

# Academically Strong California Districts for Students in Special Education

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## **Abstract**

Through a rigorous selection process based on special education performance over four years, we identified eight unified districts in California that showed unusually strong academic performance for their special education population compared to similar districts in the state. We conducted interviews with these districts' special education directors to identify the policies and practices they credited for their districts' success. Ultimately, we selected four districts to profile. Descriptions of all four districts, with a special emphasis on one of the districts—Sanger Unified—are included in this article. The main themes that emerged across the districts are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices that lead to improved student achievement for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts), collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts), continuous assessment and use of Response to Intervention (RtI) (three districts), targeted professional development (three districts), and use of Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) (two districts). We believe that these districts serve as models for others struggling to improve the performance of students in special education.

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## Introduction

Improved academic outcomes have been an important emphasis for special education policy over the past decade. The 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), specifies that schools be held accountable for the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of all students, requiring the disaggregation and reporting of data for specific subgroups, including students with disabilities. Failure to meet AYP for students in special education can result in an entire school or school district being placed in “In Need of Improvement” status.

More recently, the federal *Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) states that the Administration’s ESEA reauthorization proposal will increase support for “improved outcomes of students with disabilities” (p. 20). In California, 84 percent of school districts with sufficient students with disabilities to count for accountability purposes failed to make AYP for 2009–10 specifically due, at least in part, to the academic performance of their students in special education.

The purpose of this study is to identify districts that are beating these daunting odds. Sanger Unified, which we profile in this article, enrolls students in poverty at a much higher rate than the state average (76 versus 50 percent), and actively attempts to serve students outside special education when appropriate, classifying only 8 percent of its students in special education compared to the statewide average of 10 percent (and a national average of 13 percent). Yet Sanger’s students in special education show much higher academic proficiency on statewide tests than similar districts (and the statewide district average), and Sanger continues to make AYP. Given the challenges faced by California districts in making AYP, it is important to identify districts like Sanger across the state, to analyze what they are doing, and to consider whether their strategies might work for students in special education statewide.

To identify such districts, we used a rigorous selection process based on special education academic performance from the 2005–06 to 2008–09 school years showing higher-than-predicted academic success for their students in special education. We selected a four-year span for these analyses to identify districts whose exceptional performance had been sustained over time. We then conducted in-depth phone interviews with the special education directors in eight districts to learn about the policies and practices they had put in place that they attributed their success to. From these eight, we selected four districts with clear, well-articulated strategies to feature in this article.

The experiences of these districts are relevant to district, county, and state practitioners and policy makers because they provide specific examples of what has worked. Because we focus on higher-poverty districts in this article, these findings may be of particular interest to other “high need” districts in California and across the country.

## Study Background

In 2001, in *Education Finance in the New Millennium*, Chaikind and Fowler (2001) predicted that the future of special education would focus on questions regarding the “best outcomes for students with disabilities.” However, while the 1997 IDEA amendments required states to establish performance goals for students with disabilities, some critics have argued that these changes did not go far enough in fully establishing a results-oriented process (Wolf & Hassal, 2001).

In 2002, the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education recommended that special education focus on the outcomes achieved by each child and not on “process, litigation, regulation, and confrontation” (p. 8). The preamble to this report states, “The ultimate test of the value of special

education is that, once identified, children close the achievement gap with their peers” (President’s Commission, 2002:4).

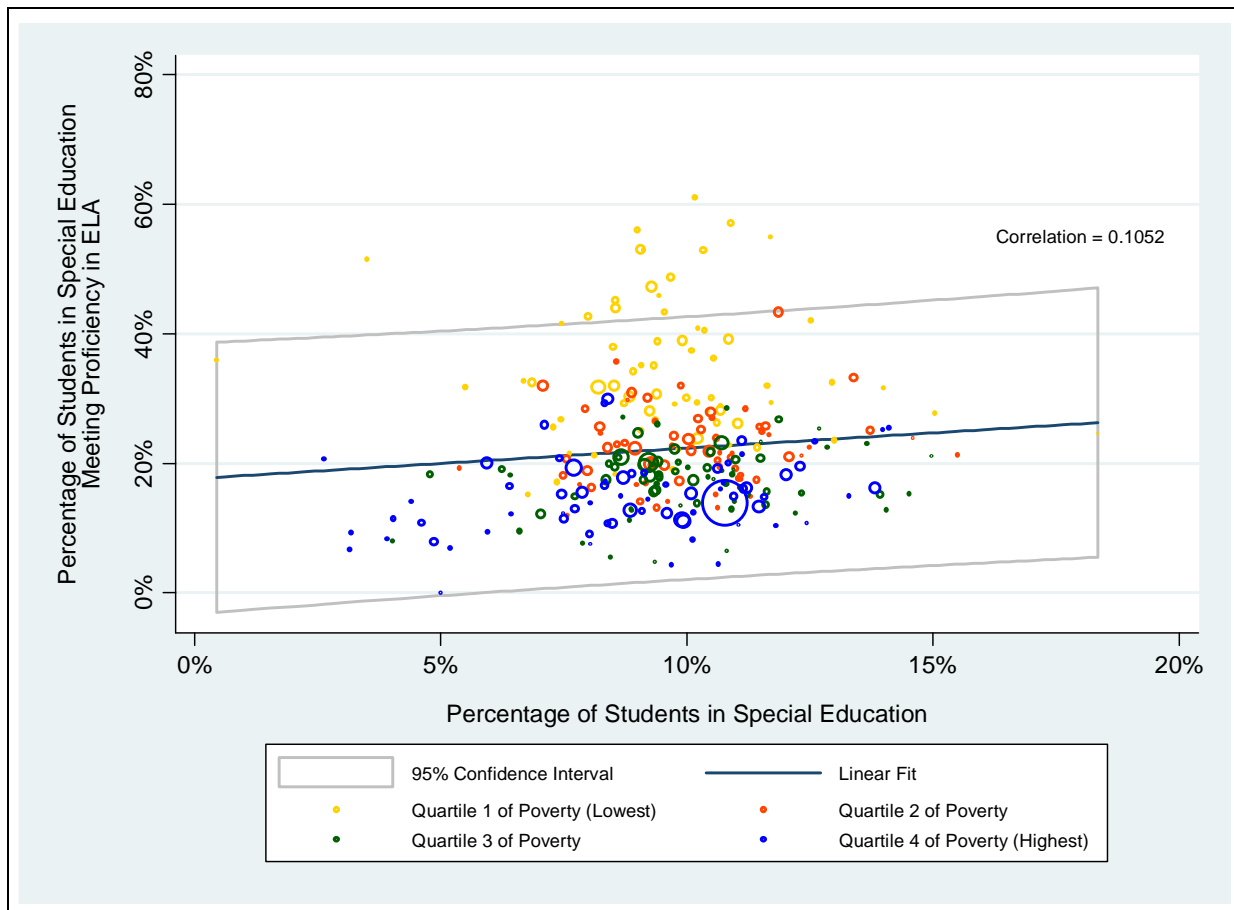
The intended purpose of NCLB is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB, 2001, § 1001). These provisions emphasize that the expected educational outcomes for students with disabilities, or for any other subgroup, are the same as for all students.

Given the challenges that students in special education face, some may expect low performance. However, at least one study by Hanushek et al. (2002) shows that “the average special education program boosts mathematics and reading achievement of special education students, particularly those classified as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed, while not detracting from [the experience of] regular education students” (p. 584).

Analyses of key student and district characteristics and academic achievement of students identified for special education in California show that while some districts are achieving relatively impressive outcomes, many are not. Large variation is found across districts in the percentage of students with disabilities scoring proficient in English language arts (ELA)—from 0 to 60 percent across California districts in the 2006–07 school year. The high end of this range shows that low performance for students in special education need not be a given.

This variation is illustrated in Exhibit I. Each district in California is represented by a circle; the circle’s size is based on district enrollment. The exhibit maps the percentage of students in special education scoring proficient and above against the percentage of students identified as being in special education by district. Although there is a slight positive correlation between performance and the percentage of students in special education, there is relatively high variation in performance across the range of percentages of students identified.

**Exhibit I: Percentage of Students in Special Education in Unified School Districts Meeting Proficiency in English Language Arts, as a Function of the Percentage of Students Identified for Special Education in These Districts, 2006–07 (Each District Is Represented by a Circle Proportional to Its Size and Grouped by Poverty Quartile)**

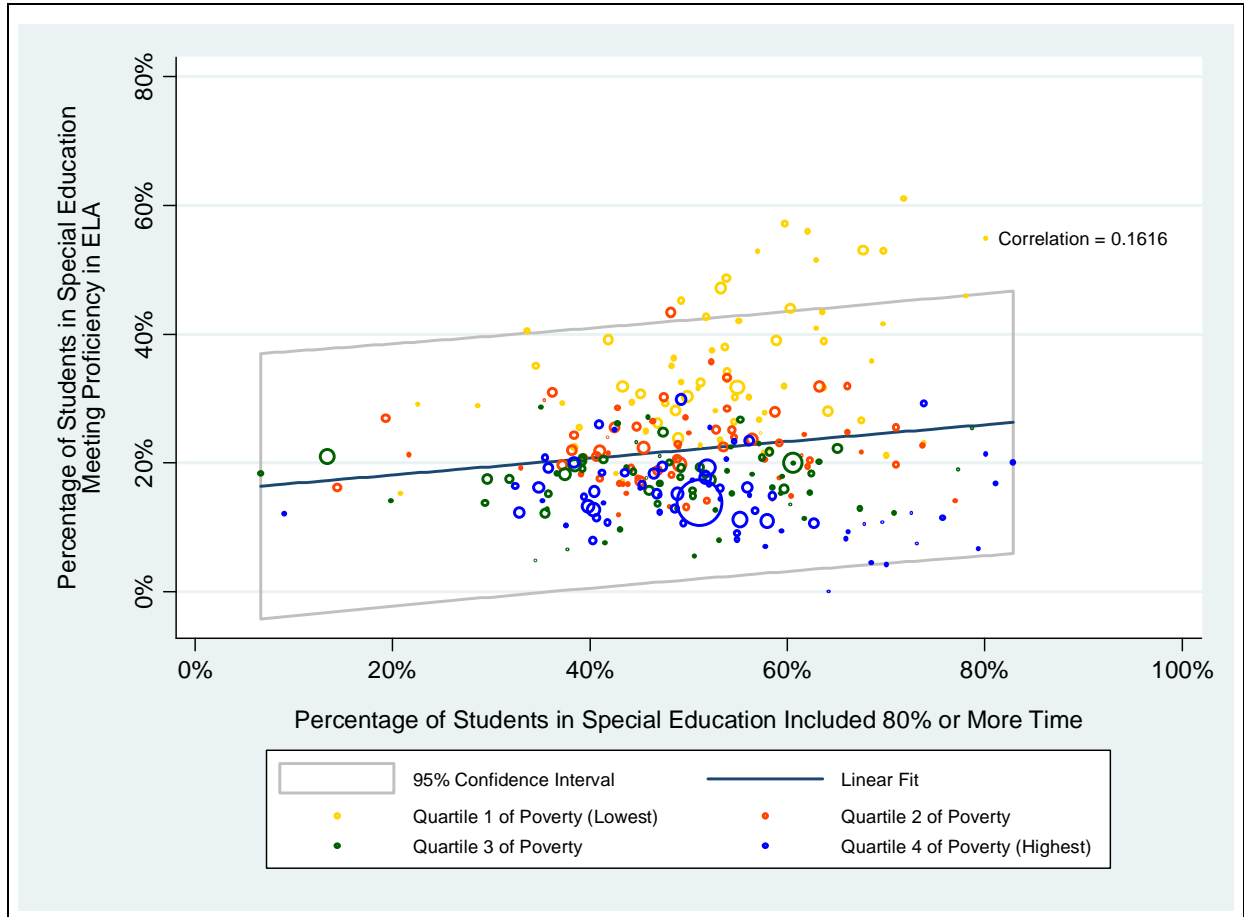


Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

Some of the variation shown above is negatively related to district poverty (defined as the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), as indicated by the number of high-poverty districts (in blue) in the lower ranges of performance. However, relatively high performers are also found among these high-poverty districts.

This illustrates that while the poverty of its students is beyond district control, other factors are not, such as where and how students are served. Exhibit 2 plots ELA proficiency against the percentage of students in special education spending 80 percent or more of their time in general education classrooms. Overall, we observe a positive correlation; however, there is a great deal of variation. This may indicate that when students in special education are included in general education classes with appropriate supports, they do better than predicted, but that increased general education placements may also lead to poorer than predicted performance when such placements are not well implemented.

**Exhibit 2: Percentage of Students in Special Education in Unified School Districts Meeting Proficiency in English Language Arts, as a Function of the Percentage of These Students Spending 80 Percent or More of Their Time in General Education Classrooms, 2006–07 (Each District Is Represented by a Circle Proportional to Its Size and Grouped by Poverty Quartile)**



Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program and California Special Education Management Information System (CASEMIS) data.

This article seeks to better understand the policies and practices implemented by districts that have special education performance that is substantially higher than predicted. It grows out of prior work done through the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd identifying high-performing, high-need schools.<sup>1</sup> The study also draws upon previous research that has examined effective practices leading to improved student achievement for students in special education (e.g., Cortiella & Burnette, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 1997).

A study by the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts (2004) is especially relevant to the current study. The purpose of the study was to identify district- and school-level practices supporting achievement among elementary and middle school students with special needs in urban public schools. Achievement data were used to identify urban districts with promising ELA and mathematics achievement among students with special needs. The research team visited 10 schools in five districts

<sup>1</sup> Examples of high-performing, high-need school profiles from this prior work can be found at: <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/print/htdocs/smu/ideas/schools.htm>.

and interviewed over 140 school personnel and a small number of parents of students with special needs. From these data collection efforts, the researchers identified 11 practices that supported success with students in special education:

- An emphasis on curriculum alignment with curriculum frameworks
- Effective systems to support curriculum alignment
- Emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum
- Culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement
- A well-disciplined academic and social environment
- Use of student assessment data to inform decision-making
- Unified practice supported by targeted professional development
- Access to resources to support key initiatives
- Effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment
- Flexible leaders and staff who work effectively in a dynamic environment
- Effective leadership

All of these practices, with the exception of “emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum,” are similar to the practices emphasized in the effective schools literature for general education (see for example Fuller et al., 2007; Perez et al., 2007; Parrish et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Levine & Lezotte, 1990). This overlap suggests that to improve academic results for students in special education, practices similar to those implemented for general education students, with an additional emphasis on inclusionary practices, may be effective.

In the Donahue study, all of the case study districts expressed a commitment to inclusion and noted various ways in which they sought to be inclusive. A common strategy was the use of flexible groupings that integrated special needs students into general education classrooms throughout the school day. However, no two districts implemented the same inclusion strategies, with practices ranging from full inclusion of all students identified for special education (with dual certification of all regular and special education teachers), to a more modest level of inclusion in which resource teachers supported students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

## **District Selection for the Current Study**

Districts were selected for this study based on higher-than-predicted achievement for students with disabilities on statewide performance measures. Publicly available data from the Academic Performance Index (API), AYP, California Standards Tests (CST), and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) databases as well as district demographic data for ethnicity, poverty, the proportion of English learners (ELs), and the proportion of students with disability were included in these analyses, which included data from the 2005–06 through 2008–09 school years.<sup>2</sup>

We ran regressions on standardized CST and CAHSEE mathematics and ELA mean scale scores for the students-with-disabilities subgroup population, controlling for the district’s percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; percentage of African-American, Asian, and Hispanic students; percentage of ELs; percentage of students with disabilities; and percentage of students within the various disability classifications (e.g., mental retardation, autism).

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<sup>2</sup> Scores on the California Modified Assessment (CMA) or the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) were not considered, as the majority of students in special education take the CST with or without accommodations.

We averaged the difference between the actual and the predicted standardized CST and CAHSEE mathematics and ELA scale scores for students with disabilities to produce district-level measures, by year, from 2005–06 through 2008–09. We then averaged these measures across the four years to obtain a single academic performance measure for students with disabilities that would reflect sustained performance. We were seeking districts where the students in special education performed considerably better than predicted and did so consistently over time. Because this was a comparative analysis, it was important to control for the grade range of students served. Thus, we limited our analysis to unified school districts, which serve over 70 percent of California’s students.

To select districts to interview, we screened out small districts (those at or below the 30th percentile in terms of unified district enrollment) to ensure that the selected districts would not simply reflect circumstances associated with unusually small size. In addition, we only selected districts serving a percentage of students with disabilities within one standard deviation of the state average for unified districts. Last, we only selected districts that were at or above the state average proficiency level on CST ELA and mathematics for students with disabilities and above the predicted academic performance for students with disabilities as estimated by our regression analysis.

After applying these criteria, we ranked the remaining districts based on their above-predicted performance as described above. Ultimately, we selected 8 districts from the top 20 to interview. Because of our interest in interviewing districts with high levels of poverty, we first selected the 4 districts in the top 20 whose percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch exceeded the state average (which is 50 percent). To also gain an understanding of how the practices reported by higher-poverty districts might compare with those with lower poverty, we selected the remaining four districts from among those that had 10 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

## **District Interviews and Analysis**

Between May and July 2010, we interviewed the special education directors from the eight selected districts to obtain descriptions of the policies and practices they considered most effective in improving and sustaining special education achievement in their districts. During a one-hour phone interview, we discussed instructional and management practices associated with the high performance of their students with disabilities.

To guide the discussion, we used a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions related to the effective practices described above. Discussion was not limited to these practices; we asked respondents to initially describe the three most important factors that they attributed to special education performance in their districts without any suggestion of the literature cited above.

When analyzing these interview data we sought instances where well-articulated strategies had been developed and implemented by the district for the explicit purpose of improving the education outcomes of its students in special education. Conversely, we sought to avoid instances where it appeared that external factors were affecting the observed high performance. Through this process, we narrowed the initial eight districts to four districts whose strategies seemed fully developed, could be clearly described, and would therefore be of potential interest to other districts. We excluded sites with issues such as not meeting special education proficiency targets as well as those with possible issues with the types of students being identified for special education (e.g., one district respondent commented on the over-identification of ELs into special education). Once initial profiles were created for the remaining four districts, the respondents provided feedback regarding completeness and accuracy.

## District Backgrounds

Listed alphabetically, the four districts featured in this article are Kerman, Sanger, Upland, and Val Verde. As shown in Table 1, the districts are located in either the southern part of the state (Upland and Val Verde) or in the Central Valley (Kerman and Sanger), and range in size from about 4,400 to 19,200 students. Three districts have a state-average percentage of students in special education (10 percent), while Sanger is below average at 8 percent. They have diverse student populations; three of the four districts (Kerman, Sanger, and Val Verde) have above-state-average student poverty, while Upland is slightly below the state average. Similarly, three districts have percentages of ELs above the state average, with one below.

**Table 1: District Demographics, 2008–09**

District name	Region	Enrollment	Percent special education	Percent poverty	Percent English learners
Kerman	Central	4,398	10	78	30
Sanger	Central	10,368	8	76	22
Upland	South	14,307	10	40	14
Val Verde	South	19,183	10	74	26
State average	N/A	13,094	10	50	20

Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

Table 2 shows the performance of each district's special education population on the CST. As shown, all four districts performed either at or above the state average in both mathematics and ELA and above districts with similar poverty levels in both subjects. Overall, all the districts scored higher in mathematics than in ELA; Sanger's mathematics score (49 percent proficient) was much higher than both the state average (33 percent) and that of similar districts (28 percent).

**Table 2: Percentages of Students in Special Education Proficient or Above in Mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) on the California Standards Test, by District, Compared with the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008–09**

District name	Math (%)			ELA (%)		
	District	State	Similar districts	District	State	Similar districts
Kerman	40	33	28	37	32	26
Sanger	49	33	28	38	32	26
Upland	40	33	34	39	32	33
Val Verde	37	33	28	32	32	26

Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

## District Profiles

We will briefly describe strategies implemented in the Kerman, Upland, and Val Verde districts; this information is based on one-hour interviews conducted with each special education director. We will then provide a more detailed description of the approach used in Sanger Unified, based both on our

interview and on an in-depth write-up provided by Matt Navo, the director of pupil personnel services for the district; Sanger provides a striking example of the success a district can attain with special education students. After the district descriptions, we summarize the overarching strategies across the four districts and present implications from the study.

### ***District Profile 1: Kerman Unified School District***

Located in Fresno County, Kerman Unified enrolls approximately 4,400 students. Over three quarters (78 percent) of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and almost one third (30 percent) are English learners. In the 2008–09 school year, 40 percent of Kerman’s students in special education taking the CST scored proficient or above in mathematics; 37 percent scored proficient or above in ELA. The statewide averages for students in special education were 33 percent and 32 percent, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable proportions of students in poverty (see Table 2).

Robert Postler, Kerman’s coordinator of special education, shared three factors he credited for the district’s success:

- An inclusion philosophy, with support from resource teachers
- Use of specific instructional and intervention strategies, including Read 180; Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI), supported by professional development; and Response to Intervention (RtI) strategies
- An emphasis on professional learning communities (PLCs), with collaboration between general and special education teachers

Mr. Postler described Kerman’s inclusion philosophy as follows: “It is my belief and the district’s belief that special education is considered not to be a separate entity; [special education students] have the same rights and privileges as general education kids.” At the elementary and middle schools, the district strives for full inclusion; most students identified for special education are fully integrated (with support from resource teachers). At the high school, students in special education receive support from four resource teachers within or outside general education classrooms depending on student needs.

The district uses Read 180, a comprehensive intervention for students below grade level, for a large number of students with disabilities at the elementary and middle school levels. Mr. Postler cited the intervention as resulting in significant success. Specific teachers who are trained in the program work 90 minutes per day with students, who rotate among three stations: small group work with the teacher, computer work at the student’s level, and individual reading.

In addition, Kerman has utilized Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) for the past four years, supported by ongoing staff development. EDI focuses on the use of (a) instructional grouping (using flexible skill grouping as opposed to “tracking”), (b) increased instructional time (increasing academic learning time—the time students are successfully engaged), and (c) continuous assessment (providing ongoing in-program assessments to inform instructional practice). EDI is mostly used at the K–8 level, with weekly monitoring by school and district administrators to ensure consistent implementation.

Over the past year, the district formally implemented RtI through an implementation plan and staff training tailored to district needs. The district has also recently purchased Read Well, a reading intervention program for K–3, as well as DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) Online, an assessment program that measures students’ early literacy skills in five areas: phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Finally, Kerman has emphasized the use of PLCs for several years, specifically including collaboration between general and special education teachers.

Mr. Postler sees the district's efforts to fully incorporate students with disabilities into the core curriculum, and the programs and strategies described above, as the keys to their impressive academic success.

### ***District Profile 2: Upland Unified School District***

Upland Unified in San Bernardino County enrolls 14,300 students, with 40 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 14 percent English learners (slightly below the statewide averages of 50 percent and 20 percent). In the 2008–09 school year, Upland's students in special education taking the CST scored above average in mathematics (40 versus 33 percent) and English language arts (39 versus 32) compared with the state as a whole, and also scored higher than districts with comparable percentages of students in poverty (see Table 2).

Upland's director of student services, Lori Thompson, cited three primary factors that have contributed to the district's success with its special education population:

- A blended program developed using curriculum mapping and common assessments
- Collaboration and co-teaching
- Professional development (e.g., Guided Language Acquisition Design [GLAD] strategies)

Special education in Upland continues to evolve, and is moving toward a blended program in which students and teachers associated with special education are integrated into general education—particularly at the junior high and high school levels. Five years ago, the district started “de-tracking” its high school. To allow all students to be on the same academic track, general and special education teachers developed common curriculum and assessments in all departments. All students now take college prep courses in mathematics, ELA, social science, and other subjects. Instead of being in a separate class, students identified for special education take college prep classes and receive specialized academic instruction from special education teachers when needed. At the middle school level, students in special education get access to the core curriculum in classes where general and special education teachers work collaboratively.

At the elementary level, while still using resource and special day class teachers, the district is implementing more blended instruction—particularly in social studies and science, because these subjects are easier to blend than mathematics and ELA. Upland used to cluster special day classes at just a few schools, with a lot of busing. However, given the high cost of busing students and the goal of having them attend their neighborhood schools, they have now distributed their special day classes more evenly across the district. This makes blended instruction more viable because students in special education are no longer concentrated at a few school sites.

In addition to collaborating and co-teaching when blending instruction, teachers engage in formalized transition planning for students in special education moving into junior high and high school. Sending and receiving teachers meet to discuss the students making these transitions. The goal is to maximize the degree to which they can be in blended classes and fully exposed to the core curriculum, with the levels of support needed to make them successful.

Upland has emphasized professional development for teachers in meeting the needs of all learners. For instance, the district has coached teachers on GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design) strategies, which focus on literacy and visual strategies for learning—seen as useful for students in special education.

### **District Profile 3: Val Verde Unified District**

Val Verde Unified, located in Riverside County, is a relatively large district, with an enrollment of approximately 19,000 students. About three quarters (74 percent) of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and more than one quarter (26 percent) are ELs. In the 2008–09 school year, 37 percent of Val Verde's students in special education taking the CST scored proficient or above in mathematics; 33 percent scored proficient or above in ELA. The statewide averages for students in special education were 33 percent and 32 percent, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable proportions of students in poverty (see Table 2).

Val Verde's special education director, Vicki Butler, along with the middle and high school program specialist, Christine Counts, and the elementary school instructional coach, Jeff Mossa, credited these factors for Val Verde's strong performance with its students in special education:

- Equitable access to the core curriculum and assessments
- Professional development for special education teachers
- Collaborative teaching and teamwork

First, the district explained that the students in special education are performing well partly because all students in the district are performing well. The philosophy in the district is that special education is not separate from general education; it is treated as part of the whole. Also, special education is deliberately located in the curriculum and instruction department—as opposed to under student services—to avoid “silos” and bridge the gap between general and special education.

To this end, Val Verde uses a “flexible model” for students in special education; students are integrated into general education as much as possible, but also receive specialized academic instruction depending on their needs and Individualized Education Program goals. As Ms. Butler pointed out, “These models are better than the old model that we used to have, where we separated kids out and isolated them. These are more entwined with the regular education program.” The team also noted that through the use of RtI strategies, they have been able to identify and provide services for at-risk students to keep their special education population from increasing beyond 10 percent.

Another important factor identified by the Val Verde team is their professional development for special education teachers. Two years ago, the district received a Special Education Teacher Professional Development Grant as part of the Reading First project. Special education teachers were trained in the ELA core curriculum (Houghton Mifflin), which is usually only offered to general education teachers. This training allowed special education teachers to better understand and use the core curriculum's different components and supplements. Teachers were also given training related to the district's writing program (Step Up to Writing), as well as training on GLAD strategies, co-teaching, and data analysis supports.

At the elementary level, Val Verde emphasizes collaborative teaching and teamwork through learning centers. The learning center is a place where students are taught through small group or targeted individualized instruction in a general education setting. Also, there is a special education teacher on each elementary school leadership team to ensure that special education is fully integrated with general education. In addition, each elementary school has an instructional coach who facilitates data meetings.

At the middle and high school levels, there is a special education team that works with grade level teams. Students with disabilities are fully included in general education classes, with either instructional assistant or special education teacher assistance in their classes. There are also “Basic Classes,” which are smaller and designed for students with more intensive needs. Next year, the district will add

instructional coaches to its secondary programs as well. According to Mr. Mossa, “We have built the capacity of our special education teachers to have them bring value to the general education classroom for the special and general education students.”

#### ***District Profile 4: Sanger Unified School District***

Sanger Unified is in the heart of California’s Central Valley, where the child poverty rate is two to three times the national average. Despite these demographic challenges, the district has made great academic strides. In 2004, seven of the district’s schools were designated as Program Improvement (PI) sites under NCLB. Today, four are State Distinguished Schools, and two have been recognized as National Blue Ribbon Schools. In addition, Sanger Unified employees have received local and national recognition, such as the National Superintendent of the Year Award, the Bell Award for Outstanding School Leadership, and Fresno County Administrator and Teacher of the Year awards.

The practices in Sanger have reduced the percentage of students requiring special education services to 8 percent, as compared to the statewide average of 10 percent and the nationwide average of over 13 percent. Despite the fact that its special education programs are serving students with the most severe needs, Sanger’s students in special education perform substantially better than the state average and better than other districts with similar demographics. In the 2008–09 school year, 49 percent of Sanger’s students in special education taking the CST scored proficient or above in mathematics and 38 percent did so in ELA, compared to 33 and 32 percent for students in special education statewide, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable levels of students in poverty (see Table 2).

According to the district, in the 2000–01 school year, Sanger was in a struggle with the teachers’ union, the school board, and the superintendent, and was at a point of total dysfunction. By 2004, Sanger had hit rock bottom, with substantial refocus long overdue. Ultimately, Sanger was able to turn the corner by adopting an approach focused on a Response to Intervention (Rtl) philosophy, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI). Sanger successfully implemented these components through a change in the administrative philosophy to one of “loose/tight leadership.”

***Loose/tight leadership:*** The “tight” component of this new approach to district governance was the message that all schools had to meet clearly established targets, which required the cooperation of all administrators and staff. The “loose” part of the model allowed each individual school to structure how to meet these expectations—which methods they would use to implement these district-wide practices and objectives.

***Implementation of Rtl:*** Creation of this loose/tight leadership model led to all schools developing their own Rtl philosophy. At each school, the general and special education staff joined together to implement the Rtl philosophy and ensure its success. Rtl allowed Sanger schools to begin addressing its special education needs and general education challenges.

Challenges to the implementation of Rtl included a large percentage of English learners and students qualifying for special services. Combined with ever-decreasing budgets, district service providers were stretched to deal with the needs of an ever-increasing special population of students who were already far behind benchmark goals. In addition, general education and special education were not communicating to meet the unique needs of students across the district.

Rtl was pivotal in creating a connection with general education teachers as they needed special education support to meet the needs of students receiving additional interventions. Being proactive about addressing the needs of these students gave teachers a greater sense of purpose, and more

ownership of and control over student outcomes. Rtl provided the strategies to address these challenges and brought school site teams together for a common purpose.

**Professional Learning Communities:** PLCs have played an important role in implementing the change needed to challenge students in their learning. Using the loose/tight approach, the district's charge to schools was to involve all levels of staff in PLC training, beginning with administrators and extending to school site teams. The "tight" component meant that all schools were required to implement PLCs, replacing more traditional staff meetings. The "loose" component meant that their approach to forming PLCs could vary as long as the school was benefitting from implementation.

As a result of this training, the district focused on four key questions, all focused on student learning:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How do we know they learned it?
- How will we respond when learning does not take place?
- What do we do for those who already know it?

The question "What do we want students to learn?" led to commonly agreed upon standards and objectives. "How will we know they learned it?" resulted in common assessments for every grade level team, bringing consistency to their instruction. Asking "How will we respond when learning does not take place?" led to common pacing guides, sharing and building lesson plans, and a flow of expertise and advice among staff regarding how to configure classes for better learning opportunities. The question of "How will we respond for those who already know it?" led to strategies to deepen understanding, expand rigor, and develop pre-assessments to differentiate instruction.

School psychologists are part of the PLCs as well. Sanger uses psychologists differently from most districts. While school psychologists are often used almost exclusively to conduct special education assessments (to determine whether students qualify for service), in Sanger they function as "quasi-vice principals," serving on leadership teams, conducting walkthroughs, dealing with student behavior issues, and serving as the backbone of the Rtl process.

**Explicit Direct Instruction:** When EDI began in Sanger, it started as a pilot project with Del Rey Elementary, one of the lowest-performing schools in the district. In partnership with a company called DataWorks, the district created structured EDI lessons that were highly correlated to state standards. After this, Del Rey experienced an increase in the state's API from 532 in 2002 to 818 in 2010, and became one of the most notable and frequently visited schools in the district.

Beginning in 2004, all special education and general education teachers in the district were trained in EDI, which provided the framework for explicit skill development and conceptual understanding. Teachers replaced conversations about how students "don't get it" with discussions about what part of the lesson they "didn't get." This allowed special and general educators to communicate with each other to meet the needs of all students. Conversations became focused on specific EDI components such as concept development, skill development, learning objectives, and guided practice. Once general education teachers identified the area(s) the student did not understand, the special education teacher could provide assistance regarding the best approach to learning, which led to greater inclusion of students with disabilities and a higher degree of collaboration between special and general education teachers.

This shift created an interdependent relationship between special and general education; this relationship was necessary to fluidly react to students' needs. The interconnection enabled all stakeholders to speak

a common language, develop common outcomes, enhance common practices, and articulate common goals. The implementation of EDI, PLCs, and Rtl moved all schools out of PI status and increased all schools' API and AYP scores. In addition, the initiatives increased district administrator knowledge of student needs and increased the use of data by teachers to diagnose and meet the needs of individual students within the district, school, and grade level teams. In short, the combination of Sanger's commitment to fully include as many children as possible in the general education setting, its Rtl philosophy to meet students' exceptional needs outside special education through the use of EDI strategies, and collaboration through PLC teams have been a recipe for success.

## Overall District Themes

Examining themes across all four of these districts, the following strategies emerged in support of special education performance:

- Inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts)
- Collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts)
- Continuous assessment and use of Rtl (three districts)
- Targeted professional development (three districts)
- Use of Explicit Direct Instruction (two districts)

Inclusion and access to the core curriculum was the strategy most strongly credited by all four districts as having contributed to special education performance. However, as in the Donahue Institute study, inclusion efforts take different forms across these districts. In Kerman and Sanger, the strategy is to fully integrate as many students identified for special education as possible, with proper support from resource teachers depending on student needs. Upland, on the other hand, is moving toward a blended program—which started with the “de-tracking” of its high school—and providing students in special education more access to college prep courses at the high school level and to the core curriculum at the middle and elementary levels. Similarly, Val Verde uses a “flexible model” in which students with disabilities are integrated into general education as much as possible but also receive specialized academic instruction when needed.

All four districts indicated that for inclusion to work, general and special education teachers need to collaborate. This strategy was consistently mentioned as a way to improve special education performance as well. In two of the districts (Kerman and Sanger), the collaboration takes place through PLCs, where special and general education teachers discuss student needs and plan instruction together. In Sanger, school psychologists are also part of the PLCs. In Upland and Val Verde, collaboration takes the form of blended instruction, transition planning, use of learning centers, and special education teacher participation on leadership teams to ensure integration of general and special education.

Kerman, Sanger, and Val Verde cited continuous use of student assessment data and Rtl strategies as a way to respond to student needs and limit the number of students referred to special education. Kerman, Upland, and Val Verde provide targeted professional development to meet the needs of all learners, emphasizing particular strategies (e.g., EDI, GLAD) or training special education teachers to better understand and use the core curriculum. Finally, Kerman and Sanger both use EDI as a way to structure lesson content and increase student engagement through the use of flexible groupings and ongoing assessments.

## Study Implications

Education researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should give greater consideration to the substantial variation observed in the academic results for students with disabilities in school districts

across the state. Some districts are producing much higher educational outcomes for their students in special education. Given the magnitude of spending on special education services and all that is at stake for these children, we must gain a better understanding of what these districts are doing that might inform others.

This study has begun this process. Through a rigorous selection process, we found a number of districts that substantially and consistently outperformed similar districts on state performance measures. The main themes that emerged across these districts are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts), collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts), continuous assessment and use of RtI (three districts); targeted professional development (three districts), and use of EDI (two districts).

All four districts were very clear about the need for students in special education to gain full access to the curriculum, which will only occur through strong general and special education collaboration. Districts emphasized the importance of creating a learning community unified in the belief that all children can learn. Aside from this overall philosophy, though, each district reported developing specific strategies that were unique.

Further exploration could occur through more in depth data collection (including site visits to districts and schools) to document through interviews and observations how successful special education outcomes are produced at different sites. Also, this study only examined performance on the California Standards Test (CST), which is the statewide assessment; one could explore the performance of students taking the California Modified Assessment (CMA) and the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) to understand best practices for the students in special education taking these assessments.

For now, however, we believe these districts, and others like them, can serve as “lighthouses” for other districts struggling to fully incorporate their special education population and to give these students the best possible chance to succeed academically.

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