Principals of Inclusive Schools

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The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), of the U.S. Department of
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Great Urban Schools: Learning Together Builds Strong Communities

ON POINT SERIES

Principals of Inclusive Schools

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WHY ARE PRINCIPALS SO IMPORTANT?

School leaders play an important role in promoting and sustaining change in schools. Without their efforts, schools cannot change or improve to become places where all students are welcome, and where all students learn essential academic and non-academic lessons in preparation for life in the community. Nowhere is this initiative more important than in urban schools where many students have been left behind, shunted aside, or asked to learn with poor or inadequate buildings, materials, and under-qualified teachers. Moving urban schools from current practices to inclusive practices requires the collective efforts of key stakeholders. Principals serve as catalysts for the key stakeholders. They play a unique role in helping students, staff, and parents to think and act more inclusively. Their role is to guide and support the course of change, drawing together the resources and people necessary to be successful.

Understanding more about leadership in effective, inclusive schools may help parents, educators, and community members better support the work of the school in general and the efforts of the principal in particular. In this *OnPoint*, we discuss the role of principals in building a school's capacity to serve all learners well and the strategies and resources that successful principals use to develop an inclusive learning community in urban schools. Because inclusive practices represent a considerable shift in practice for some schools, we begin by helping you understand more about the complex process of school change.

WHY CHANGE?

When urban schools embark on a plan to improve their practices through becoming more inclusive, they do so for many reasons. Core to this work are the community values of both diversity and an inclusive school culture. That is, schools that are effective with *ALL* their students believe that schools are enriched when they reflect the diversity of society and when all learners, including those with disabilities and diverse cultural/linguistic needs, become integral members of the learning community. Inclusive schools also promote inclusive decision-making and participation in their school, creating a variety of avenues for parents, staff, and students to become part of the governance structure.

Values and beliefs about ensuring that every student belongs and feels membership in the school community are essential dispositions for the journey towards inclusive schooling. These values and beliefs are bolstered by federal laws that require attention to students who have been marginal members of many schools: students with disabilities, students who have diverse cultural and ethnic heritages, students whose native languages are not English, students who bring rich experiences to school but may not have been exposed to the learning experiences that are often presumed in the school curriculum. These laws require schools to monitor the progress of all students, measure their success by ensuring that all students are learning, and provide additional services and supports to students who may need them while ensuring that these students continue to learn with their peers in general education environments.

Differences hold great opportunities for learning. Differences offer a free, abundant, and renewable resource. I would like to see our compulsion for eliminating differences replaced by an equally compelling focus on making use of these differences to improve schools.

Barth (1990), p. 514-515.

Because of the high expectations that come with both the values and mandates to achieve inclusive schooling, schools today, more than ever, need highly accomplished leaders. Inclusive schools need principals who are familiar with the research literature and know that inclusive services and supports produce educational benefits for students with and without disabilities, teachers, and families. These benefits occur in many areas of academic and non-academic development and tend to be related to administrative supports, professional knowledge and skills, and the attitudes of teachers.

WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES AND PATTERNS OF CHANGE?

Much effort has been devoted to understanding the process of change in school settings. While it is a complicated process, there are some commonly agreed upon findings that are helpful in understanding how change happens:
- Change is a process, not an event
- Getting ready for change (development) is vastly different from the implementation of school level changes
- Organizations do not change until the

individuals within it change
- Changes come in different sizes and take different amounts of time and resources to take hold
- Change happens from the top-down, the bottom-up, and horizontally
- Administrative leadership is essential to long term change success
- Mandates set the course, but a sound process will make or break success
- The school is the primary unit for change
- Facilitating change is a team effort
- Appropriate supports and interventions reduce the challenges of change
- The context of the school influences the process of change

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM THE PRINCIPAL?

Principals know this work requires collective effort and commitment. Effective principals establish collaborative teams (see the *Building Leadership Team*[1] OnPoint), bringing together key stakeholders who represent different perspectives and roles in the school community. The team provides leadership throughout a continuing cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation in the school change process (see the *School Improvement Process*[1] OnPoint). The principal brings resources and administrative connections to the table to address needed changes in rules or policies. Principals help identify and approve changes that support more inclusive practices. These changes may focus on

[1]http://urbanschools.org/publications/on_point.html

organizational resources like schedules, the use and assignment of personnel, strategies used to assign students to classes, resources available for professional development, and the focus and type of professional development activities.

While these technical changes are important to create the conditions for change, there are deeper changes that are required for change to be sustained. At the core of all change efforts lie the beliefs, attitudes, practices, and characteristics of the school that define its culture. These deeper aspects of an organization can take longer and are more difficult to change. Researchers have found that school change is a cyclical process. Schools can expect to experience slow, steady progress, implementation "dips", and some amount of the "two steps forward, one step back" phenomenon

as both surface and deep changes are underway (Fullan, 1993). While principals in inclusive schools act as mediators, coaches, cheerleaders, and emotional supporters to those involved in the process of change, it is fundamentally a team effort. Parents, community patrons, school staff, educators, and students themselves must have a voice in the process.

WHAT DO PRINCIPALS OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS HAVE IN COMMON?

There are several characteristics associated with principals who lead inclusive schools (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992). These principals tend to be:

CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE
Risk takers	Not afraid to say "no" to something different and tend to be actively engaged in pushing for innovative solutions to issues that exclude learners who differ in their abilities, culture, language, and/or ethnicity. Act as proponents of inclusive practices within their schools.
Invested in relationships	Principals in inclusive schools "go the extra mile" to work with staff, parents, and community members. They work with personnel in their school to resolve differences and find workable solutions. These principals work hard to build trust and promote changes by sharing information honestly with all involved.
Accessible	Effective school leaders are not "desk jockeys". That is, they routinely get involved at the ground level with students, teachers, parents, and community members to address issues confronting their school. They are genuinely interested in being where the action is so that they can understand the issues first-hand.

CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE CONTINUED
Reflective	Principals in inclusive schools use information gathered from reports, teachers, parents, and community members to develop reasoned approaches for action and help generate new meanings about the changes ahead. They mobilize teams of teachers and parents to inform their decision-making.
Collaborative	Effective principals share leadership with staff at all levels of the organization. They know that teams of people who share the same goals will be more effective than one administrator working alone. These principals create time for teams to meet, plan, and teach together.
Intentional	Principals in inclusive schools have a strong sense of direction and infuse their core values, beliefs, and attitudes into building an inclusive culture in their school. The pace and number of changes must be carefully weighed so as not to overwhelm teaching staff.

HOW DO PRINCIPALS SUPPORT INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS?

While responding to the increasing diversity in our schools is a growing challenge, it is not a new one. School leaders have faced issues associated with a diverse student body for as long as public schools have been in existence. Students with disabilities may increase the diversity within a classroom, but they are far from the only reason that schools are in search of practices that are effective in "making things work" for their entire student body.

Inclusion serves as a philosophical compass, guiding schools in their journey to create a caring, supportive, and effective learning community. As described by Stainback and Stainback (1990), "An inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met" (pg. 3).

How does such a learning community come to be? What do educational leaders do to guide all members of the school community so that school practices are compatible with such a philosophy? Schools have traditionally focused on the majority of the students, those in the center. Larry Cuban, an expert on school reform, describes many schools as

lacking the flexibility to accommodate the diverse abilities and interests of a heterogeneous student body (Cuban, 1989).

Educational leaders promoting an inclusive vision understand that they must attend to the margins, students who traditionally are separated out into "special" programs; uncategorized, unlabeled, yet unsuccessful students in the regular classroom; students who come from families that do not speak English; as well as high performing students who push the margins in the other direction. As described by Leonard Burrello and colleagues (Burrello, Lashley & Beatty, 2001), "These students….present educators with a grand opportunity to create new learning for themselves and examine their invitation to learning for all students. These students constantly challenge the equilibrium and boundaries of the classroom and their diversity calls out for the school to change. They are the engines of reform" (pg. 2).

In order to address the needs of students "at the margins", the educational leader must guide the school to increase its capacity to respond to the varying learning styles and abilities of its students. The principal must also work to create and maintain a school climate in which all students can feel a sense of identity, belonging, and place (Sergiovanni, 1994). A critical component of achieving these goals is to identify and replace those existing practices that undermine these outcomes.

"My teacher has an interesting theory", explained Jimmy, an eight year old. "She says that teaching is like bowling. All you can do is roll the ball down the middle and hope that you touch most of the students." "What do you think of her theory?" asked John, his older brother. "She's a terrible bowler".
Bechtol & Sorenson (1993), p.3.

PROBLEMS WITH A PROGRAM-BASED RESPONSE TO DIVERSITY

- Separate programs track and marginalize students of color and students of lower social classes.
- Separate programs are costly.
- Separate programs require personnel to expend a tremendous amount of resources in determining eligibility.
- Separate programs result in some students receiving services and others being denied.
- Separate programs fragment a student's day.
- Separate programs blame and label students.
- Separate programs enable educators and students not to change.
- Separate programs prevent transfer of educator and student knowledge back to integrated environments.

Capper, Frattura & Keyes, 2000, pg. 16

There is considerable evidence that program-based models of service delivery that have characterized our response to diversity in the past are incongruent with an inclusive vision. These problems, summarized by Capper and colleagues (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000), are highlighted in the box

above. There are many paths that can take a school on the journey from a program-based service delivery model to one that focuses on the delivery of services needed by students to be successful. As the school leader, the principal's use of a systems process is critical to the success of this effort.

While the organizational chart of a school is likely to depict a linear, compartmentalized system that functions with a clear chain of command, the reality is that schools are more like intricate webs (McREL, 2000), and managing the change process associated with such a shift in practice can be a very complex process. Various models exist that identify variables that must be in place in order for change to be successful. The remaining discussion about how principals guide their school on the journey toward inclusive approaches to school draws on two of these existing models.

WHAT ARE THE VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH CHANGE?

Knoster (as cited in Thousand & Villa, 1995) sought out organizational change models from the business world to provide school leaders with a simple tool to evaluate their efforts to support change. He adapted a model by Ambrose (1987), graphically depicted in the figure below. This simple, but powerful, illustration clearly identifies the essential variables that are part of a successful change effort. With just one ingredient missing, it is clear that the outcome will not be successful.

The implications of applying this model to the creation of an inclusive school are clear. Beyond the vision of an inclusive school environment, school personnel need the skills to do things differently. Teachers need to draw upon a range of teaching strategies that are effective with a

ESSENTIAL VARIABLES ILLUSTRATION

Vision + Skills + Incentives + Resources + Action Plan = CHANGE

_____ + Skills + Incentives + Resources + Action Plan = CONFUSION

Vision + _____ + Incentives + Resources + Action Plan = ANXIETY

Vision + Skills + _____ + Resources + Action Plan = RESISTANCE

Vision + Skills + Incentives + _____ + Action Plan = FRUSTRATION

Vision + Skills + Incentives + Resources + _____ = TREADMILL

full range of learners. They need to know how to work collaboratively to draw upon the specialized knowledge and strategies that different members of the educational team bring to the learning environment. Incentives must exist to support all stakeholders in this process through the change process.

Teachers who work in the complicated world of urban schools must be prepared to teach in culturally responsive ways so that the assets and skills of students and their families are recognized and incorporated into the formal and hidden curriculum of schools. Often, teachers who come from the mainstream, dominant middle class culture of the United States need to learn to understand and value the cultural perspectives and skills that their urban students bring to school. For many white and middle class teachers, understanding and valuing means adopting new perspectives on what constitutes learning, skills, and family involvement. Changing values and dispositions is difficult work since it challenges long held beliefs and attitudes. Such change is most successful when led by highly sensitive principals who understand the developmental change process and are able to nurture and challenge, while maintaining connections with their faculty and community members.

While the benefits of inclusive schooling will ultimately be the incentive to continue the effort required to maintain these practices, people need support along the way to help them reach a point of comfort and success. For teachers, this may be release time to engage in collaborative planning to design

instructional units that are differentiated and use universal design principles. For parents, it might be an offer to be a member of a school planning team that shapes the practices that will be introduced in a school. While school change experts remind us that heavy reliance on extrinsic rewards can actually interfere with the change process since "commodities" are not always available, it is also true that "what is rewarding gets done….even when no one is looking" (Sergiovanni, 1990, pg 22).

Resources to support inclusive schools can be technical (e.g., access to people who have skill in inclusive practices to provide on-site support), material (e.g., curricular materials that allow for differentiation in skills and interests) or organizational (e.g., shared planning time for grade level teams) (Thousand & Villa, 1995). Schools need to engage in a comprehensive action planning process to identify how they will acquire the skills and resources needed to move from a current service delivery approach to one that reflects an inclusive vision. It is rare that new resources become available to support such changes in practice. In practice, the process typically requires substantial restructuring of existing resources, changes in the way staff are assigned, and changes in the roles of existing staff.

"By defining the problem positively, by providing classroom-based support, by maintaining ongoing communication, and by building peer-support networks, we can create an educational setting that positively and successfully includes all our students" (p. 91).
Dalheim (1994)

What Other Processes Support Change?

A second model, *Asking the Right Questions*, was designed to provide school leaders with a simple process to think systemically about change in their schools. It was developed after conducting extensive interviews with school leaders (McREL, 2000). This model builds upon the work of Cordell and Waters (1993) in which they define three "domains" of school systems. These categories – the Technical, Personal, and Organizational Domains, can be thought of as different "lenses" through which a school can be viewed. Each domain is described below (McREL, 2000).

Given this organizational framework, the "systems thinking" process then involves identifying the initiative of interest, developing specific questions, and considering possible actions. It is important that the questions

DOMAIN	DEFINITION
Technical Domain	The "stuff" of schooling, including the following components: • Standards • Curriculum • Instruction • Assessment
Personal Domain	The affective part of the system, impacting attitudes, skills, and behaviors of people, including the following components: • Staff Development • Leadership & Supervision • Internal Communication • Climate & Culture
Organizational Domain	The resources and structures of the system, including the following components: • External Environment • Stakeholders • Resource Allocation • Technology • Accountability

asked are, as the title of the approach implies, the "right" questions. They should not be questions that are phrased as simple "yes" or "no" questions. Rather, they should be phrased in a way that promotes brainstorming, evaluation, and solution-finding.

The process is illustrated in an example about inclusive schooling practices in the chart that follows. These three steps, supported by "the right questions", provide a structured yet simple process that leads to the development of a comprehensive action plan.

STEP **1** IDENTIFY THE INITIATIVE

Adopting Inclusive Schooling Practices

STEP **2** DEVELOP SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

STEP **3** CONSIDER POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Technical Domain
What are the implications of this initiative for what and how students learn and how we assess their progress?

How can we prepare teachers to work collaboratively across disciplines so that supports are available to students who need them in the general education classroom?

What models of instruction will enable general education classrooms to be responsive to a full range of learners?

How can instructional units be planned for students with diverse learning styles and abilities so that substantial "retrofitting" will not be necessary?

What assessment and progress reporting models support differentiated learning approaches?

What practices and rituals of the school are incongruent with a school climate in which all students are valued and all students belong?

Form study groups to consider various approaches to co-teaching; recruit volunteers to implement models on a pilot basis.

Curriculum committee reviews information about effective research-based practices and shares information with staff.

School-wide training on differentiated instruction models; on-site mentoring available to teacher teams.

Form parent/teacher committee to make recommendations for changes in grading policy and report card practices.

Engage teachers and students in a "scan" of the school to identify potential problems and propose potential solutions.

1: IDENTIFY	**2:** DEVELOP	**3:** ACTIONS
Personal Domain How will our attitudes and skills contribute to the success of this initiative?	What type of professional development activities will provide teachers with an opportunity to express concerns, ask questions, and contribute to the vision of inclusive services in this school?	Schedule ongoing "professional conversations" to promote continuing dialogue and problem-solving.
	How can the school leaders support staff as they work to adopt new practices?	Meet with staff regularly to monitor implementation, concerns, and problems; provide multiple forums in which issues can be constructively addressed.
Organizational Domain How will our organizational support systems contribute to the success of this initiative?	How can we assign and allocate staff time so that specialized resources "follow the child"?	Form collaborative grade level teams, linking a specialist to each team; Ensure that grade level teams have shared preparation periods to facilitate planning.
	How can we engage families and the community to participate in the planning and evaluation of inclusive schooling practices?	Prepare information to share with parents. Recruit parents to participate in planning and evaluation activities.

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Building the capacity of urban schools involves broadening our view of what leadership means and who leaders are.

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WHAT ARE SOME FINAL THOUGHTS?

Building the capacity of urban schools involves broadening our view of what leadership means and who leaders are. Principals, though uniquely situated to guide the process of change, are not the only individuals who can or should serve as agents of change. Principals have a responsibility to cultivate leadership at all levels within their school and to promote shared understandings about what inclusively delivered instruction means. To be sure, there is an essential role for principals in leading change and in creating the conditions necessary for change to occur. However, their impact will be significantly greater when joined by parents, educators, students, and community members. Leaders committed to inclusive education value diversity, push the boundaries of traditional thinking, and lead by example. While following that lead may take you down an unfamiliar path, what occurs along the journey can transform not only schools, but the individuals within them. By learning together, taking risks, supporting each other, and weathering the challenges along the way, urban schools can emerge as successful learning communities for *all* students.

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❖
Produce high achieving students.

❖
Construct education for
social justice, access and equity.

❖
Expand students' life opportunities,
available choices and community contributions.

❖
Build on the extraordinary resources that
urban communities provide for life-long learning.

❖
Use the valuable knowledge and experience that
children and their families bring to school learning.

❖
Need individuals, family organizations and communities to
work together to create future generations of possibility.

❖
Practice scholarship by creating partnerships
for action-based research and inquiry.

❖
Shape their practice based on evidence of what
results in successful learning of each student.

❖
Foster relationships based on care,
respect and responsibility.

❖
Understand that people learn in different
ways throughout their lives.

❖
Respond with learning
opportunities that work.

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