Collaboration Drives Change:

How a Group of Districts Joined Together to Raise the Achievement of Struggling Learners

by Nathan Levenson and Megan Roth

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Every month, a group of superintendents from the northeast suburbs of St. Paul (MN) gathers under the leadership of Connie Hayes, superintendent of Northeast Metro 916. Northeast Metro 916 is a regionally organized collaborative that provides its member districts services in special education, career and technical education, area learning centers, elementary education, and alternative high school programs. Well recognized for its specialized special education services, Northeast Metro 916 has become a source of best-practice knowledge and a resource for building capacity and cultivating cross-collaboration among the districts.
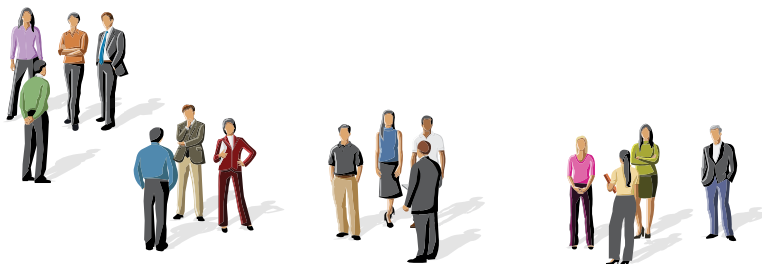
In recent meetings, Superintendent Hayes had been particularly struck by the shared challenges among the group regarding special education services; despite significant differences in the profiles of the individual districts, their concerns were the same. Each district was dedicating significant resources to its special education programs, but the achievement of the students with mild to moderate learning disabilities was not good enough. In each of the districts, a significant reading proficiency gap persisted between special education students and general education students. Meanwhile, the cost of special education services was continuing to rise while budgets were decreasing. The pressure to address the challenge was palpable, but there was much apprehension about having the hard conversations about the quality and cost-effectiveness of the services.

Superintendent Hayes recognized an opportunity to address these challenges as a group. She knew that a critical first step was to gain an in-depth understanding of current practices in each district and benchmark these against best practices. Acknowledging that a third party with an outsider's perspective can be powerful in performing this analysis, Superintendent Hayes requested the support of the District Management Council (DMC). "It was clear that many member districts shared challenges in this area. Given the tight resources, working as a group brought great economies of scale to our collaborative, and made the work accessible to districts eager to participate," said Superintendent Hayes. She even extended an invitation to participate to a neighboring collaborative, Intermediate School District 917. In the spring of 2013, six districts of Northeast Metro 916 and two districts from 917 embarked together on a mission to examine current special education practices, compare their practices to best practices, and see if strategies could be identified to improve their special education programs. ➔

Would a Group Study Work?

The districts were eager to address the challenges before them, and were generally intrigued by the notion of working together as a group. However, some members expressed concern about making comparisons between the districts. Although the districts were close in proximity, they varied in funding, student body demographics, and culture. Per pupil funding varied from $9,000 to $12,800, and the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch within the group ranged from 16% to 79% (Exhibit 1).

Despite some initial concerns, the group decided to push forward. The economies of scale offered a compelling opportunity. And Superintendent Hayes believed that approaching the tough topic of special education effectiveness and cost-effectiveness as a group might hold other benefits—most notably, it could provide needed support and encouragement. Special education staff might feel more comfortable conducting this type of review and analysis given that their neighbors and colleagues would be doing the same. Once the initial analysis was completed, each district would need to tackle its opportunities individually, but other participating districts would be going through similar experiences and might be able to provide a mixture of empathy, encouragement, and inspiration along the way.

Getting Started

The first phase of the work involved examining each district's current practices and developing a deep understanding of the challenges unique to each district. This phase of work was launched in fall 2013 and took until early winter 2014 to complete. To get the work started, each superintendent formed a district team to champion the individual district's portion of the project. Each team generally included the special education director, curriculum and instruction leaders, and sometimes the chief financial officer. DMC and each of the district teams worked together closely to kick off the project.

Initially, the scope of the project was straightforward: the study of current practices would include all special education staff supporting students with IEPs. This initial list included special education teachers, special education paraprofessionals, psychologists, and related services staff.

EXHIBIT 1: DISTRICTS PARTICIPATING IN THE GROUP STUDY

DISTRICT	K-12 ENROLLMENT	FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH RATES	PER PUPIL SPENDING
Centennial School District 12	6,500	19%	$10,100
Columbia Heights Public Schools	3,000	79%	$12,700
Inver Grove Heights Community Schools	3,900	37%	$10,100
North St. Paul - Maplewood - Oakdale School District 622	10,600	49%	$10,800
South St. Paul Public Schools	3,400	46%	$10,700
Spring Lake Park Schools	5,600	37%	$9,500
Stillwater Area Public Schools	8,200	16%	$10,600
White Bear Lake Area Schools	8,200	29%	$10,500

SOURCE: rc.education.state.mn.us/   Data as of Fall 2014.

While examining the services these staff provide would produce enough information to understand the special education support model, it became clear that a key piece of the puzzle would be missing: *What support occurs before a student is placed on an IEP? Who supports him or her? How often?* A clear understanding of *how* students are placed into special services is a critical component to understanding why the achievement gap between general education and special education students persists. The districts quickly agreed to redefine the scope of the project to include all struggling learners both with and without IEPs, and the study was broadened to include staff supporting struggling learners without IEPs, such as general education paraprofessionals, reading specialists, interventionists, and English Language Learner (ELL) support staff.

A DMC team then visited each district for several days to gain a full understanding of the complete spectrum of services currently being provided to students, and more importantly, to comprehend how these services fit together. During interviews with special education teachers, paraprofessionals, directors, curriculum and instruction teams, and district leaders, several trends began to emerge across the group of districts. Within virtually all of the districts, there was considerable difference between the responses of leadership and the responses of teachers to the question of how paraprofessionals support struggling learners. District leaders believed that paraprofessional staff were providing behavior and classroom management support for special education students. But, when special education teachers and paraprofessionals were asked the same question, a drastically different model was described. Paraprofessionals were often being assigned to general education classrooms with the directive to support the students with IEPs on their goals as needed. As a result,

"**Given the tight resources, working as a group brought great economies of scale to our collaborative, and made the work accessible to districts eager to participate,**" said Superintendent Hayes.

instead of focusing on behavior management, special education paraprofessionals were often being asked to provide reading instruction support. General education teachers thought the special education staff was managing the paraprofessional staff, but the special education staff thought the paraprofessionals were working with the classroom teachers.

The work of meaningful change is nearly impossible without the correct measurement tools. While disconnects between leadership vision and daily implementation can be easily identified through interviews, it is difficult to assess through interviews the pervasiveness of the issues throughout the district. Key questions remain unanswered after the interviews were concluded: *How many students do special education paraprofessionals provide reading support for? Are some schools using paraprofessionals for behavior support? How significant an issue is this?* ➔
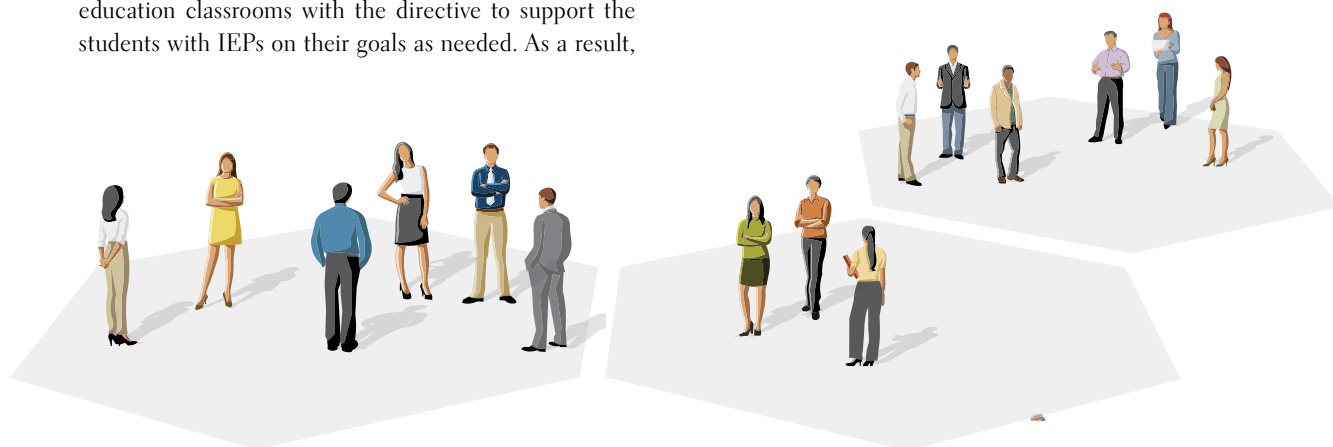
Measurement Provides Meaning

To gain a quantitative understanding, DMC's technology tool dmPlanning was utilized. dmPlanning® begins with an online form that asks special education, remediation, and intervention staff to create a log of their actual weekly schedule for one week (Exhibit 2). Practitioners are provided a customized list of activities, from "paperwork" and "attend IEP meeting" to "student instruction." The form also gathers details, such as the type of service (pull-out or co-teaching a general education classroom), the size of the group, and the type of support being provided, ranging from "life skills" to "reading." In other words, the data was capturing the *what*, the *when*, the *why*, and the *how*.

Once all the schedules are entered, the dmPlanning tool enables powerful analysis of how time is actually being spent and exactly how service is being delivered (Exhibits 3 and 4). Each district received a detailed analysis of current practices in the district, and these practices were compared to research-based best practices for supporting struggling learners, both with and without IEPs. Additionally, staffing patterns were examined and benchmarked nationally to districts of similar size and student body composition; this helped create a meaningful comparison of district staffing practices against national averages. Finally, the DMC report identified for each district the leading opportunities to raise achievement and deliver services more cost-efficiently. The process allowed each individual district to gain a deep understanding of how its model compared to best practices and to other similar districts nationwide, and armed the district with the quantitative data necessary to make meaningful change.

Upon receiving the data and recommendations for their own districts, superintendents and staff naturally began to wonder how their fellow districts in the group had fared. Staff groups and leadership at both ends of the student-spending spectrum were certain that the challenges they faced were incredibly unique to their situation, and once again expressed concern about the validity or usefulness of comparisons. But clearly, the competitive juices were flowing. Superintendent Hayes was hopeful but nervous about the group meetings that lay ahead in Phase 2.

EXHIBIT 2: **STAFF SCHEDULE-SHARING PROGRAM**

The dmPlanning form allows each staff member to enter in granular detail the amount of time they spend on different responsibilities. The list of activity options is created by role, and is unique to each district.

Coming Together and Letting Data Lead the Way

In the winter of 2014, the eight participating districts gathered together to discuss the findings. Each superintendent brought his or her team, and the differing energy within the room was palpable. Some districts were buzzing with excitement, referencing their district's individual report and already actively brainstorming with their team about how to implement change. Other districts were more focused on questioning the validity, relevance, and accuracy of the work that had been done.

At this meeting, trends and comparisons were presented anonymously at first to help mitigate tension and the natural tendency to want to draw comparisons. Once the findings were revealed, it became clear that every district, regardless of spending, student demographics, or culture, shared areas of opportunity to support struggling learners.

Key Shared Issues and Recommendations:

For each district, issues and recommendations were identified that were specific to its unique situation, but across the group of eight districts, some key issues and recommendations were common to many:

Examine the service delivery model being used and who delivers services: The response to intervention (RTI) model in place at the elementary schools put tremendous emphasis on providing additional, individualized support to students struggling to read without IEPs. If various types of interventions with teachers skilled in reading did not prove effective, students would receive an IEP with reading goals.

Once a student was placed on an IEP with reading goals, the student often began receiving daily in-class reading support from a special education paraprofessional in that classroom, with extra pull-out support from a special education teacher. This approach, a model that is common nationwide, has the unintended consequence of

EXHIBIT 3: SPEECH AND LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST ACTIVITY DISTRIBUTION

ACTIVITY	PERCENT OF TIME SPENT
Student instruction or support	52%
TOTAL DIRECT SERVICE	52%
Planning/ materials preparation	11%
Collaboration with colleagues (email, phone, in-person)	6%
Paperwork/ IEP writing	5%
Personal lunch	4%
Attend school based meeting (other than IEP)	3%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	3%
Parent communication (email, phone, in-person)	2%
Student observation/ data collection	2%
Attend meeting (IEP)	3%
Under-reported time	10%
TOTAL INDIRECT SERVICE	48%

The chart depicts the amount of time speech and language pathologists dedicate to different responsibilities within the contracted workweek; similar information was collected for other staff groups. Understanding how staff spend their time can enable districts to set clear guidelines for student support time, meetings, and IEP paperwork.

EXHIBIT 4: AVERAGE STUDENT GROUP SIZE FOR INCLUSION SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

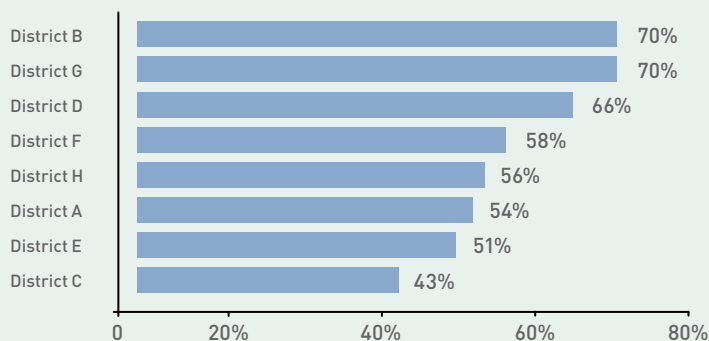|	
1 student	69%
2 students	16%
3 students	9%
4 students	4%
5 or more students	2%
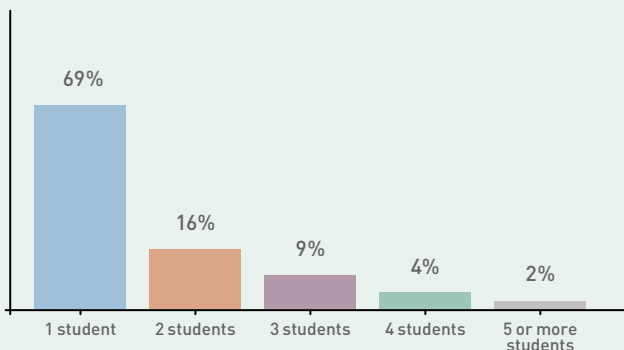
For each specific student support event, the staff member is asked to list the number of students he or she is supporting during that time.

denying the most struggling readers the skills of "general education" specialists and teachers, while increasing the intensity of support from paraprofessionals who typically lack the skill and training to provide meaningful remediation and instruction in reading. As shown in Exhibit 5, the data that emerged from Phase 1 of the study revealed that in all eight districts, special education paraprofessionals were spending significant amounts of time (43 to 70 percent) on providing academic support to students with mild to moderate special needs.
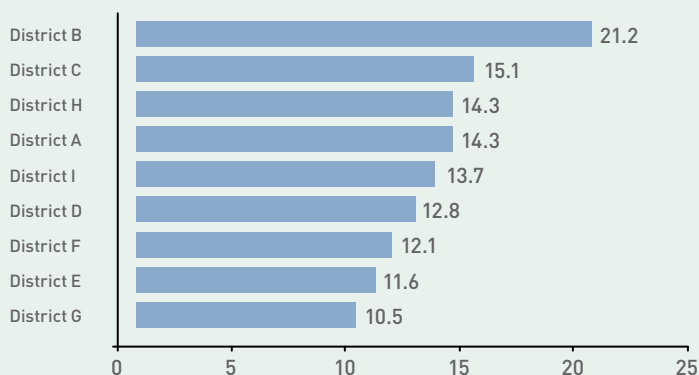
This approach can also inadvertently lower the expectations of special education student performance in a general education classroom. With this approach, general education teachers often came to expect that special education paraprofessionals and teachers would cover the needs of these students. This model has the effect of including students in the classroom without truly being inclusive. Districts that have made significant gains among all struggling readers (including those with mild to moderate disabilities) have done so by providing to *all* struggling readers extra time with teachers skilled in the teaching of reading.

The situation at the secondary level was similar. In interviews with special education teachers at the secondary level across the eight participating districts, many spoke about the expectation that they be content experts in multiple subjects. Special education teachers said they often needed to instruct and support students with IEPs in everything from algebra to biology all in one day. Special education staff revealed that they were generally reacting to student needs, mostly homework help, instead of having a structured lesson for each day. Interviews in one district, for example, highlighted that while great emphasis was placed on hiring skilled math teachers with training and expertise in math in the general education classroom, the educational background of special education teachers was rarely considered when creating their caseloads.

EXHIBIT 5: PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPECIAL EDUCATION PARAPROFESSIONALS DEDICATE TO ACADEMIC SUPPORT (INCLUSION CLASSROOM)

District	Percentage
District B	70%
District G	70%
District D	66%
District F	58%
District H	56%
District A	54%
District E	51%
District C	43%

Across the eight districts, paraprofessionals dedicated between 43% and 70% of student support time to core subject academic support.

EXHIBIT 6: SPECIAL EDUCATION PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFFING PER 1,000 STUDENTS

District	Staffing
District B	21.2
District C	15.1
District H	14.3
District A	14.3
District I	13.7
District D	12.8
District F	12.1
District E	11.6
District G	10.5

At both the elementary and secondary level, the skills, background, and content expertise of the teacher supporting students, whether or not they have IEPs, is critical. Extra time with a teacher who has the content expertise to pre-teach material, un-teach misconceptions, and re-teach the daily lesson has been proven to have a positive impact for all struggling students, both with and without IEPs. If the participating districts were going to see gains in achievement for their most struggling learners, they needed to put the right people in front of their most struggling learners.

While this idea struck some special educators as unconventional, perhaps even illegal, they group nature of the work helped quicken acceptance and implementation of the ideas. Some directors shared that they had long wanted to move in this direction. Other districts had already made these best practices a reality. Seeing and hearing that others wanted to or had already adopted these practices diminished the pushback.

Examining Staffing Levels: Within the peer group, district staffing was normalized to account for FTEs per 1,000 students. Analysis of the data revealed a particularly wide variation in staffing levels of special education paraprofessionals. For example, District G had half the number of paraprofessionals per 1,000 students as a neighboring district (Exhibit 6). While this chart initially raised some sensitive issues, the districts ultimately found the insight incredibly helpful, since it showed that some districts in fact were not relying so heavily on less skilled staff.

But an even more compelling story emerged with national benchmarking. Each district was individually compared to *like communities* across the nation; in other words, districts were individually compared to other communities in the nation that had similar profiles in terms of per pupil spending, students receiving free and reduced lunch, and enrollment. Exhibit 7 compares each district's paraprofessional staffing levels to its like communities across the nation (e.g., District A will be compared to different like communities than District H, due to variations in their district profiles).

Regardless of their different profiles, each district participating in the study had notably more paraprofessionals per 1,000 students than similar districts across the nation. Initially, the districts had been focused on the variation among the group's member districts. However,

Once the findings were revealed, it became clear that every district, regardless of spending, student demographics, or culture, shared areas of opportunity to support struggling learners.

national benchmarking revealed that they were all in a very similar situation: all of the districts had significantly more staff than districts similar to them nationwide. State reimbursement rules and cultural expectations from parents may have been contributing to a heavy reliance on paraprofessionals. It is not uncommon for districts in the same geographic area to have similar practices, but taking a national perspective can help shape a conversation about alternative support practices and can demonstrate that districts in very similar situations are making their models work, at a drastically lower cost. →

EXHIBIT 7: **COMPARING LOCAL PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFFING LEVELS PER 1,000 STUDENTS TO THOSE OF SIMILAR DISTRICTS NATIONWIDE**
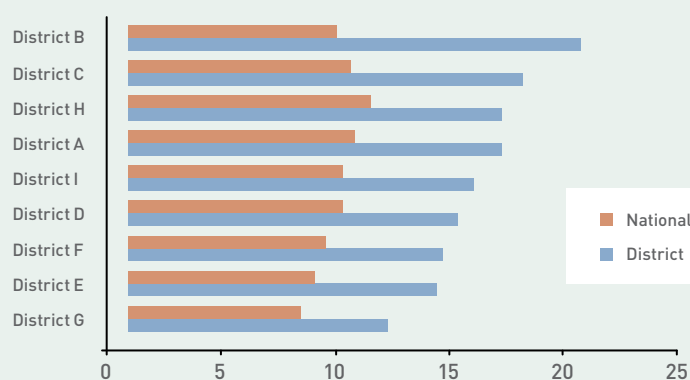
> **The use of data to bring clarity and accessibility to the issues allowed districts to have engaging conversations about previously misunderstood and seemingly confusing practices.**

Data Drives Change

Having hard data was critical to the success of the project. The findings and recommendations were not based solely on anecdotal information from staff interviews, but were grounded in data provided by staff themselves and extensive interview findings. On average, about 500,000 data points from the staff schedule sharing per district now existed to facilitate meaningful conversations about support models and to mitigate any staff concerns around the validity of the opportunities defined for their district. Additionally, providing superintendents with staffing benchmarking compared both to other local communities and to like districts across the nation facilitated meaningful conversations regarding *what's possible*.

Sharing and understanding the trends as a group motivated the districts. In their meetings as a group, they reviewed in detail the many analyses of all the data collected. These analyses showed a wide range of practices across the participating districts. No one district was consistently at the top of all the charts, or consistently at the bottom. Each district had specific strategies that resonated with best practices, and together they could help one another. Comparing districts to one another showed that change was possible, because it proved to them that some of their neighbors were actively practicing the change they were seeking. Superintendent Patty Phillips of North St. Paul–Maplewood–Oakdale noted, "By having clear, insightful data, our conversations became action-oriented. Our team immensely benefited from comparing and contrasting with neighboring districts; seeing their work helped move us forward." The data showed what was possible. It rooted the conversation in reality, and shifted the conversation immediately to "This is where we are. What's next? How do we push change forward? How do *you* do that?"

Interesting Findings, but How Do We Pay for This?

In the group discussions that followed, it became clear to all the participating districts that the opportunities identified as a result of the study were understandable and achievable, and would save the districts money. For example, providing reading specialists to students with mild to moderate reading needs is both a best-practice model and a relatively cost-neutral adjustment.

EXHIBIT 8: ELEMENTARY LEVEL ONLY: FTE DEDICATED TO READING

ROLE	FTE	AVERAGE SALARIES & BENEFITS	TOTAL INVESTMENT
Elementary special education teachers (inclusion)	17	$57,000	$969,000
Elementary special education paraprofessionals (inclusion)	15	$27,000	$405,000
Speech and language pathologists	4	$55,000	$220,000
TOTAL	36	--	$1,594,000

Using the dmPlanning tool, districts can easily see how much time special education teachers and paraprofessionals currently invest in the teaching of reading, and the current investment in special education reading can be calculated. In the district example provided in Exhibit 8, speech and language pathologists were also providing reading support.

In this example, the number of students needing additional specialized support was calculated by looking at the percentage of special education students who were not proficient in reading on the state exam. When this information is partnered with the caseload data available from dmPlanning, it takes a simple calculation to see the number of reading specialists that would be required to support struggling readers with IEPs (Exhibit 9).

In total, to meet student need, only eight reading teachers would be required, which is vastly fewer than the current 36 staff that are invested in reading efforts within the district. Students would benefit from working with teachers skilled in teaching reading. And the cost of implementing this best practice is less than the current costs.

Prior to the group work, superintendents were not sure where to start. But the short list of high-impact opportunities on cost-effective ways to raise student achievement now provided district leaders with a clear direction forward. A connection between special education, intervention practices, general education instruction, and the budget were brought together in a meaningful way. The breakdown of opportunities made special education practices understandable and accessible to both chief financial officers and chief academic officers. The use of data to bring clarity and accessibility to the issues allowed districts to have engaging conversations about previously misunderstood and seemingly confusing practices. Data, partnered with the power of group comparisons, gave districts the momentum they needed to enact change. →

EXHIBIT 9: INVESTMENT REQUIRED TO IMPLEMENT BEST-PRACTICE READING INSTRUCTION

Elementary Level Only	
% of students with IEPs who did not pass the state reading exam	72%
Estimated # of special education students struggling to read	317
# of students served per reading teacher	40
# of reading teachers required	8
Total cost of providing additional time for students struggling with reading [1]	$456,000
TOTAL SAVINGS COMPARED TO CURRENT INVESTMENT	$1,140,000

1. Assumes an average salary and benefits of $54,000.

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- SUPERINTENDENT PATTY PHILLIPS
SCHOOL DISTRICT 622
NORTH ST. PAUL-MAPLEWOOD-OAKDALE

Lessons Learned

Working as a group created a very powerful dynamic that propelled implementation of the recommendations. It helped the reluctant districts to take action and the motivated ones to move faster and deeper. For example, when one district learned that they had only a few of the best practices for reading or intervention in place, some in the district initially defaulted to a position that such programs and approaches were not doable and likely violated state law. But during the group sharing of data, they realized that each best practice was in place in at least one district and some districts had many in place. The idea that "it's impossible" dissipated quickly.

Finally and most importantly, working as a group led to faster, bolder, and deeper change. First, superintendents were able to leverage the group to their advantage. It helped that they could share with their school board and other stakeholders the fact that their challenges were common among their peers, that others were also implementing change, and that these ideas are ultimately good for students. Also motivating was the concern that some peer districts had already put best practices in place or were moving quickly to do so. The faster runners thus picked up the pace for the others. Reflecting on the work, Superintendent Jeff Ronneberg of Spring Lake Park commented, "The study provided a deep understanding of practices and structures within our

district that were contributing to current results. This learning, combined with a knowledge of what other districts had implemented and experienced success with, increased our motivation as a team while providing sound strategies we could bring to scale and mitigating barriers."

Moving Forward

On the whole, the districts participating in this group project implemented more change—and more quickly—than is typically seen in districts that are working on their own. North St. Paul–Maplewood–Oakdale ISD 622, for example, immediately reduced instruction by paraprofessionals and shifted support to more skilled staff, while also closely examining and refining their related services support model. Spring Lake Park Schools within months added extra time for struggling students to work with highly skilled teachers. And a number of districts shifted resources away from meetings and into more and better services for children.

In the year following the research phase, more than half the districts have large-scale efforts underway to improve reading, math, and ELA supports; to reduce time in meetings; and to integrate
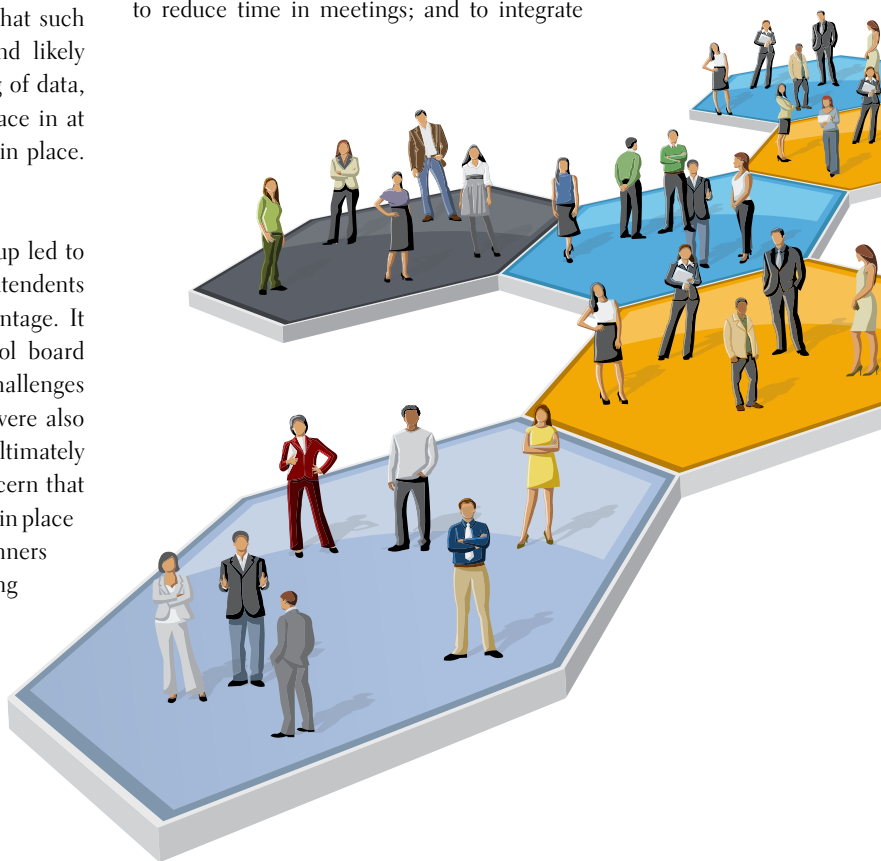
more general education supports for students with special needs and/or shift instruction away from less-skilled paraprofessionals to highly skilled staff. The report did not end up on a shelf collecting dust, in part because of the momentum created by the group effort.

The power of working as a cohort of districts became most visible when the original group of superintendents met a year later and started asking, "So, what do we do next?" Together, they have already embarked on another joint effort, this time focusing on building capacity for Achievement Value Analysis—a study of which programs and strategies work, specifically for which children, and at what cost. The group has expanded, and they are even sharing a data analyst across the districts to reduce the cost and increase the impact of their next joint effort. This second group effort is certainly a testament to the power and dynamism created by the first group project. Effecting significant change is never easy, but tackling challenges as a group created energy, support, and a competitive spirit that helped drive change and, most importantly, will help drive results for students. ◆

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