

Creating and Developing a Culture of Mutual Respect and Trust

Returning Students to their Home Districts The Task Force on Special Education’s 2013 survey reported that out-of-district placements and transportation continue to be the primary cost drivers for special education. Returning students to their home school or district, when appropriate, is a complex, emotionally charged endeavor. Effective strategies to return students to the home school require these important variables: parent support, out-of-district placement support, facility support and appropriate programs and services designed by trained staff at the district level. To assess the appropriateness of returning a student to the district school, the first step is to determine the possibilities by collecting extensive data concerning opportunities and obstacles. This process includes a thorough examination of the roles and responsibilities of all involved and the identification of specific strategies that would promote success, in particular, ways of gaining the confidence and support of parents by establishing trust and a sense of comfort that their child will benefit in this placement (Helfgott, 2013, presentation to the Task Force).¹⁶

Jennings (2007) provides an analysis of studies based on the research on effective collaborative teaching teams in inclusive classrooms. Research suggests that students with mild to severe disabilities placed in settings instituting co-teaching models and inclusive practices demonstrated improvements in attendance and academic, behavioral and social outcomes (Fisbaugh and Gum, 1994; Deno, Maruyana, Espin, and Cohen, 1990; Jenkins, 1992; England, 1996; Cole and Meyer, 1991; Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas, 2002; Hunt, Soto, Maier and Doering, 2003). Jennings addresses the importance of creating conditions for teaching teams to prosper while developing their own styles and systems for improved student outcomes. He also outlines ways school leaders can create, support and celebrate a culture of positive relationships, professionalism and trust.

Professional Development: Staff Recognizing that destructive conflicts lead to lost child study team time, due process petitions and increased litigation costs, Jennings (2009) stresses the importance of providing targeted professional development for staff to improve listening skills, empathy and persuasive tactics. Developing and fostering a belief system, behaviors, attitudes and practices that promote positive relationships among the child study team members, teachers, parents and students are both critical components of an effective inclusive school and steps toward developing what Jennings calls “Organizational Competence” (Jennings, 2013, presentation to Task Force). Palestis (2001) sees empathy and the need to carefully listen to parents and to “walk a mile in their shoes” (p.26) as critical components of team dynamics. These strategies promote the elimination of attitudes and values supporting the “deficit model.”

Professional Development: Board Members Jennings has also identified the importance of school leaders who can create, support and celebrate a culture of positive relationships, professionalism and trust. The Task Force believes that research linking effective school board

¹⁶ For specific strategies see *The Return Organization*, Helfgott, 2013.

governance to student achievement underscores the importance of training board of education members in the legal, fiscal and programmatic aspects of special education.

The 2000 Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) study found that "school boards in high-achieving districts are significantly different in their knowledge and beliefs than school boards in low-achieving districts. And, this difference appears to carry through among administrators and teachers throughout the districts" (Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB). Web. Last accessed March 16, 2014). Specifically, the IASB study found:

In the high-achieving districts, school board members showed greater understanding and influence in each of seven conditions for productive change that provided one "lens" for the content analysis. They were knowledgeable about topics such as improvement goals, curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development. They were able to clearly describe the purposes and processes of school improvement initiatives and identify the board's role in supporting those initiatives. They could give specific examples of how district goals were being carried out by administrators and teachers (IASB, *The Lighthouse Inquiry: School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement*, 2000).

As policy-makers, New Jersey's school board members play an important role in fostering the conditions that advance student achievement. In the context of special education, effectively carrying out this responsibility requires knowledge of the legal, financial and programmatic aspects of the services that their students are eligible to receive. Additionally, acquiring greater knowledge of their districts' special education programs and services will enable school board members to communicate the goals and achievements in this area to parents, staff and the community.