

AASA **School Administrator**

## Be the Champion! When It Comes to Special Education

What every superintendent can do to improve learning by students with disabilities

BY NATHAN LEVENSON/*School Administrator, January 2020*



**Nate Levenson, a former superintendent, can see top district leaders playing a more involved role**

Most superintendents rightfully worry about special education. Achievement is low, costs are high, staff are burning out and many parents are unhappy.

Based on my conversations with hundreds of school district leaders across the country, I know all want things to improve, and many believe the district's special education director or head of pupil services is the person to lead the way. It's too specialized, legalistic and downright scary.

One school board meeting I attended in New Jersey offers a perfect illustration. The superintendent shared the latest student test scores on the state assessment. He reported modest progress overall but pointed to a stubborn special education-general education achievement gap.

The thoughtful, experienced superintendent then shared his plan to raise achievement in general with specific measures planned for students of color and those living in poverty. He turned the microphone over to the special education director to explain the challenges of serving students with special needs, whose

**in promoting best practices in special education.** report consisted more of explanations than action steps. Then the discussion quickly moved on to the next agenda item, an update on an ongoing building project.

### **A Deliberate Role**

Most revealing to me from this scenario was the superintendent's comfort in addressing the specific needs of students widely, yet for children with disabilities, a non-plan from the special education director was acceptable. To be sure, both leaders cared and worked hard, but a betting person would wager the achievement gap would still exist at the following year's school board presentation.

As a former superintendent, I empathize with those who are largely hands-off when it comes to improving special education. Yet based on my experience partnering as a consultant with more than 125 school districts, I've discovered a common thread that runs through those districts that have greatly improved outcomes for students with special needs: a strong and deliberate role for the superintendent.

This doesn't suggest superintendents playing an active role need to complete a master's degree in special education. It does mean ensuring that five key responsibilities are part of your work every week. They aren't time-consuming and can fit into an existing schedule.

#### **» No. 1: Create urgency and hope.**

Superintendents often talk publicly about special education during the annual budget-building process but not enough during strategic planning and goal setting. What superintendents talk about will set the agenda for others.

School district leaders need to promote the view that students with disabilities deserve better and better outcomes for them are achievable even in times of tight budgets. Sometimes silence is interpreted as "We are doing the best we can, given our constraints."

#### **» No. 2: Champion three proven best practices.**

What will it take to raise achievement? If I ask superintendents at the start of lunch, "What's your theory for ensuring all students are college and career ready?" dessert will be served before they are finished detailing their plans. Some will stress SEL, others will

reference retaining great teachers and others will share enthusiastically their approach to personalized learning. The specific plans may differ, but the depth, detail and delight are commonalities.

If I ask instead, “What’s your theory for closing the achievement gap between special education and general ed?” I’m in for a shorter answer, with less detail and an invitation to talk to the special education director, before the appetizer arrives.

Their short answer isn’t surprising because in many districts there isn’t a districtwide theory of action. Only a superintendent, however, has the clout and districtwide reach to guide the system toward three interconnected best practices that have closed the achievement gap. Work by education researcher John Hattie, the What Works Clearinghouse and other research studies underpin three interconnected best practices for students with mild to moderate special needs. They also help most struggling students without a dis-ability as well.

» **100 percent of core instruction.** Students with mild to moderate disabilities need to receive the totality of the core instruction given to other students by skilled general education teachers.

» **Extra time to learn.** These students also need extra instructional time each day to fill in past skill gaps, re-learn current-year content, hear tomorrow’s lesson in advance and unlearn misconceptions.

» **Content-strong teachers.** Who provides the instruction during the extra time matters a lot. Teachers with deep content knowledge are key. Contrast this with generalists such as special educators, who are asked to teach many subjects and manage IEPs, or paraprofessionals, who aren’t even teachers.

These best practices are common sense but not common practice. They are effective and don’t cost a dollar more than current approaches, but they don’t spontaneously take root in a school district. They only bloom when the superintendent champions them.

Superintendent advocacy can come in many forms. It can be direct through goal setting in the strategic plan or through screening senior staff for philosophical alignment during the hiring process.

One superintendent of a mid-sized district in Minnesota took a vocal stance on this matter, saying, “If it was my son or daughter, I would demand nothing less than these best practices.” He backed up his words by adding to the performance review of each principal the faithful implementation of 100 percent core instruction and daily extra time from content-area teachers for all struggling students. He updated the school board quarterly on progress. He left no doubt what the theory of action was across the system.

In a 5,000-student district in Massachusetts, a superintendent took a less visible but equally influential path. When hiring the chief academic officer, the director of pupil services and senior curriculum staff, he quizzed them deeply on their commitment to the three best practices. Their answers served as a key marker for hiring.

In both school systems, achievement of students with special needs rose and the superintendent was the catalyst.

» **No. 3: Fund what works.**

Advocacy isn’t enough. Districts need to back their words with money. If the goal is content-strong staff, then the budget should cover more reading teachers, math teachers and English teachers to handle the extra-time interventions. It also means shifting resources from generalists like special educators and paraprofessionals.

» **No. 4: Set a few non-negotiables for school schedules.**

Perhaps the most surprising difference made by superintendents in gap-closing districts is their involvement in scheduling. In most districts, principals build master schedules and superintendents are largely hands-off. This, unfortunately, can undermine all three best practices.

Scheduling either brings to life or buries the best practices. At the elementary level, schedules must include intervention periods so students get 100 percent of the core instruction and extra learning time. At the secondary level, schedules should include intervention courses, sufficient intervention staff and graduation requirements that don’t box out the intervention classes.

If every principal sets scheduling priorities on their own, some students will benefit but others won’t. As the lead champion of equity, the superintendent must encourage the use of schedules that embrace the best practices by setting clear expectations and removing obstacles that might get in the way.

A superintendent of an urban district with about 12,000 students realized scheduling was too important to be off his radar. He told his principals what he expected: all struggling students would receive extra-time instruction daily from content-strong staff. When six schools reported that this wasn't feasible, the superintendent sent them back to the drawing board. When four indicated they still could not make the schedule work, he assigned another administrator to help. A few weeks later, every master school schedule in the district was in alignment with the best practices. Student learning took off for students with and without disabilities in the ensuing years. The overall dropout rate decreased by 64 percent and the superintendent was honored at the White House.

» **No. 5: Support special educators.**

Lastly, superintendents ought to pair setting a firm direction with empathy. Such changes are not easy, especially on special educators. These folks already are stretched thin, and many are burning out. Superintendents can make the job more sustainable for special educators by streamlining meetings and paperwork and allowing staff members to play to their strengths.

For a superintendent without a background in special education, this can seem like a lot of work. It is, but it also fits perfectly with the superintendent's skillset, role and responsibilities.

Moreover, as past philosophers have asked, "If not you, then who? If not now, when?" Students with disabilities are hoping the answer is "My superintendent, starting this year."

**[NATE LEVENSON](#)**, a former superintendent, is managing director at District Management Group in Boston, Mass. His book *Six Shifts to Improve Special Education and Other Interventions: A Common Sense Approach for School Leaders* will be published by Harvard Education Press in March.

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