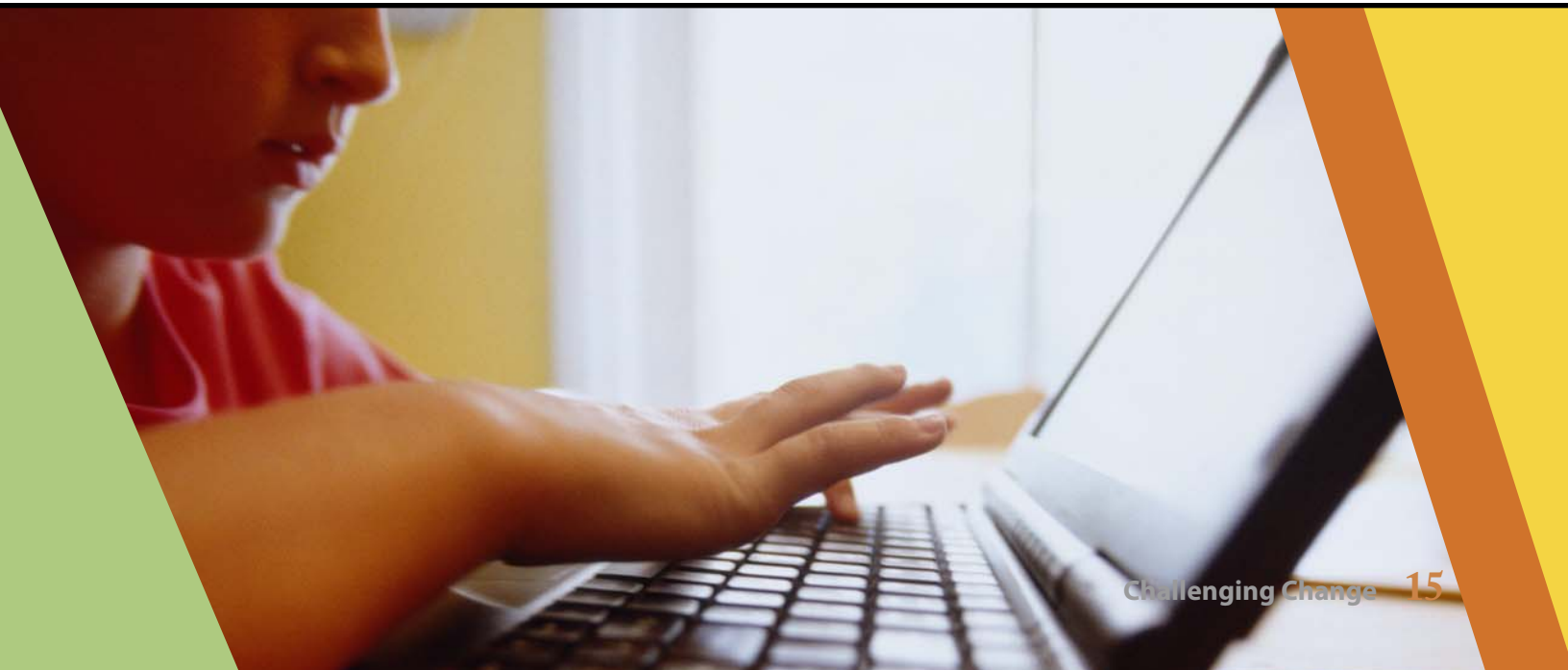


**Ohio Testing**

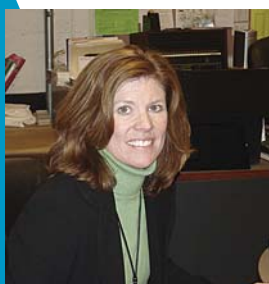
Ohio’s Grade 3-8 Achievement Tests (OAT) in reading, mathematics, science, social studies and writing are aligned to Ohio’s academic content standards. OAT is used to test all public school students in Ohio. Student performance falls into one of five performance levels:

Limited, Basic, Proficient, Accelerated and Advanced.

Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT) are aligned to Ohio’s Academic Content Standards in reading, mathematics, science, social studies and writing. Students in high school must take the OGT to demonstrate proficiency before graduation from high school. OAT and OGT results are also used for school and district accountability under NCLB.







## North East Independent School District



### School Profile

	Students with Disabilities	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Proficient
North East Independent School District	11%	39%	61%	13%
Texas	8%	55%	64%	16%

Sources: Texas Education Agency, Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS).

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Judith Higgins Moenin**, Executive Director,  
Special Education

*"North East ISD has worked hard to meet the challenges of No Child Left Behind. As we have traveled this path our campus leaders have learned not just the rules for testing students with disabilities under NCLB, they have learned that the issue is also about how we teach kids with learning challenges."*

*Campus staff have learned how to help students successfully access the general education classroom and curriculum. They have learned the importance of monitoring student progress through benchmark tests, common assessments and mini-assessments completed by teachers. Campuses have also learned how to provide effective intervention for their students in special education when monitoring revealed that they were in danger of failure."*

*Over the past few years we have seen not just classroom doors open for our students, we have also seen our understanding grow that when students don't fit particular programs, then those programs must be modified to fit the needs of students. No Child Left Behind has made a tremendous difference for our district."*

The North East Independent School District (NEISD) serves 63,000 students in a mixed urban and suburban setting in San Antonio, Texas. It is a district rich in diversity (see district profile)—roughly 47% of its students are Hispanic and more than a third are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Percentages of students who are non-White, English language learners and/or eligible for free or reduced-price lunch have been increasing each year for the past several years. The district has a long history of strong performance on state tests and a high percentage of college-bound students—close to 90% of last year's graduates planned to attend college.

Yet in 2005, ten of the district's 61 schools failed to make AYP under NCLB. The performance of students with disabilities played a major factor in these results. The district faced this situation head on, developing an aggressive plan to challenge the traditional model of special education. As Alicia H. Thomas, the Associate Superintendent for Instruction, put it, "we didn't hide from the data. We went right at it. We recognized that this is not a special education issue. This is an instructional issue."

The job of supporting academic achievement for NEISD's students with disabilities fell to Judith Higgins Moening, Executive Director of Special Education. According to Moening, the district's traditional approach to special education was, "we'll pull them out, and fix them. Lo and behold, we never did."

**Philosophy and Focus.** NEISD developed a comprehensive plan to improve special education. The district knew that in order to meet the intent of NCLB it would need to align instruction with assessment for all students and align leadership at all levels. The district adopted these four central beliefs to guide its work:

1. All children are capable of high levels of academic success;
2. Academic success equitably includes all student groups;
3. Adults in schools are primarily responsible;
4. Traditional school practices result in inequity and must be changed.

Source: *Leadership for Equity and Excellence*, Scheurich, Skrla & McKenzie

NEISD's plan for change would force the district to:

#### ■ Reflect

- Examine data and practices about teaching and testing students with disabilities
- Compare NEISD to state on key statistics

#### ■ Revise

- Abandon practice of teaching and assessing special education students below grade level
- Create the Data Coaching framework as a way to collaboratively guide and support individual schools within the district

#### ■ Retool

- Utilize Data Coaching for ongoing review of individual school progress and adjustment of practices along the way

Its first focus was to move more students away from pull out programs and into the general education classroom for more of the school day. The district has been criticized by Texas officials for having a high percentage of its special education students spending most of their instructional day away from general education classrooms. So, between the 2001-2002 and 2005-2006 school years, the district

## What Works in North East Independent School District

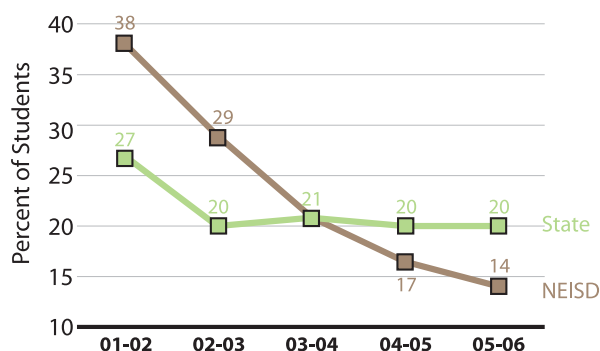
- Raising expectations for special education students
- Instituting data-based decision making in instruction and administration
- Intensive professional development
- Procedures to ensure aligning curriculum with testing
- Assessing more special education students at grade level

lowered the number of students being pulled out of general education for more than half of the school day from 38% to 14% (see chart).

Along with the move toward more inclusive schools came a reduction in the number of students identified as needing special education, from 18% in 2002-03 to 11.5% in 2006-2007.

An emphasis was also placed on reducing the number of special education students who took "out-of-level" tests, i.e., tests designed for students in lower grades, in statewide testing. Texas had been notified by the U.S. Department of Education that the large percentage of students with disabilities being given out-of-level testing did not comply with NCLB requirements.

### Students Served More Than 50% of School Day Outside General Education



For a number of years, Texas used a state alternate assessment as an optional measure of performance for special education students. Texas allowed individual IEP teams to set a passing standard for students on this alternate and also allowed the IEP team to recommend out-of-level (below the student's grade level) assessment. That practice ended in the 2007-2008 school year as Texas finally implemented an assessment system which met the requirements of NCLB. Texas now requires that 97% of all students take either the general state assessment—the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)—with or without accommodations. Alternate assessments are now restricted to a small number of special education students, as allowed by NCLB.

In 2004-05 at the state level, 45% of students were assessed on grade level or no more than one grade level below in math on the state's alternate assessment. That figure was 43% for reading. In the same year NEISD assessed 85% of its special education students on grade level or no more than one grade level below in math on the state's alternate assessment and 86% in reading. By 2006-07 the district assessed 97% of students on grade level in math and 96% on grade level in reading, while the state assessed 66% of students with disabilities on grade level or no more than one grade level below in math and 61% in reading.

Next, the district undertook a thorough examination of its practices with regard to special education. The examination found “fragmented programs, poorly understood and complex accountability systems, and lowered standards for students with disabilities.” For each school, an improvement plan was developed, resulting in an intensive, flexible map for improvement within the school.

**Professional Development.** The district formed “data coaching teams” that worked with each principal to examine student achievement. The approach gave schools a way to distill the huge amounts of student data available to them and to translate that data into instructional improvement. The schools at higher risk of failure received additional professional development, more meetings with data coaches, and extra support as needed. The framework for the data coaching process came from Harvard University's Graduate School of Education's *Data Wise* project (*Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning*).



**We have learned that kids can and will rise to our expectations when given the opportunity and the right supports.**

– district special education teacher



On the first day of the 2005-2006 school year, principals reviewed the previous year's testing results with teachers and discussed a school improvement plan. This review highlighted trends within the school and strengths as well as areas of concern. It also underscored the district's philosophies toward achievement for students with disabilities. Teachers were asked to develop an intervention plan for each student considered at risk of failure. Mid-year, the individual plans were reviewed and revised according to the student's performance during the year on benchmark tests and common assessments. At the end of the year, principals reviewed the year's data and developed school improvement plans for the 2006-2007 school year. Teachers reported that the more in-depth knowledge of their students led to improved student performance.

According to Associate Superintendent for Instruction, Alicia Thomas, the power of data coaching is in the questions, such as:

- What do these data seem to tell us?
- What do they not tell us?
- What else would we need to know?
- What good news is there here for us to celebrate?
- What needs for School Improvement might arise from these data?

**Curriculum and Instruction.** The data coaching process aligned leadership and set a common direction at all levels from the district to the principals to the teachers. It also resulted in a better alignment of curriculum and instruction for special education students, focusing instruction and instructional improvement planning on individual students. The use of test data informed

instructional decisions so that teachers could address individual needs and instruct each student as a complex learner.

According to one district special education teacher, “We always believed that we were acting in the best interest of students by teaching them at their current level, by pulling them out of general education instruction when they were struggling and finally by assessing them on the level at which they were taught. We have learned that kids can and will rise to our expectations when given the opportunity and the right supports. The kids have really taught us how to work within the system and succeed.”

**Results.** In 2004-05, the percentage of students with disabilities taking and passing the TAKS at the state level was 35% in math and 50% in reading. In the same year, NEISD posted a special education pass rate on the TAKS of 54% in math and 68% in reading. By 2006-07, the percentage of students with disabilities taking and passing the TAKS at the state level was 45% in math and 65% in reading. For that same school year, the pass rates for special education students in NEISD were 73% in math and 82% in reading.

### Texas Testing

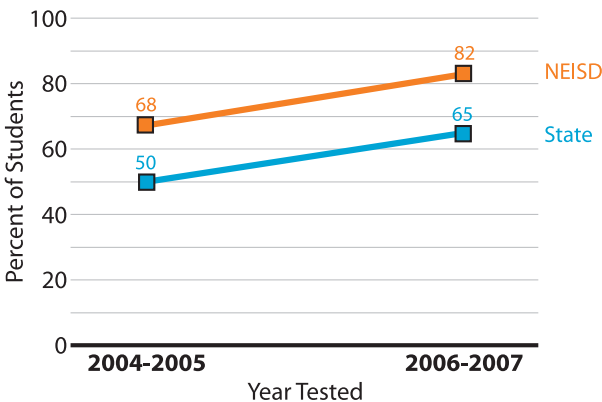
The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was designed to evaluate students’ skills against the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state-mandated curriculum. The TAKS is also used to show progress under the NCLB.

The TAKS measures the statewide curriculum in reading at Grades 3-9; in writing at Grades 4 and 7; in English Language Arts at Grades 10 and 11; in mathematics at Grades 3-11; in science at Grades 5,10, and 11; and social studies at Grades 8, 10, and 11. The Spanish TAKS is administered at Grades 3 through 6.

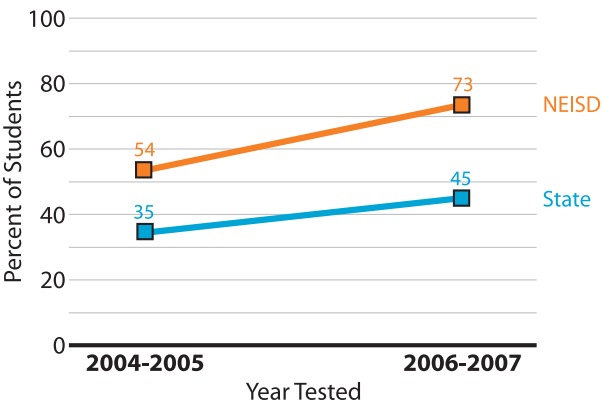
Students may advance to the next grade level only if they pass the TAKS reading test at Grade 3, the reading and mathematics tests at Grade 5, and the reading and mathematics tests at Grade 8, or if a grade placement committee unanimously decides that the student is likely to perform at grade level after additional instruction. Satisfactory performance on the TAKS at Grade 11 is required for a student to receive a high school diploma.

The state rates schools as exemplary (90% of students scored proficient), recognized (75%), acceptable (50%), or low performing.

North East Independent School District  
TAKS Pass Rates for Special Education  
Students: Reading



North East Independent School District  
TAKS Pass Rates for Special Education  
Students: Math







## Snowline Joint Unified School District



### School Profile

	Students with Disabilities	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Proficient
Snowline Joint Unified School District	10%	38%	44%	12%
California	11%	51%	71%	25%

Sources: Annual District CBEDS Report, October 2007; California Department of Education, DataQuest, 2006-2007.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Jim Canter**, Assistant Superintendent  
Curriculum and Instruction

*"As I walk through classrooms, I now observe special education teachers instructing to state standards, and I find students with disabilities receiving instruction in regular classes to a greater extent. Our students and teachers endeavor to make a difference. Students work hard to meet state standards, even if they must take alternate forms of assessment. Our teachers willingly participate in student-centered, collaborative dialogue that has an effect on their instruction."*

*"I am proud that, through all our efforts, Snowline District exited Program Improvement, but I realize and our administrators and teachers fully understand that we must continue to improve. Only then will all our students—including those with disabilities and those who under perform—achieve to their full potential."*

Located in the high desert/mountains of San Bernardino County, California, the Snowline Joint Unified School District serves over 9,100 students in twelve schools: five elementary, one K-8, two middle, one comprehensive high school, and three alternative schools. Presently, approximately 10% of the district's students receive special education services, in line with both state and national averages. Significant minority groups continue to increase in population. Hispanic students comprise the largest non-white group at 38% of the student population. English language learners are approximately 12%, and disadvantaged students are 38% of the student population.

In 2005, Snowline found itself in a position not unlike many school districts in California and other states—it failed to achieve AYP due to the underperformance of its students with disabilities. Snowline's special education students had scored below the state's required rate of proficiency in English/Language Arts (ELA) for two consecutive years—2003 and 2004. Although some improvement had been made, only about 11% of the district's special education students scored proficient in ELA.



Because of this shortfall, the California Department of Education identified Snowline as “in need of improvement” as required by NCLB (known as “program improvement” in California).

Snowline’s Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Jim Canter, quickly set out to develop a plan of action to improve the academic performance of the district’s students with disabilities. With input from staff and parents, the plan addressed improving student achievement by implementing a process structured around data and standards. Canter describes the district’s plan for improvement this way, “In Snowline, through a comprehensive self-review process, we realized that we had a successful instructional improvement process in place. However, we also found that we were not including all teachers and students in this process. We needed to involve teachers of students with disabilities in administering common assessments, analyzing data from state and common assessments, collaborating with grade-level teachers about student achievement, and developing classroom strategies and student interventions to improve achievement. This need became the focus of our plan.”

**Philosophy and Focus.** The district maintains a strong belief that the best solutions to student learning challenges most often come from teachers. In developing strategies to address its AYP challenge, the district placed a stronger emphasis on teacher collaboration about standards-based, data-driven instruction. To map out its plan of action, Snowline first conducted comprehensive self studies that included both perception surveys and data analysis. The district surveyed all stakeholders, including all teachers and administrators as well as board members and parent representatives, about the district’s instructional program. Basically, these perception surveys verified that the district’s instructional program successfully delivered state standards to the general student population, but not to some students, especially students with disabilities.

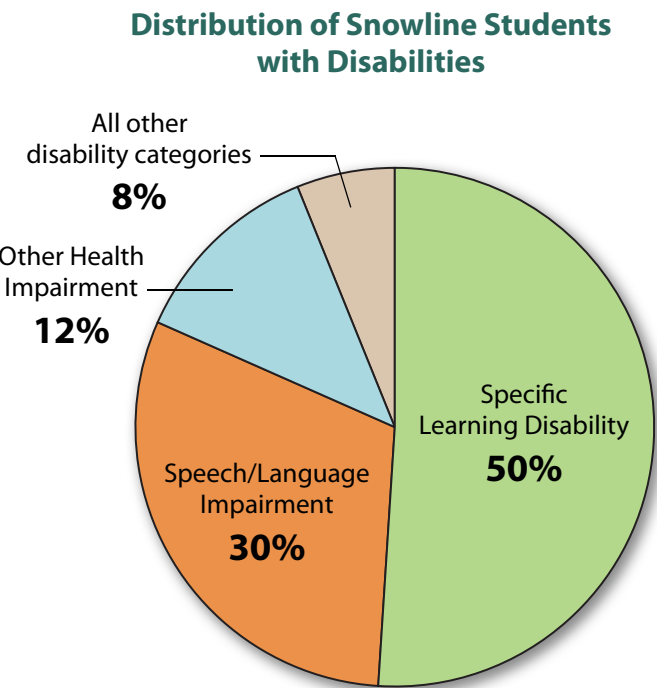
Second, the district simultaneously completed an in-depth analysis of students who were receiving special education services. The district looked closely at the composition of this group, examining factors such as disability categories, instructional placement, and reason for special education eligibility.

## What Works in Snowline

- Curriculum alignment with state standards
- Formative assessments in all four core subjects
- Data-based decision-making process
- Structured teacher collaboration time
- Inclusion of special education teachers in the district instructional improvement process

This data analysis revealed that:

- Half of all special education students were in the Specific Learning Disability (SLD) category.
- While most students in the SLD category were diagnosed as mildly impaired, only about seven percent scored proficient in ELA.
- Thirty percent of the group was Speech/Language Impaired, yet less than 14 percent of these students scored proficient.
- Sixty percent of students in the SLI group were found eligible for special education due to articulation difficulties, generally a non-cognitive impairment.




Based on the data, it was obvious that the majority of Snowline's special education students had the cognitive ability to be proficient on California's content standards in ELA. To get there, these students needed more involvement in the district's standards-based program.

**Curriculum and Instruction.** The district immediately integrated special education students, who had previously devoted a lot of time to lessons below their grade level, into the district's standards-based system, and several school sites also brought many of its students with disabilities into general education classrooms. These changes helped increase collaboration between special and general education teachers.

Part of that collaboration takes place in "Structured Teacher Planning Time" (STPT) meetings, in which teachers examine and discuss student data and determine the next steps in instruction. Teachers look at state and local data by grade level and course, develop data statements, and make instructional decisions based on the data. While special education teachers in Snowline were sometimes included in the STPT process, now they are expected to attend and encouraged to participate. After the regularly held meetings, special education teachers also hold separate STPT meetings by grade span so they can specifically discuss data concerning students with disabilities, teaching strategies, and related issues.

The district gives assessments modeled on state exams several times a year, and students with disabilities now take these district formative assessments as well as state assessments required by NCLB. In addition to providing the students with practice in taking tests, these interim assessments produce data that teachers use to help determine next steps. According to Canter, this strategy profoundly affected instruction. It not only provided teachers with the information needed to help predict student progress throughout the school year, but also helped influence teachers to instruct directly to state standards.

The district plan included additional strategies to help address the program improvement issue. Teacher coaches were hired and trained to facilitate the collaborative process. Administrators and teachers aligned staff development to the new plan, and almost all training



**We needed to involve teachers of students with disabilities in administering common assessments, analyzing data from state and common assessments, collaborating with grade-level teachers about student achievement, and developing classroom strategies and student interventions to improve achievement.**

– Jim Canter,  
Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum



was conducted within the district. Inservices involved strengthening the school improvement process and focusing on research-based instructional strategies. The district's intervention program was strengthened by implementing a kindergarten through second grade "Response-to-Intervention (RtI) Program" in order to emphasize early intervention and by providing district-wide training and updated materials to teachers who taught the Language! Program. Also, special education teachers and speech therapists were taught to write standards-based, computer web-based IEPs, and the district encouraged site leaders to maintain and improve the positive family involvement programs they had in place.

Special education teachers in Snowline see the benefits of these changes—not only in improved student performance, but in their own professional development. Pam DeRenard, a district elementary special education teacher, observes that, when teachers work together, they learn from one another. She says, "All of our students learn differently, and having the time for teachers to bounce ideas off each other has been beneficial to our teaching. We learn new strategies and different ways to reach our students. Collaboration is the key to unlocking our special education students' potential."

Tony Overduin, a district middle school special education teacher, also points out the connection between staff development and student achievement. He states, “I believe that students at all ability levels in our schools have the opportunity to benefit from special education teachers’ full participation in our STPT process. By meeting with teachers in the content areas, special education teachers are able to identify areas in which students with disabilities may have difficulty, address those areas by scaffolding and/or accommodating, and move on. Our district also provides time for special education teachers to meet as a team for full day STPT days each year. This time is very valuable and is spent analyzing data, identifying weak areas, unwrapping standards, and developing lessons and strategies as a team that help increase student learning. No matter with whom we meet, our focus is consistent: improve learning by making the standards accessible for all of our students.”

**Results.** Snowline is the first school district in San Bernardino County to climb out of “program improvement” status. Since 2003, the percentage of Snowline’s students with disabilities who met state standards in math and English has tripled. The district met NCLB’s requirements in 2004-05 and 2005-06, allowing it to exit program improvement. In California, school districts are also rated on a separate rating scale, the Academic Performance Index (API). In 2007, Snowline achieved an API of 778, the third highest score in San Bernardino County. Snowline also has one of the highest percentages of students passing the California High School Exit Exam. In 2007, tenth grade students administered the tests for the first time passed at rates of 85% in ELA and 83% in mathematics.

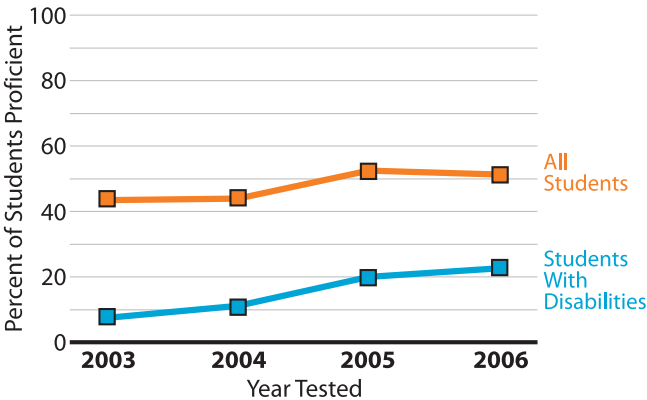
The graph indicates the proficiency rate of regular education students (All Students) and students with disabilities over the four year period from 2003 through 2006 in the area of ELA.

### California Testing

California’s assessment system uses the California Standards Tests (CSTs), standards-based tests that measure the achievement of state content standards in English-language arts, mathematics, science, and history-social science. Students attain one of five levels of performance on the CSTs for each subject tested: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic. Results from the CSTs are used to fulfill the requirements of NCLB. CST scores are also used to rate districts on California’s Academic Performance Index (API), a yardstick for measuring school performance, ranking schools based on academic achievement, and comparing schools with similar student populations.

In order to graduate, students must pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), a requirement satisfied by passing English language arts and mathematics exams. Students with disabilities must pass the exams or may request a school board waiver of the requirement by achieving an equivalent passing rate on the exams while using modifications specified in IEPs. All students are required to take the CAHSEE for the first time in Grade 10. Students who do not pass one or both parts of the CAHSEE in Grade 10 may take the parts not passed up to two times per school year in Grade 11 and up to five times in Grade 12. Adult students may take the tests multiple times per school year past the 12th grade.

**Snowline Joint Unified School District  
English/Language Arts**





## Conclusion

The schools and districts described in this report faced varying challenges and developed unique programs and activities to address them. In every case, their efforts have led to improved education for special education students. As measured in terms of the NCLB, these programs have brought schools from “needing improvement” status to some of the highest scores in their states. Yet, while NCLB provides a mechanism for measuring progress and a reference for directing the education of students with disabilities toward the general education curriculum, each program is individual, focused toward the circumstances of the school, the district and the state.

While every program has a multitude of components, some characteristic stand out as common to all. Since the elements shared by these efforts—regardless of the school or district’s size, student characteristics, resources or philosophy—have shown improvement in the learning of students with disabilities, adoption of these approaches would have a strong likelihood of success.

### ■ **Raising Expectations for Special Education Students.**

Without exception, the single most common and important component of achieving challenging change is a shift in thinking about special education students and a commitment to higher expectations. Time and again, these school and district leaders have expressed the need to raise expectations for students with disabilities, to end the practice of making excuses, and to look at these students as general education students first. While other components are important, few if any will succeed without the guiding belief that all students can learn.

### ■ **Collaboration Between General and Special Education Teachers.**

Each of these schools and districts put improving collaboration at the top of their to-do list. With student goals geared toward achievement in the general education curriculum, collaboration between general and special education, not just at the systemic level but also between the general and special education teachers, is critical. The programs described in this report have used various means and structures for collaboration, ranging from dual certification of all school personnel to pairing of general and special education teachers in classrooms. Equally important, collaboration extends to professional development, with teachers forming teams to attend professional development activities.

### ■ Inclusive Practices.

Every school and district profiled here made more inclusive practices the cornerstone of their improvement plan. While the efforts illustrated in this report range in the extent and means by which their students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms, they all use the general education curriculum in instruction and the general state assessment in testing as their reference point for students with disabilities. The extent to which these schools have incorporated inclusion varies, but all seem to understand that a student's opportunity to learn hinges on access to the general education curriculum and that instruction in core academics such as reading and math is best delivered by general educators. The general education teacher contributes knowledge of the curriculum, testing, and the class social structure, while the special education teacher brings knowledge of instructional modifications, individualized instructional techniques, physical and sensory accommodations, and social and behavioral enhancement. While neither simple nor cheap, inclusive practices are convincingly the best way to ensure that students with disabilities get access to the same challenging curriculum as their peers.

### ■ Data Based Decision-Making.

Schools have had to incorporate extensive changes in recent years in order to implement the statewide testing requirements of NCLB, while at the same time continuing their business of educating students. These profiles demonstrate some innovative and fascinating ways that schools and districts are integrating testing requirements into their educational programs and using them to improve instruction. In nearly every school, teachers use statewide testing data to modify and direct their instruction so that it addresses individual students needs. While annual test results are important, most schools also engage in frequent progress monitoring in order to adjust instruction during the school year. One school not only uses formal analysis of the data, but also asks students where they had problems with the tests and addresses instruction to those areas. In several of the schools, professional development plans are based on needs identified from the test data. In another locality, teaching modules are developed around gaps and problem areas identified through state tests.

### ■ Consumer Satisfaction.

Parent and community satisfaction with the school and school district is another measure of school success. Parents are the ultimate judge of whether the school is providing the skills their children will need as adults, and the schools and districts profiled in this report have used formats for interactive communication with parents and families of their students that go way beyond traditional parent teacher conferences. Examples include annual parent surveys and annual parent meetings providing an orientation to and explanation of the state testing program.

These schools and districts found that they did, indeed, have an achievement to celebrate when they received feedback on their programs in the form of student test results. By facing the need for change head-on, they have swiftly and significantly improved the education they provide to their students with disabilities. In doing so, they have dramatically improved the performance of their school and districts. And, they have shown us that—while such change can be challenging—the benefits of improving instructional programs for students with disabilities extend far beyond special education.



This report is available at [www.LD.org/challengingchange](http://www.LD.org/challengingchange)

Citation: Cortiella, C., Burnette, J. (2008). *Challenging Change: How schools and districts are improving the performance of special education students*. New York, NY: National Center for Learning Disabilities.

©National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc. 2008. All rights reserved. This publication is provided free of charge by the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Wide dissemination is encouraged! Copies may be made and distributed in keeping with the following guidelines: The publication must be reproduced in its entirety, including pages containing information about the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Copies of the publication may not be sold.



381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401, New York, NY 10016-8806  
Telephone 212.545.7510 Facsimile 212.545.9665  
[www.LD.org](http://www.LD.org)

