

AASA
THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ASSOCIATION

School Administrator

JANUARY 2020

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS



Mindsets in Special Education

Inclusive placements,
student-led IEPs,
online therapy delivery



PLUS

*Ethics: Board Demands
Student Transfer, p8*

Social Media: Student Takeovers, p9

Adult Fans Threaten School Sports, p12

Best of the Blogs, p7

NON-PROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
BOLINGBROOK, IL
PERMIT NO. 144

Board Leadership

on Inclusive Practices, Equity and Access for All

With the need to realign human and financial resources and deploy integrated supports, buy-in by the decision makers is a vital first measure

BY KURT A. SCHNEIDER AND SUZANNE B. SANDS

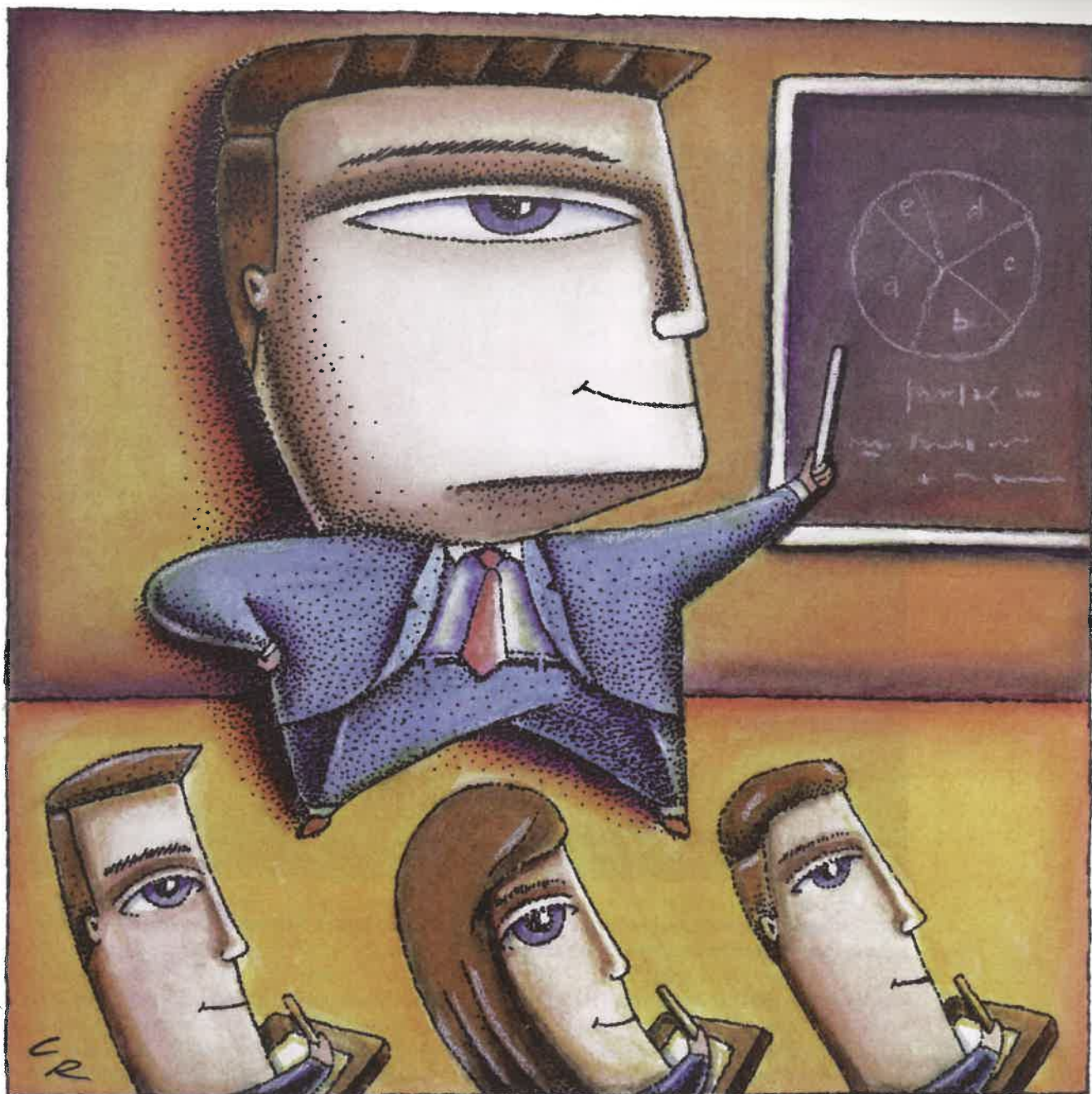
To promote inclusive practices and effectively provide all students with equity and access to high-quality curriculum and needed supports, you must have buy-in first from your school board. This is not to minimize the importance of having school district staff, parents and the community you serve on board, but empowering school board members to be well-informed decision makers is an essential early step.

This will happen only by providing professional development around educational research, federal policy and evidence-based practices. Though challenging, starting with board members is imperative because they set the district's direction and vision, approve personnel, oversee

finances and create policy, all of which are needed to transform an educational system to better serve the needs of its diverse learners.

Transformational systemwide change requires broad support for new budgetary practices, a realignment of human and financial resources, curriculum reviews and updates and deployment of integrated systems.

Historical research suggests boards of education have been overlooked in reform initiatives, leaving them the forgotten players. Yet without full board support, thoughtful district initiatives focused on improving student learning outcomes can be derailed by individuals or small groups intent on preserving current practices. Opposition often involves the fear of something being



taken away or perpetuates the status quo. Leaving in place tracking, leveling, overidentification and other practices results in segregation and marginalization of diverse learners and stands against what sound research and our own experiences inform us about the importance of inclusive practices.

The regional cooperative we lead in the Chicago suburbs, the Northern Suburban Special Education District, supports 18 member districts with diverse learner populations. We are committed to the possibilities in every learner and strive to be a national leader in the commitment to inclusive communities that equally value all people and inspire them to be active participants in our world.

One of us (Schneider) made this inclusive vision a top priority when hired as superintendent in 2016 — a goal that would not have been realized without the engagement and support of the district's Leadership Council board.

Starting with the Board Interview

The process of educating the 21-member board began with the superintendent's interview for the position. Using research from a book by Colleen Capper and Elise Frattura, *Meeting the Needs of Students of ALL Abilities: How Leaders Go Beyond Inclusion*, I (Schneider) shared, as a candidate, the history of diverse learners, explaining how school systems were intentionally established for the privileged few, with diverse populations



Kurt Schneider, superintendent of Northern Suburban Special Education District in Highland Park, Ill., with Suzanne Sands, president of the NSSED's Leadership Council.

purposefully excluded. I described how an educational cooperative could support school districts in developing integrated comprehensive systems benefitting all learners.

I also explained that such work would require a focus on equity, a realignment of human resources, a transformation of learning, a new financial model for the cooperative, and possibly a new district name and branding. Having the courage to open this dialogue with the board in the interview process served to begin building the board's understanding of the work ahead and laid the foundation for a supportive, open and honest relationship between the superintendent and board.

Educational change is never easy, so transforming practices across 18 school systems was inevitably going to result in pushback. Equipping the board with the knowledge and understanding to strongly support the change process and familiarity with the research and policy behind the need for change was the key to moving beyond opposition. Preparing elected leaders

for the potential barriers and saboteurs as you go through the stages of change is an important and necessary step in transforming education systems given the high stakes of educational accountability, according to Amy Meeks, in her 2016 doctoral study of special education administrator turnover, which she completed at University of Missouri at St. Louis.

Managing Change From the Outset

Before the formal strategic planning process could begin, board members had to agree on the need for significant change. To that end, they were provided with research focused on such topics as equity, inclusive schooling, evidence-based practices for all learners, effective implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, as well as district, regional, state and national outcome data.

The superintendent facilitated professional development during board meetings, including opportunities for discussion and engagement on

research materials and video conferencing with national experts. Superintendents from each of the cooperative's three regions were invited to share with the board their districts' needs and how they viewed the organization's current and future role in their school systems.

Further, representative board members and the superintendent attended several key national conferences and symposiums focusing on equity and inclusive practices and shared key learnings with the board. Together, all of these conversations early in the process set the direction of the district.

Leading a Strategic Planning Process

Once they were grounded in the need for change, school board members made the superintendent responsible for developing a collaborative strate-

gic planning process that engaged all stakeholders. With the support of an independent outside consultant, the superintendent designed a process for developing a shared, communitywide vision of public education and the role of our cooperative in the public education system.

Strategic planning is a process of discovery, where key stakeholders engage in learning, discussion and critical thinking, so the process had to challenge current beliefs leading to new ways of viewing the organization and its work.

To engage our stakeholders, we administered a survey on the strengths and needs within the organization as well as plans to use evidence-based practices across the cooperative. The survey was available to parents, special and general education staff and administrators in all 18 districts. More than 880 people responded.

School Districts' Inclusion Initiatives

Several specific initiatives illustrate the move to include more students with disabilities within the schools of Illinois' Northern Suburban Special Education District.

► District level.

The NSSED administrative team has been restructured to promote innovation through collaboration. The director of programs role, which largely focused on the administration of self-contained programs, has been reimaged as the assistant superintendent of instructional design and innovation. The role now facilitates collaboration among various administrators in the cooperative's 18 districts to develop integrated comprehensive systems in schools and promote greater access to the general education curriculum.

Additionally, a new position was created from reallocated resources: chief technology, communications and data services official.

Together, the two administrators co-lead the newly established Department of Learning, which focuses on all aspects of student learning and the promotion of inclusive practices across the

cooperative and within NSSED programs and services.

► Lake Forest Elementary and High School Districts 67 and 115.

The catalyst for systemic change began with the local school board supporting the superintendent to conduct a study by an independent outside evaluator of their diverse learner population to better understand their student outcomes. The study led to several recommendations: Strengthen culture and acceptance of diverse learners; build the necessary infrastructure for all students to attend the same home school as nondisabled peers; and update policy and procedures around special education eligibility to promote more effective and efficient use of public funds.

Additionally, the two districts introduced new curricula across content areas, increased use of inclusive practices, strengthened social-emotional learning curricula and supports and developed co-planning and co-serving staff service delivery models.

As a result of these system-wide efforts, 99.5 percent of students are educated in their home schools, IEP rates have declined

from 18 percent to 13 percent and the percentage of students with IEPs being educated in their general education environments for more than 80 percent of their day has increased from 61 percent to 80 percent over the past five years.

► Winnetka School District 36.

Administrators collaborated with the local school board to begin developing an integrated comprehensive system. This required board support for increasing capacity to improve supports and outcomes for students with complex needs.

Responsibilities among school personnel have shifted from work silos toward collaborative school-based support of students throughout the day. In one elementary school, social workers, art teachers, and music staff now take a greater role in the inclusion of all students by working directly with student support teams to meet student needs beyond their own classrooms, notably on transitions during the day.

The results: reduced behavioral incidents and an increase in successful transitions throughout the school day.

— KURT SCHNEIDER

Next, we hosted a community engagement event at which 138 participants discussed the world in which our children will be living and the future of the Northern Suburban Special Education District. Intentionally diverse groups of stakeholders were seated together and given discussion questions. The notes collected were used with the survey data to drive the work of a core representative group of stakeholders tasked with drafting vision, mission and belief statements. Over an estimated 200 hours, numerous challenging conversations took place at committee meetings, at stakeholder meetings and at school board tables throughout the cooperative. Active board engagement took place in the process from beginning to end.

The mission, vision, beliefs and goals that were articulated in our strategic plan (available at nssed.org) challenged existing practices and mindsets. Demanding change and growth, the

plan holds us, our communities and our students to higher expectations.

Like many others, our plan includes goals and objectives related to relationships and communication, financial planning, developing a culture of excellence and learning. However, unlike many district plans, at its core is the identification of equity and access as well as unity. Stated explicitly, we believe it is important that all individuals, including students with the most complex needs, are seen for their contributions, and we proudly recognize the diversity of our cultures, interests, skills and backgrounds as an asset that makes our community stronger.

Unfortunately, even in the most well-intentioned school systems, student success can be predicted by race, economic status, language and ability. Therefore, the identification and elimination of systemic barriers preventing learners from reaching their full potential must be addressed. Doing so in a unified, regionwide manner with the shared resources and expertise of the cooperative will allow us to effectively transform our schools.

Additional Resources

The authors suggest these informational resources for school districts pursuing inclusive practices with students.

BOOKS AND REPORTS

- ▶ "The Board's Role in Educational Improvement" in *Issues About Change*, Volume 3, No. 4, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
- ▶ *Leading for Social Justice: Transforming Schools for ALL Learners* by Elise Frattura and Colleen Capper, Corwin Press
- ▶ *Meeting the Needs of Students of ALL Abilities: How Leaders Go Beyond Inclusion* by Colleen Capper and Elise Frattura, Corwin Press
- ▶ "The Stages of Systemic Change" by Beverly Anderson in *Educational Leadership*, September 1993, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept93/vol51/num01/The-Stages-of-Systemic-Change.aspx>

ORGANIZATIONS

- ▶ Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity, an annual summer institute co-sponsored by the educational leadership programs at University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee that focuses on implementation in school settings.
- ▶ National School Boards Association's annual Equity Symposium, a forum for school board members and community leaders to examine strategies and best practices around equity. www.nsba.org/Events/Equity-Symposium
- ▶ TASH, a national organization based in Washington, D.C., committed to fully including individuals with disabilities in all facets of public life. <https://tash.org>

The End of Labeling and Tracking

Given what we have gained from this process, learned from educational research and what current educational policy demands, we believe educational institutions must increase inclusive opportunities, promote high expectations and achieve better outcomes for diverse learners. We must stop focusing on labeling students, tracking them into separate programs and levels, emphasizing pullout instruction and services, and establishing separate and costly educational environments, all of which result in lower expectations and outcomes for students.

Instead, educators must view all students as general education students and focus on setting individualized instructional goals and customizing the supports and services needed to meet those goals. This work must be done in partnership with parents and communities at-large. Doing so increases the perception that all students are learners and raises the cultural expectation from one of caretaking to one of scholarship.

To achieve this transformation, superintendents must partner with their school boards in committing to the possibilities in every learner every day. ■

KURT SCHNEIDER is superintendent of the Northern Suburban Special Education District in Highland Park, Ill. E-mail: kschneider@nssed.org. Twitter: @KASchneider_PhD.
SUZANNE SANDS is the president of the NSSED's Leadership Council and a member of the District 67 school board.