



Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Educators and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

What high-growth schools are doing

We talk a lot about academic proficiencies, and extol high-performing schools. That's natural, of course, because it's important to study our high-performing peers. But just as Rome wasn't built in a day, top-notch systems didn't get there over night.

They did, however, get there through sustained and committed growth.

And growth was the focus of a recent study by the Iowa Department of Education in conjunction with Grant Wood Area Education Agency. The question fueling the study: Why are students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) not achieving at high levels?

"The reason we ask is that it is estimated that 80 percent of students on IEPs have mild disabilities," said Ellen McGinnis-Smith, a consultant for the Iowa Department of Education. "Is it possible for these students to learn



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Collaboration between special education teachers and their general education counterparts is key to ensuring a high-growth school.

strategies to work with their disability and achieve high levels? We should be able to expect that."

The study examined five schools in the AEA with the highest growth and compared them to four schools with some of the lowest growth.

"We collected two years of data focusing on rate of growth, rather than proficiency, with the goal being to close the achievement gap," McGinnis-Smith said. "We found many characteristics that were present in the high-growth schools,

and absent or in the development stage at the low growth schools."

Common practices at high-growth schools include:

1. Students receive formative assessments regularly, and direct instruction geared toward their academic needs. This comes down to quality instruction.
2. Ownership of all students by all staff. Just because a student receives special education doesn't mean the general education teacher should not have as much ownership of that student.
3. Having high expectations. What this really means is teachers and administrators know that a disability does not define expectations for that student.
4. Relationships with students. A positive relationship conveys to

students that the teachers believe in their potential and their capacity to learn. In a strong relationship, a teacher also sees the students' strengths, and they genuinely like the students. "This is not coddling, but developing a healthy relationship with the student," McGinnis-Smith said. "You have confidence that the student can master skills, you help them know that they belong in school, and when they sink into learned helplessness, you don't allow it. You treat that individual as you would anyone else – know their strengths, their potential, their interest and their human foibles."

5. Students on IEPs receive the core and more. They get more instruction than a non-IEP student would. Specifically, they receive the core plus ad-



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Department of Education

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ditional direct systemic instruction in the area of their need. Students also will receive pre-teaching and concepts that they will need to know to benefit from core instruction.

6. Use structured evidence-based strategies and materials.
7. Clear direction of what needs to be done (instruction, materials, use of data) by either the district or principal.
8. Most have a Response to Intervention (also known as Multi-tier Systems of Support) in place and students on IEPs are included in the full range of interventions.
9. High level of communication between special education and general education teachers.
10. Teachers feel empowered.

Conversely, some common characteristics cited in low-growth schools are:

1. Pieced together materials from here and there; it is not structured, and not necessarily evidence based.
2. Some or all tutoring during special education time rather than working to develop core skills.
3. Lack of district or principal direction of what to do (special education teachers feel they are on



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- their own to figure out what to do with students).
4. Teachers sometimes seem more frustrated or helpless.
5. Teachers expressed more concerns about student behaviors and mental health issues.

“One of the overall challenges for these schools was finding time for special education teachers to participate with general education teachers in professional learning communities,” McGinnis-Smith said. “In any successful school, collaboration between special ed. and gen. ed. is crucial.”

In all high-growth schools, there was a top-down commitment.

“Leadership is important in all districts, but it is especially important in smaller districts in which they may have fewer resources,” McGinnis-Smith said.

“Without strong instruction leadership, a clear vision and a commitment, you cannot expect to have system-wide top-notch outcomes.”



In high-growth schools, there is a high level of communication between teachers and parents. In addition, students receive core instruction plus additional systemic instruction in the area of their need.