



Beating the Odds: Learning From Grade K–8 Schools Outperforming Expectations for Students With Disabilities

Executive Summary

The PROGRESS Center (www.promotingprogress.org), a federally funded center focused on promoting progress for students with disabilities (SWD), investigated lessons learned from schools serving children in Grades K–8¹ that were beating the odds (BTO) for students with individualized education programs (IEPs) based on test scores from 2018–19 and 2021–22. This is the final stage of the PROGRESS Center’s work to identify the essential elements of a sustainable school system that leads to improved outcomes for SWD, which included working closely with 11 partnership sites; conducting extensive literature reviews; collaborating with over 60 Educators in Residence; evaluating and refining professional learning activities; and annually convening practitioners, policy makers, and researchers.

For the BTO analysis, we used a mixed methods approach to identify these schools and provide a comprehensive overview of the practices, programs, and policies in BTO schools that support high-quality instructional programming for SWD. The BTO analysis included two elementary schools (Grades Pre-K–5 and K–5), two intermediate schools (Grades 3–5 and 4–5), and one middle school (Grades 6–8) in three states and the District of Columbia and included a variety of local contexts (urban, suburban, and rural). Data collected from special educators, general educators, school leaders, and district administrators provided insights into the school elements and facilitators contributing to their success.

Report Objectives

1. To examine the practices, programs, and policies in BTO schools that contribute to their success with SWD and identify the key elements of an effective system that supports SWD.
2. To provide recommendations for high-quality instructional programming based on current knowledge in the field and the perspectives of educators and school and district leaders in successful schools.

¹ One school additionally served pre-kindergarten, but this was not the focus of our analysis.



Our Approach

We used a mixed methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The quantitative component included several phases. First, we identified a set of states where SWD made progress on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) in recent years. In the next phase, we used school-level state assessment data and demographic data to identify schools where SWD outperformed similar schools within the same state. We conducted this analysis twice—using data from 2018–19 and 2021–22—to ensure accurate identification of schools likely implementing sustainable practices. The qualitative component included focus groups and interviews with special educators, general educators, school leaders, and district administrators in BTO schools to gain insights into their experiences and perceptions of effective practices contributing to a successful school system.

Key Findings

The findings point to the positive impact of a cohesive school system that prioritizes five essential elements: student belonging, evidence-based general education instruction and supports, individualized instruction and supports, staff collaboration, and educator supports. The findings also suggest these five elements are supported by five facilitators: family engagement, high expectations, collective efficacy, strong school leadership, and data literacy. Key findings include:

1. Participants reported the benefits of a tiered system of supports (e.g., multi-tiered system of supports [MTSS]) that addresses the needs of all students, including students at risk for or with disabilities, noting the importance of adequate training, high-quality resources (e.g., evidence-based curriculum and interventions), positive school climate, and ongoing support (e.g., coaching and mentorship) for successful implementation.
2. Participants noted the importance of the five essential elements for a sustainable school system. Key emergent themes that demonstrate the integration of the five essential elements include (see Exhibit ES-1):
 - Supporting **student belonging** by removing barriers to access, fostering participation in extracurricular activities, and facilitating positive relationships with peers and adults.
 - Providing **high-quality core instruction and supports**—often within a tiered framework such as MTSS—by effectively leveraging instructional technology, planning for instruction (e.g., scaffolding), and teaching cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support student learning.
 - Providing **individualized services and supports** such as effective special education instruction, related services, and supplementary services and aids through the IEP.
 - Fostering **staff collaboration** through supportive structures such as master scheduling, intentional use of time, creativity, and flexibility.



- Providing **educator supports** through both formal and informal mentorship, flexible (e.g., hybrid, multimodal, and “bite-sized”) professional learning, recognizing and celebrating staff, and generally building a positive culture.
3. Participants reported holding high expectations, a strong sense of collective efficacy, strong leadership, family engagement, and data literacy skills as factors that help facilitate implementation of successful systems. These facilitators are interconnected and reinforce each other as well as the essential elements (see Exhibit ES-1). Key emergent themes include:
- Leading by practicing **distributive or shared leadership**, creating positive culture and healthy working conditions, and being responsive to needs of staff, families, and students.
 - Developing and maintaining a strong sense of **collective efficacy** among staff to support collaboration and close achievement gaps.
 - Maintaining **high expectations** for all students through strong leadership, ambitious goals, positive growth mindsets, and effective Tier 1 instruction.
 - Building **data literacy** to inform individualized instruction, classroom instruction, and academic and non-academic supports.
 - Increasing meaningful **engagement with families** by removing barriers, building personal connections, and using a variety of communication tools and technologies.

Exhibit ES-1. Essential Elements and Facilitators of a Sustainable School System That Promotes Progress for Students With Disabilities



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