

# Narrowing Gaps for Special-Needs Students

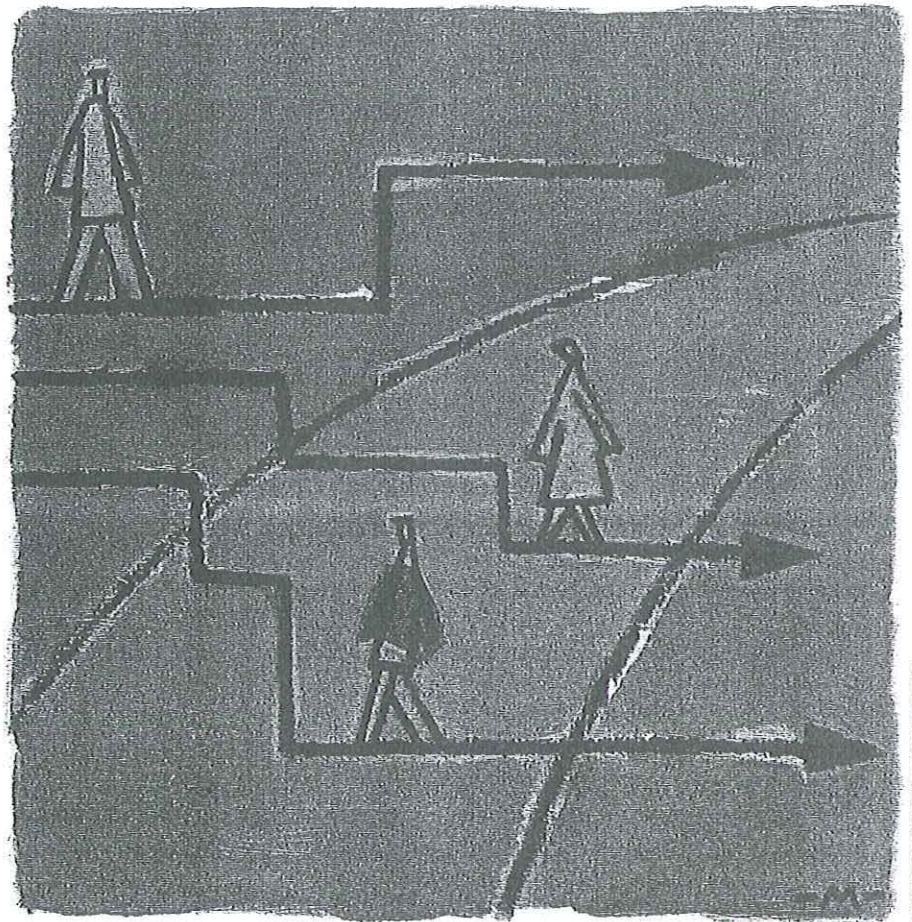
*A longitudinal study in Rhode Island shows that despite low rankings, many schools are raising the achievement of students with special needs.*

**Vincent J. Hawkins**

**S**chools in Rhode Island that received rankings of “low performing” and “in need of improvement” share one common factor—the failure of the subgroup with individualized education programs (IEPs) to meet annual measurable objectives on state assessments. However, no single measure—such as a score on a state test—can adequately determine the effectiveness of a school. We need to look beyond test scores of subgroups and, as ASCD contends, assess a school’s effectiveness using multiple measures. One such measure—longitudinal studies—can provide a truer picture of school achievement.

In support of this position, members of the Rhode Island ASCD affiliate conducted a longitudinal study of all 320 public schools in the state. Using data from state testing in language arts and math, the study compared the performance of students who have special needs with that of the student population as a whole.

By considering subgroup performance data from 2001–2004, the research team sought to determine which schools, including those not making adequate yearly progress, were, in fact, making significant progress toward closing the gap between students with individualized education programs and all tested students. Meeting the classification of



“moderate” or “high performing” was not the focus of the study.

Using the disaggregated data of each school, the research team analyzed subgroup performance for all grade levels tested, using three-year averages of student performance (index proficiency scores). The study revealed that nearly

100 of Rhode Island’s 320 public schools demonstrated significant improvement in closing the gap between the IEP subgroup and all students in either language arts or math on the New Standards Reference Exam (NSRE). Nine schools demonstrated significant improvement in both tested areas.

Sixty schools that had demonstrated the ability to close the gap responded to a survey designed to identify effective practices. The three profiles that follow—of an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school—illustrate how some schools are making substantial progress.

### **Schools That Closed the Gap**

#### *West Broadway Elementary School*

West Broadway Elementary School in Providence, Rhode Island, enrolls more than 500 students in grades preK–5 and has a teaching staff of 39. More than 88 percent of students are minority, and more than 85 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. Approximately one in six students has an individualized education program.

## **The driving force of successful schools is the staff's commitment to ensuring the success of each student.**

West Broadway has shown three years of progress in the tested grade in both mathematics and language arts for all students and for students with IEPs. Both groups achieved the school's annual measurable objective for mathematics, reducing the achievement gap from 10 points in 2001–2002 to 5.4 in 2003–2004. The school also significantly closed the gap in language arts: In 2001–2002, there was a 48-point gap; by 2003–2004, the gap had decreased to 7.1.

West Broadway's reported practices and intervention included implementing a balanced literacy program, which included teacher read-alouds; self-selected reading; home reading; and teacher-directed reading, writing, and vocabulary building. In mathematics, teachers engaged all students in consistent, in-depth problem solving through focused, small-group instruction and provided manipulatives that helped students learn mathematical concepts.

Teachers also immediately addressed students' conceptual and procedural errors.

#### *Gilbert Stuart Middle School*

Gilbert Stuart Middle School, also in Providence, enrolls more than 800 students in grades 6–8, with a staff of approximately 65. Almost 25 percent of students have an individualized education program, and approximately 80 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. More than 95 percent of students are minority.

The school has substantially reduced the gap between all students and students with IEPs in both language arts and math. By the 2003–2004 school year, students with IEPs achieved a score of 51.6 in language arts (up from

28.4 in 2001–2002), reducing the achievement gap from 26.3 points to 15.5. In math, the results were even more impressive. By 2003–2004, students with IEPs were scoring at slightly higher levels in math than all students were.

To achieve these gains, the school implemented a double block of English language arts instruction and regularly scheduled common planning time for teacher teams. In math, special education teachers used the same scope and sequence as the regular education teachers did. They also implemented the same strategies and techniques for differentiating instruction. Special education teachers were included in the English, math, and science departments.

The school has a culture of collegiality and collaboration, with a strong focus on professional development. Regular education teachers used special education teachers as instructional models because of their expertise in scaffolding

and differentiating instruction. Teachers also created their own professional development by visiting one another's classrooms to identify effective practices.

#### *Davies Career and Technical Regional High School*

Davies Career and Technical Regional High School has an eclectic student population, drawing from numerous cities and towns within the Providence metropolitan area. The school enrolls 800 mostly urban students in grades 9–12, with a staff of almost 100. One student in seven has an individualized education program, one-half receive free or reduced-price lunch, and more than one-third are minority.

In 2001–2002, the gap between the performance of all students and that of students with IEPs was 8.1 points in language arts and 14.7 in math. By 2003–2004, the gap had decreased to 5.4 points in language arts and 12.3 in math.

The staff at Davies received professional development in differentiated instruction, inclusive practices, and literacy across the content areas. As a result, teachers began to take student learning styles into consideration when planning instruction. They also used a variety of collaborative teaching models, such as

- *One teacher/one support teacher*, in which a subject-expert lead teacher pairs with a support teacher specialist.

- *Station teaching*, in which teachers divide the content among student groups and teach a miniclass. When the miniclasses are over, students switch groups.

- *Parallel teaching*, in which teachers divide the class and teach the same content after planning cooperatively.

- *Alternative teaching*, in which a smaller group receives preteaching or reteaching.

- *Team teaching*, in which teachers share instruction and planning.

In addition, the school has fully integrated special education staff members into academic departments, meeting

weekly for common planning. Special education and regular education teachers work together in all science classes and in most of the English, math, and social studies classrooms.

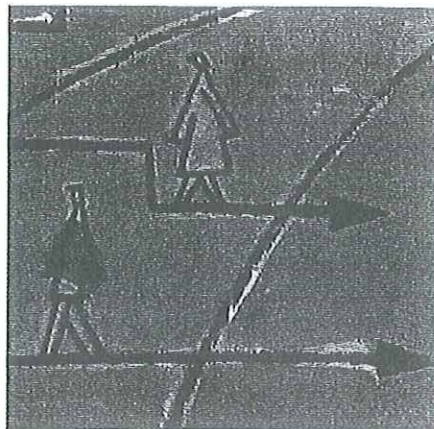
Davies also offers ramp-up and remedial assistance in language arts and mathematics. Students in grade 9 who are at least three years behind in reading are required to take a daily 90-minute instructional block taught by an English teacher and a reading specialist. The curriculum doesn't differ from the regular curriculum; the students simply have more time to cover the material. Similarly, students in grade 9 who score significantly below grade level in math are required to take a one-credit remedial ramp-up math class in addition to their regularly scheduled math class. Class size is limited to 12 students to ensure an exemplary, self-paced, individualized program with significant teacher interaction.

### Striving to Succeed

Two schools surveyed—Richmond Elementary and William R. Dutemple Elementary—indicated that they embedded high expectations for all students in daily activities. For example, teachers and students in these schools understood grade-level expectations. The schools practiced “learning walks” (walk-throughs), focused on strong early reading instruction, and hired excellent, high-quality teachers.

As a result of this focus on high expectations, the achievement gap between students with IEPs and all students in both language arts and math decreased by approximately 40 percent. Dutemple and another school in the study, Garvin Memorial Elementary, implemented inclusion so effectively that it was nearly impossible to distinguish between students with IEPs and general education students. Any student who needed an intervention, an alternate strategy, or other assistance received it, with teachers addressing specific requirements as discreetly as possible.

The diverse populations of schools



that have successfully reduced the achievement gap suggest that strategies are applicable and effective in a variety of settings. For example, Richmond Elementary is a rural school that enrolls 500 students, with a minority population of approximately 2 percent. Dutemple, on the other hand, has a minority population of more than 28 percent and is defined as “urban ring.”

In 1997-1998, Rhode Island implemented a school accountability reporting system known as SALT (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching). SALT visits involve teams of local educators who spend a week in schools to gather and review evidence on teaching and learning. A SALT visit to Potter-Burns Elementary School indicated a need to expand collaborative planning and teaching models and support greater inclusiveness. By differentiating instruction and analyzing student work, the school experienced a dramatic increase in student achievement. Teachers engaged in collaborative work and planning, integrating the arts with social studies, writing, and math.

In 1998, fewer than 5 percent of the school's students achieved proficiency on the state assessments in language arts and mathematics. By 2003, 86 percent of all students had achieved proficiency in language arts, and more than 73 percent had achieved proficiency in mathematics. For students with IEPs, standard achievement levels dropped slightly during this period, from 75 percent to 69 percent.

### Practices That Work

Our survey indicated a number of practices that successful schools use to reduce the achievement gap and improve achievement for all students. These included

- Using inclusive strategies that engage students with special needs in general classrooms.
- Establishing common, high expectations for all learners, with a focus on achievement.
- Providing professional development to all staff members in research-based best practices.
- Employing a highly qualified staff that is trained, committed, and responsive to student needs.
- Having teams of teachers frequently analyze student work.
- Using multiple forms of assessment.
- Differentiating instructional practices to address student needs.
- Increasing instructional time in literacy.
- Involving parents in student learning.
- Creating safe learning environments that incorporate incentives for success.

The Rhode Island ASCD affiliate study proved that students with special needs can achieve high standards when schools address learning needs. Successful schools had strong leadership and incorporated effective practices that promoted a responsive learning environment. Most important, they were committed to ensuring the success of each student. ■

*Author's note:* Kenneth DiPietro, Superintendent of Coventry Public Schools, assisted with this article. The Rhode Island ASCD Board of Directors and the Rhode Island Department of Education supported this project.

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