

An Interview on District and School Transformation

Practical Approaches to Facilitating Sustainable Systemic Change

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Abstract: Illinois has an education system that includes regional cooperatives charged with supporting member districts in the provision of special education services for students from birth to age 22. Such support can include both direct services (i.e., early childhood services, special education classes in a separate building or in special education classrooms of the member districts) and indirect services (e.g., consulting services, professional development and coaching, assessment, related services). This interview is with three leaders in one such cooperative of 18 K-8 and high school member districts of varying size across 3 regions in 2 counties.

Keywords: systems change, access to and progress in the general curriculum, leadership, system transformation, re-imagining special education

Illinois has an education system that includes regional cooperatives charged with supporting member districts in the provision of special education services for students from birth to age 22. Such support can include direct services (i.e., early childhood services, special education classes in a separate building or in special education classrooms of the member districts) and indirect services (e.g., consulting services, professional development and coaching, assessment, related services). This interview is with three leaders in one such cooperative, consisting of 18 K-8 and high school member districts of varying sizes across 3 regions in 2 counties. Dr. Kurt A. Schneider is the superintendent of the Northern Suburban Special Education District (NSSED) in Highland Park, IL. He holds undergraduate and master's degrees in

special education, and a PhD in educational leadership and policy analysis. He has extensive general and special education experience in designing integrated comprehensive education systems and has held his current position since 2016. Suzanne Sands is the president of the NSSED Leadership Council, as well as member of the School Board of District 67 in Lake Forest, which is one of the 18 member districts of NSSED. Kristen Endre is the president of the NSSED parent leadership group for the Association of Parents and Staff, which comprises parent representatives from each of the 18 member districts, as well as NSSED district administrators. For many years, this association has participated in and offered learning opportunities to advance inclusive practices and shared parent perspectives with leaders as they make decisions about services and the students of NSSED. This is part of their story about their experiences with re-imagining their system's implementation of special education and related services.

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Question (Q): What issues faced NSSED and the 18 member districts that led to this change process?

Suzanne Sands (SS): It had become clear to us the needs of our 18 member districts had become “as diverse as the learners we serve.” A couple of districts were thinking about leaving NSSED and were wondering whether they were prepared to educate the students historically served by cooperative programs. Districts were wanting to keep their students in the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability, which meant fewer students were being sent to our self-contained programs, resulting in reductions to tuition revenue for NSSED. While this appeared to reduce expenses for the districts, it cut the primary source of revenue for NSSED to operate. Ultimately, these districts ended up staying members of NSSED,

Table 1. Northern Suburban Special Education District Mission and Vision.

Mission and Vision
<p>Mission: Committed to the possibilities of every learner, every day.</p> <p>Vision: Northern Suburban Special Education District is a national leader and highly valued partner with a courageous commitment to inclusive communities that equally value all people and inspire them to be active participants in our world.</p>

but we realized we had some work to do if we were going to better meet the diverse needs of our member districts, and make NSSED sustainable in the long-term.

In addition to the financial ramifications, we faced issues related to the identity of NSSED. For years we had been a leader in the state, reflecting a long history of being on the cutting edge of special education and related services. We wanted to continue being cutting edge, which further drove us to consider rethinking our structure. With Dr. Schneider’s leadership we learned that, rather than focusing on placements and locations, and “taking back programs,” we needed to focus on using the cooperative to assist with providing instructional supports and services within general education curriculum and classrooms, so students could be meaningfully included in their home schools and communities. When we started re-imagining ourselves, our services for some secondary students comprised them coming to a self-contained building, sometimes for large portions of their day, being taught skills in isolation of integrated employment. After exiting the education system, disproportionate numbers of students in Illinois moved on to a segregated day program for adults. Dr. Schneider helped the board understand this was not best practice and was, instead, a response to traditionally well-meaning systems in place within the Illinois system. These systems, however, were not meeting the needs of people with disabilities to live, work, and play in an integrated community. Through re-imagining the role of NSSED we have recommitted to preparing and expecting our secondary students to succeed in competitive integrated paid employment, maximizing the number of hours they work. Our staff are employment specialists who provide job coaching at real work sites and track our graduates’ success.

Q: Describe the changes that NSSED and your member districts wanted to achieve.

SS: Regardless of where you are philosophically, it was evident there was need for a new plan for sustainability, which led us towards the path we are on now. It was becoming clear for NSSED to be sustainable and meet the needs of districts that wanted their students to access the general education curriculum and classrooms within their own schools, we needed to change how we were doing things. We began a strategic journey towards re-imagining the way NSSED could serve its 18

member districts. Developing a culture of high expectations for everyone was one outgrowth of that work which led to a new mission and vision (see Table 1).

Q: How did you begin and build your change process, and who was involved in it?

SS: The first step in our process was to find, recruit, and hire a superintendent for NSSED who had a vision for re-imagining our role in special education and related services with our districts and we found Dr. Schneider. He led the NSSED Board in a full year of learning through reading articles, listening to experts, and discussing what we were learning. During that first year, we also invited superintendents from our member districts to come and describe what they needed from NSSED. This grounded our Board in the reasons this work was so critical.

Kurt Schneider (KS): In prior district roles I held previous to this process at NSSED, I had observed several superintendents in trying to lead systems change work. So, I knew this needed to be a slow process with a deep level of learning so people could understand the issues, the changes needed, and the change process. As I talked with the member district superintendents of NSSED, it was clear that the majority of them were expressing the thought that “Yes, this is exactly what we’ve been trying to talk about.” There was so much great energy and they have been wonderful colleagues!

SS: By the end of the first year with Dr. Schneider, Board members all understood IDEA, the history of the legislation, the impact it had on school systems, the ways in which funding had fallen short, and had a deeper understanding of the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and its intent. The people at our table began to understand why inclusive education was important, that every student was a general education student and deserves an enviable life, and that community connection was critically important. In the second year of the change process, we began to apply our learning and discuss what we really want for our schools. More importantly, we discussed what we want for our students and their families; this really is the key question. While we still varied in our opinions about the best way forward, Dr. Schneider brought in a facilitator who helped design a strategic planning process that allowed for a lot of small and large group discussions and synthesized our thoughts into a plan with some pretty aggressive goals (see Table 2).

Table 2. Northern Suburban Special Education District Strategic Plan Goals.

Strategic Plan Goals
Goal 1: Professional Culture of Excellence & Excitement for Learning
Goal 2: Equity and Access for Every Student, Every day
Goal 3: Fiscal Responsibility and Resource Allocation
Goal 4: Learning Opportunities that Empower Every Student
Goal 5: Building Collaborative, Trusting Relationships and Communication
Goal 6: Unity within Member Districts and the Community

KS: We needed to adjust our processes so that decisions were based on tangible data and current research, rather than on opinion and emotion. There were tools that needed to be tweaked or built, such as an administrative organizational chart, a finance model, a professional learning framework, and a comprehensive data system. It was all about the **six goal areas** in the layout of the plan. We built a continuous improvement cycle, so that each goal leader had a team. Those leadership teams come together regularly through the year to talk about how their work is going, and together form our District Leadership Team. There are periodic updates to the Leadership Council, ensuring transparency of information. We modernized a website and built a dashboard to publicly show documents and content of the Leadership Council meetings.

SS: There are aspects of our re-imagining work that are internal to NSSSED, as well as aspects that engage all 18 member districts. For instance, we have a regular communication cycle to ensure we meet the needs of our 18 districts. The Learning Goal Leadership Team established a structure for communication. For example, annual profile meetings with each member district in the fall are held to talk about member district goals, partnership opportunities between organizations throughout the year, and local, regional, and state data trends. NSSSED and each member district meet again later in the winter to forecast usage from the cooperative for the upcoming year. This allows organizations to plan and budget in a way that positions NSSSED to be able to provide the continuum of programs, services, and supports needed by our member districts.

KS: After a year of learning and a year in which we collectively designed a 3-year strategic plan, we now are finishing year three of that plan.

Q: How did implementing the strategic plan help shift the culture?

SS: Even though a recommitment of a philosophical shift to even more inclusive educational practices was occurring, serving students in self-contained settings was still valued by families, the districts, and the community. Dr. Schneider came in wanting to respect that, as well as the history of the organization, while pushing for the changes toward research based best practices, and the intent of federal laws, that would improve outcomes for our learners.

Kristen Endre (KE): NSSSED was thoughtful about considering each unique subculture community or ecosystem of its member districts. Each district was able to consider their individual needs and priorities and bring those to a larger, collaborative discussion.

KS: The philosophical shift accounts for some of the excitement we have seen and are continuing to build; that and each district's community taking more of the lead from their own administrators, but with the support services from the cooperative being integrated into the member district to maximize student's access to inclusive experiences. The re-imagining of our role in special education services has not been an initiative; it is a culture shift. We continue to build a culture in which the values and practices associated with inclusive education is just the work that we do. For instance, we now are talking about onboarding new Leadership Council members and personnel for next year, using continuing members and personnel as mentors for new people joining NSSSED. We also are strengthening our Articles of Agreement with member districts, using language that strengthens the foundation for this work, and continuing to revisit our financial model.

SS: The way we have gone about this work has shifted the way our organization operates, as opposed to just an initiative; we shifted in every aspect of NSSSED and how it operates. We made changes, adjustments, and shifts towards doing the work differently to support inclusive education practices. You could not unravel the changes; they are ingrained in the system.

KE: Families have been integral to this cultural shift. The foundation of NSSSED has always been based on pushing educational boundaries for students with disabilities. Families have always been a part of these efforts and partnered with NSSSED often in the initiating or driving the changes they wanted to see.

Q: What impact have this re-imagining and culture shift had on students and families?

KE: An important piece for the families in this process was when Dr. Schneider led us through the learning during the first year. We sat there and said, "We have been saying this about

our own children for decades.” We are reaching out to teachers, schools, and districts. While LRE was the language the families already spoke, it became important for us to collectively embrace the history of LRE implementation and the context. That deeper understanding and the difficult conversations that followed were essential building blocks for family support for these organizational shifts.

KS: One of our parent leaders was wonderful. She had all this emotion, because her educational systems had always been saying something different from what she believed. She now had a conceptual framework, research, and policy to support her parental instincts. She would often say this was so validating, after years of feeling oppressed. She became a fierce advocate and resource for the culture shift we were trying to achieve. I knew at the end of the day it would be the parents who would push, at key times, our system where it needed to go, and I needed to spend as much of my time with the parents as I spent with the NSSED Board. This is not to say that we do not need our staff to achieve the culture shift, but the roles that parents and Board members play are the most impactful on systemic changes. The parents, though, are the ultimate cavalry.

SS: Parents came in and shared their stories with the Board. It was difficult for other stakeholders to argue with those stories, because they were aligned with research on best practices and resulted in student changes we valued. We were able to get a vision for what we were striving to achieve, and that vision was flexible enough to support each stakeholder, that is, wherever they entered the change process, each stakeholder felt they would continue down a good path. The vision and strategic plan did not leave anyone behind, drag anyone to a starting point for which they were not ready, or pull anybody back.

KS: One day Kristen called me and said, “My kid got homework. I’m like every other parent.” You don’t think of things like that. As a profession, it often reflects a low bar we set for students with disabilities.

KE: I remember that. My son was sent home with the same book as every other kid in his class. He got homework and he hated it, just like every other kid. It was the best night of my life.

Q: What insights can you share with others engaged in similar re-imagining?

KS: We learned to continuously link our work to our students. We start every Board meeting by recognizing a student who is a part of that work. Staff, family, and students all come to celebrate the student and their accomplishments. Connecting the student to the work reminds us why we are meeting and sets the stage for the work at hand.

SS: At the APS Best Practices Awards, an event hosted annually by NSSED’s parent board, a general education

teacher in my district was recognized. He is a beloved teacher, and instead of sharing his thoughts with the audience he said, “My students have been sitting for a long time. I’m going to invite them up here.” As each student came up to him this teacher said something unique about each of them. It doesn’t matter who you are when you walk into his class, he’s going to meet you where you are and cherish you. That is what every learner needs.

KS: While there is sometimes hesitation and debate, I would say it is critical to involve everyone from the beginning and invest time in conversations because you have to unlearn and relearn some new information. To accomplish this, the Board engages in three strategic events every year: The National Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity Institute, held by UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee faculty, the national TASH Conference, and the National School Boards Association Equity Symposium and Conference in D.C. While in D.C. the Leadership Council members meet with their representatives to advocate for policy and funding changes to support inclusive education. From a Leadership Council perspective, this engages them in the bigger process, and they are developing a sense of pride in their work.

SS: Taking the time for learning is critical, and boards often do not do that. If you want impactful change, it is critical that you take the time needed to ground your Board in knowledge about best practices. Bring in experts and have them talk. The first year I went to the TASH Conference I brought back information. I said to my superintendent, “I don’t know where this information has been, but this is what we need to be doing if we really want our teachers and administration grounded in why we are doing this work.”

KS: During this work, it is very important to tap into the kids without disabilities and their parents. Change really occurs through the general education door. The more principals, classroom teachers, and parents know, the more successful you will be with this work and shifting the perception and paradigm of students with disabilities. This shift even led us to take on the topic of the name of the organization and we listened to the students to help us make this decision. They essentially said, “If you’re going to change the name, do it with meaning behind it, not just as camouflage. We don’t want to be segregated and isolated, but if you’re going to just change the name, but not the practice, then don’t waste anybody’s time.” So, as of July 1 we will be known as TrueNorth Educational Cooperative 804. The name change emphasizes the collaborative effort of our mission and vision for our dream of an inclusive education for all, and in which we are engaged with our 18-member districts on this journey towards that destination.

If you would like more information about the re-imagining work being done at NSSED and its 18 member districts, you may contact Dr. Kurt Schneider (kschneider@nssed.org).

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Bios

Kurt A. Schneider is the superintendent of the Northern Suburban Special Education District (N SSEED) in Highland Park. He holds undergraduate and master's degrees in special education, and a PhD in educational leadership and policy analysis.

Suzanne Sands is a former teacher and now the president of the N SSEED Leadership Council, as well as member of the School Board of District 67 in Lake Forest, which is one of the 18 member districts of N SSEED. She has a BA from Tufts University in Child Study and an MEd from Emory University in Middle Childhood Education.

Kristen Endre has been the president of the Association of Parents and Staff, N SSEED's parent leadership group, since 2010. After

leaving a professional career in writing and communication, she and her former husband co-parent two new high school students, one of whom has complex developmental and medical needs.

Dale Baker is a PhD student in the Department of Specialized Education Services at UNC Greensboro, and working with two federally funded inclusive education grants. She received her MEd in reading and her undergraduate degrees in special education and general education.

Kristin Burnette is a nationally board certified special education teacher and is currently completing her PhD in special education at UNC Greensboro, working with the two federally funded grants to study education and systemic change for practices that support inclusive education. She received her undergraduate and master's degrees in special education.

Diane Ryndak is a professor of Special Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her work focuses on teacher and doctoral level preparation, with a focus on collaborative teams meeting the complex needs of students with extensive and pervasive support needs through the use of evidence-based practices that result in access to grade-level general education curriculum, contexts, instruction, and classmates.