

Connecticut Case Study Report

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March 26, 2007



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research team would like to acknowledge the support and cooperation provided by both school systems and the local communities involved. This effort required the willing participation of many individuals who took time from their work and home lives to speak with us. We were consistently treated with great hospitality and respect. We appreciate all the effort that was put into making this opportunity a success. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of one of the initial team members, Dr. Barbara Sparks.

CONTEXT

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) has been working with school districts on the issue of overrepresentation of students of color in special education through annual summits on this issue since 2003. Overrepresentation has been a key performance indicator in Connecticut's focused monitoring since 2004. Data maps by state and school districts have been used at state meetings to develop deeper understanding and support strategic initiatives based on those data. Connecticut's website also makes these data maps available to all website visitors. Districts have implemented various strategies to contend with inappropriate identification and placement of special education students including programs and strategies in the general education, or least restrictive, environment. Some districts have been more successful than others. In order to more fully understand what strategies and interventions are successful, Connecticut asked a consortium of researchers and evaluators from NCCRESt and Learning Innovations @WestEd/NERRC to study two districts that have been reducing their disproportionality data. In this report, we refer to the districts by pseudonym: Eagle and Falcon School Districts. Selected as research sites based on Connecticut State Department of Education data that indicate their efforts have shown substantial progress, the two districts were visited in May and early June 2006 and then again in October 2006 by members of the research consortium.

Researchers conducted school walk-through observations, interviewed teachers, staff, system administrators as well as community members including families who had children enrolled in the schools, ministers, staff from recreation, police, social service departments, and business owners. Over 12 days, we interviewed a total of 65 individuals and visited 60 classrooms between the two districts. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Coding of the interviews was done using a software program called NVIVO. Codes were constructed by three researchers independently. We defined our codes, shared them across the researchers, tested each other's coding categories, and then, developed a shared list that were applied across all the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once all transcripts were coded, we developed categories and, from those categories, themes.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to more fully understand what strategies and interventions were successful for selected districts in the state. This study was undertaken as a collaborative venture with CSDE, the National Center for Culturally

Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt), and Learning Innovations @ WestEd/NERRC.

Evaluation Questions

This evaluation study was guided by the following overarching questions:

- What factors may have contributed to the overrepresentation of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in special education?
- What interventions were used to reduce inappropriate identification and placement of special education students?
- How were these interventions implemented?
- What influence did these interventions have on teachers, students, family/community and administrators?
- What other activities or initiatives in the district are impacting the inappropriate identification and placement of special education students?
- How has state and federal policy impacted efforts at the district level?
- What transferable practices can be identified for use by other districts?

Through these questions, the evaluation team looked for policies, practices, and professional roles that may be contributing to reductions in overrepresentation or changes in overall disproportionality. Some of the contributors included professional development of teachers, special education personnel, and administrators; focused monitoring of districts, data collection and migration to new practices; student assessment, identification and early intervention strategies; suspension, drop out and graduation rates; resource management; equity teams and family/community involvement.

RESULTS

Description of the Towns

Falcon and Eagle are in close proximity to each other, north of Hartford, the second largest city in Connecticut. The U.S. Census website reports a total population of 30,595 people in Central Falcon CDP in 2000. At that time, people who identified as White comprised about 83.2% of the population. About 8.3% identified themselves as Black, another 7% identified as Hispanic or Latino, with the remaining split between Asian Pacific and Native American. The poverty rate was reported at 6.8%. About 83.5% of the town's residents reported having a high school degree or higher. Of those about 23.1 reported having a bachelor's degree or higher

Eagle's city website reports a total population of 28,742 in 2004 with a projected population of 29,342 in 2009, and a .4% growth rate. People who identify as White comprise about 65% of the population. About 27% identify themselves as Black,

another 6% identify as Hispanic, with the remaining 2% split between Asian Pacific (n = 919) and Native American (n = 46). The poverty rate was reported at 3.7%. About a third of the town's population has a high school degree, another third have at least bachelor's degree, and a little more than a quarter report having attended some college. Almost half of all jobs in Eagle were absorbed by the service industries, almost a quarter by trade, with manufacturing, government, finance, construction, and agriculture comprising the other 25%.

Description of the Districts

Falcon. Falcon served about 7, 400 students and reported a slightly declining enrollment trend over a four year period. Its White students constituted a majority population in the schools at about 58% of the total student enrollment. The student population was about 20% Black, about 17% Hispanic, and about 5.3% Asian Americans. The 29 students who identified as American Indian comprised .4% of the student population. About 32% of the student population qualified for free/reduced-price meals and about 12% of the students spoke languages other than English at home. Extensive data are available on the Connecticut State Department of Education's website. Here, only some highlights are reported to provide a context for this study's findings.

About 93% of the district's staff were White and about 69% had master's degrees or above. Class sizes ranged from an average of 17.1 students per classroom in kindergarten to almost 24 students per classroom in high school. With the exception of Grade 4 aggregated student performance on the writing portion of the Connecticut Mastery test, aggregated student performance in reading, writing, and math was below the state average. The gap between state averages and district averages grew across grade levels with 8th grade scores about 8 points below the state mean. Two middle schools were identified as needing improvement based on adequate yearly progress measures along with one elementary school based on 2006 data.

Table 1 provides composite index by the three largest ethnicities for the academic years 2002-03 through 2005 -06 as well as the total percentage of students with disabilities by year. Data came from the Connecticut State Department of Education website, special education reports by district.

Table 1. Percentage of Students by Ethnicity in Special Education in Falcon

	Black Students (n = SPED/GENED) Percentage	Hispanic Students	White Students	All Students
2002-03	(255/1438) 17.7	(202/1138) 17.8	(522/4734) 11	(1022/7717) 13.24
2003-04	(263/1462) 18	(204/1207) 16.9	(495/4561) 10.85	(1002/7750) 12.93

	Black Students (n = SPED/GENED) Percentage	Hispanic Students	White Students	All Students
2004-05	(245/1465) 16.72	(191/1267) 15.07	(490/4318) 11.35	(988/7649) 12.92
2005-06	(232/1514) 15.32	(191/1228) 15.55	(478/4040) 11.83	(955/7393) 12.92

Table 1 shows a decrease in the percentage of students who identified as Black receiving special education services. A similar pattern is evident for students identified as Hispanic while the percentage of students who were identified as White and receiving special education services increased by less than a percentage point over the same time frame. Students with disabilities receiving special education services also declined slightly. A risk ratio calculation comparing the composition index of students who were Black and identified for special education with students who were white and identified for special education shows a decrease from a relative risk ratio for Black students of 1.61 to 1.30 from 2002-03 to 2005-06.

The Falcon Board of Education included this description of their current initiatives in their 2005-06 report to the Connecticut Department of Education:

Academic experiences are provided that are culturally responsive and embrace differences to eliminate racial, ethnic, and economic isolation. Specifically, two elementary schools continue to participate in a School Choice Program. These programs provide school themes that are woven through the curricula. Washington Media Arts Magnet School was specifically created in an effort to balance racial student population and offer space to selected students in neighboring communities. This year, Washington was able to enroll more non-minorities to keep the school in compliance with the state statute of a racially balanced school. Overall, families are attracted to this school because of the diversity and exposure to various ethnic and cultural experiences. At Nathan Hale, students are offered a special focus on Spanish and technology. Students enjoy opportunities to speak a foreign language and learn to use the latest technical hardware. This school continues to actively recruit families to take part in these areas.

Professional development is given to staff to ensure that cultural responsiveness is implemented in the learning environment. Such programs as Courageous Conversations and Efficacy Initiatives speak specifically to this point. Courageous Conversations is a project to connect the school and community in discussions to better communicate about race. The Efficacy Initiative trains teachers at the secondary level to target proficiency skills focusing on closing the achievement gap. This

effort assists the staff to implement rigor in all academic subjects at the middle and high school levels. The Equity Director continues to be an important position to oversee programs and ensure that the staff is continually conscious of our diverse needs (retrieved from the web, March 21, 2006, www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/ssp/dist0506/dist048.pdf).

Eagle. Extensive data about Eagle school district are available on the Connecticut State Department of Education's website. Here, only some highlights are reported to create a context for this study's findings. Eagle served about 4, 223 students in 2005-06 and reported a slightly declining enrollment trend over a four year period. Eagle's population is diverse with almost half of its students identifying as Black (49.2%). More than a third of Eagle's student population is White with almost 10% identifying as Hispanic. Asian American and American Indian students comprise less than 5% of the total student body (4.6%). About a quarter of the student population qualified for free/reduced-price meals and less than 5% of the students spoke languages other than English at home.

About 90% of the district's staff were White and about 69% had master's degrees or above. Class sizes ranged from an average of 14.5 students per classroom in kindergarten to almost 20 students per classroom in high school. With the exception of Grade 7 aggregated student performance on the reading portion of the Connecticut Mastery test, aggregated student performance in reading, writing, and math was below the state average. The gap varied from less than one percentage point in the lower grades to as much as 10 points on one of the exams in the 8th grade. One middle school was identified as needing improvement based on adequate yearly progress measures based on 2006 data.

Table 2 provides a composite index of the three largest ethnicities for the academic years 2002-03 through 2005-06 as well as the total percentage of students with disabilities by year. Data came from the Connecticut State Department of Education website, special education reports by district. Table 2 shows a decrease in the percentage of students who identified as Black receiving special education services from the 2002-2003 to the 2005-2006 academic year.

Table 2. Percentage of Students by Ethnicity in Special Education in Eagle

	Black Students (n = SPED/GENED) Percentage	Hispanic Students	White Students	All Students
2002-03	(322/1999) 16.1	(64/350) 18.3	(217/1897) 11.4	(610/4646) 13.1
2003-04	(308/ 2050) 15	(67/377) 17.8	(185/1782) 10.4	(569/4612) 12.3

	Black Students (n = SPED/GENED) Percentage	Hispanic Students	White Students	All Students
2004-05	(316/2063) 15.3	(71/398) 17.8	(188/162) 11.2	(587/4642) 12.7
2005-06	(300/2077) 14.4	(67/411) 16.3	(168/1540) 10.9	(546/4559) 12

A declining trend is evident for students identified as Hispanic while the percentage of students who were identified as White and receiving special education services increased by about a percentage point over the same time frame. Students with disabilities receiving special education services also declined slightly. An analysis of the relative risk ratio for Black students being identified for special education services shows a drop from 1.41 to 1.21.

Eagle school system reported the following in its 2005-2006 academic year report to the Connecticut Department of Education:

Eagle is committed to providing educational opportunities for students to interact with students and teachers from diverse, racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. To support this commitment, Eagle participates in the following Magnet Schools: Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, Greater Hartford Academy of Mathematics and Science, Metropolitan Learning Center, and Montessori Magnet. We also participate in Student Exchange-Sister Schools, Leadership in a World of Difference, Pathways, Inter-district Visitations, and Inter-district Summer School Programs including: E.Q.U.A.L. Summer Magnet School, River to the Sea, Summer School, Center for Creative Youth, Soaring Summer Inter-district Program, Camp Anytown Inter-district Program, and EQUUS Academy Inter-district Program. Participants have offered diversity activities for their peers during the school year.

Students and staff also participate in other programs, such as: School Year-We're Making History- Urban Suburban Partnership, SBC/SNET Inter-district Technology and Connections, Common Ground, Connecticut Forum Student Board, Greater Hartford Computer Academy, Pupil Partners: Breaking Down Barriers.

Eagle also participated in the CHOICE program, at all levels, involving 15 students in the 2004-05 school year. Eagle is deeply involved in efforts to reduce the achievement gap between its minority and non-minority students. Our district joined the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) which includes the participation of all staff in the TRIPOD project to address needs identified for improving the achievement of all students. Eagle is also participating in a multi-year

research project in collaboration with Yale University that focuses on instructional strategies to increase student achievement and to close the achievement gap (retrieved from the web March 21, 2006, p. 2).

A closer look

We have organized our findings by district and then conclude with overall commentary on our findings as well as some questions that arise from these data. The use of quotes to illustrate the interpretations that we made is a cornerstone of qualitative research. After transcripts are transcribed and coded, researchers organize their findings by themes that emerge from the data (observations, reports, and focus groups). The inclusion of a quote here means that the quote is representative of information, perceptions, attitudes, and observations that we made over the course of our 12-day visit.

Falcon

Regulatory Environment. Both Falcon and Eagle received letters from the Connecticut Department of Education (CDE) citing the disproportionate representation of students identified as Black and Hispanic in special education. The districts were required to respond to the data by exploring potential causes for the existing data and implementing practices that would address those causes. The Falcon special education director said, "...a letter from the state in terms of racial balance has been a driving force (008, p. 2)." This attention to the data on disproportionality was echoed by teachers as in this comment:

And I think the fact that we're sensitive to the data that's been out there, administrators in particular, they don't always please the teachers when they don't give a certain person of color a certain amount of days suspension because he broke this rule and so and so broke this rule and they were white. I mean, this is talked about in team level, and we say this kid did this and he was white and he only got, you know, he got 5 days, but this kid, he's of color and he only got 2, and he did the same thing wrong so why would they do that? This is still coming up, although the data shows that there's improvement but I think that it's fair that they handle those kids with kid gloves and give them the, you know what I'm saying? They take the culture into consideration and their reactions to things. (p. 6, A0011).

In Falcon teachers and administrators respond to the regulatory and accountability aspects of their work.

Leadership. The Falcon District superintendent who brought her district out of financial difficulties had been a school leader who focused on ensuring equity and opportunity for vulnerable and marginalized students in her school. She brought that same focus to her work as superintendent although the scope of the challenges facing her rested on a number of dimensions outside instructional leadership. As superintendent, she had little time to devote to leading the work on the cultural

dimensions of exploring and learning more about inclusive educational practices. However, she actively encouraged her staff to lead such efforts. She came to the superintendency after the letters from the state had been delivered to districts with disproportionate representation in special education. Her leaders were unprepared for the mandate when it came from the state, and had difficulty building interest and engagement in the process of becoming inclusive. A guiding force has been the special education director who was asked to lead the special education department after the initial letter was received.

Cultural Difference. Teachers in Falcon were conflicted about how to respond to the behavior. One teacher noted,

As open as we try to be, and as open as I try to be, I know I have some times when I'm prejudiced against whatever, you know, I'm not just talking about race, but all kinds of things. Just the way a child sits or the way they answer me or, you know. And I think we always have to keep that in check (p. 5, A0011).

Another administrator commented on the veteran teachers and their difficulty with accepting and working with students with varying kinds of behavior:

We have a very veteran staff in this district and so they're, I think that plays a big role. They didn't change with the kids and if you don't change with your population, you're going to be in trouble. You're kidding yourself. So, and if you refuse to hear that difference is coming and therefore you have to do things differently, it's going to catch up with you and so of course you're going to have disproportionality. And unfortunately, black boys in particular, do not act like white boys, so that means that they are not normal. White boys are considered normal and so if those black boys don't act like those white boys, something must be wrong (p. 4, DWC0019).

Structural Issues. While leadership for change around disproportionality is in place and teachers are engaged in understanding how their own cultural identities influence their practice, several structural issues continue to slow down change while other organizational changes have accelerated progress. First, the barriers to improvement include the size of the high school. The high school is the fourth largest in the state with 2300 students although the district ranks 24th in total student population. Bond issues to build a second high school have failed as did an initiative to build a new middle school. Large schools tend to lose a sense of community and connection with their students and have more problems retaining and graduating students. The US Department of Education has published these research findings on its website (<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/schoolsize.html>).

Connected to the failed bond elections, the alternative programs are housed in older, rundown buildings with inadequate access to technology and cramped classrooms. On the other hand, the district has invested in professional learning for its principals.

Instructional Practice. What were elements in helping a staff of 522 individuals focus on disproportionality? One teacher echoed the comments of many about having an Equity Director and early intervening teams at every building:

Having a person in a position where they're, I'm not going to say personal job is being helping people become culturally aware, but I think that's part of her, not just her professional ambition but I think it's part of her personal position as well.. Having a person who, they don't have to be of color, but a person in her position who can look out for the needs of the people of color that are, like you said, being over-identified and being lumped into groups maybe where they don't belong but they have no other program level, I think you need a person at that level that can kind of oversee things that are happening in the town.

We have what we used to call SIT is called EIT, it's early intervention, and what it is it's made up of teachers and social workers, psychologists and whoever else sits on the committee and it's a school based thing and when we come upon issues with students who may or may not be a color, it's not a color related situation but it's when we have students who are habitually having problems of whatever come, they always relate back to academics but they may be home related or emotionally related or what have you, behavior related, we have this, it's sort of a buffer between administration and the kid (p. 2, AOII).

This was typical of many of the teachers we interviewed. They understood that cultural differences between teacher expectations and student background existed. They were confused about how to respond to these differences in dialogue with students and in school policies. They needed a team that had some expertise in thinking through issues of culture and language in relationship to learning needs.

A science class of 11th graders at Falcon high school offered a scenario in which students did not seem actively engaged. Students are seated in rows at tables, two to a table. The teacher is giving a lesson on viruses and stands at the front of the room with an overhead projector. She has written notes, which she will show on the screen, but begins with them covered with a sheet of paper. She pulls the paper down to reveal a sentence on the screen. The sentence, written by hand, is small and barely legible from the middle of the classroom. She reads the sentence and has the students write it down. As they write, she walks up and down the aisles, looking at what they are writing. She goes back to the overhead projector, and begins the process all over again: she pulls the paper down to reveal another sentence, reads it and again asks the students to write it down, and walks up and down the aisles checking what they've written. The 25 students appear to comply throughout the observation. They watch her as she reads the notes and write sentence after sentence. There is no discussion about viruses, no discussion about what the students are writing, and no discussion about anything.

Community. One of the promising practices in Falcon emerged during our focus group with community members including members of the police department assigned as

school resource officers, parks and recreation, and youth services. They work together with the school system to build a coordinated summer program for students. They work with families to ensure that costs of the summer program don't keep some families and their children excluded:

One of the things, just so I don't forget it, but one of the things we do now with the board of ed, which we didn't do previous to 5 years ago, is we meet in October, we meet in January and we meet in April, where everybody from the parks and rec side and everybody from the board of education side that's involved in summer programs. We have the meetings here, there's 30 people in the room for a lunchtime meeting. All the program people, summer school people from board of ed, transportation, food service, because we do a big food service program in the summertime and the most important, is custodial is part of those meetings now for the people that are maintaining the buildings and school security. Everybody's there. The October meeting we review what happened in the summertime, you know, what are the suggestions we have. January we kind of come in with a draft program and April we finalize everything and we didn't have those meetings 5 or 6 years ago (p. 6, A007).

Summary. The decreases in Falcon's disproportionality data are influenced most heavily by its attention to accountability and compliance. Leadership within the district has provided a strong message to change those data. Professional learning opportunities are beginning to change the discourse of faculty with little implementation of culturally responsive instruction in the classroom. The content of professional learning has focused on intervention strategies such as differentiation and positive behavior supports. In addition, the PJ court order that mandates more inclusive educational settings for students with disabilities has impacted how educators think about their role in serving students with disabilities. However, structural barriers slow progress. Community involvement by other locally funded agencies strengthens the possibility for bridging the gap between the majority and minority populations in Falcon.

Eagle

Regulatory Environment. In Eagle, school district personnel at the system level prepared school building principals and special education staff and teachers that students with disabilities were to be placed in the general education classroom and that special education services such as accommodations for reading and assessment were to be within the general education classroom. The Eagle's special education director commented, "We should be doing this anyway (003, p. 4)." Thus, an external pressure is creating an opportunity for district leadership to install changes in the special education services that are more in line with their values and beliefs about inclusive education.

In addition to the letters from the State Department of Education about disproportionality, every district has been required to implement the P.J. settlement agreement. This case addresses all school-age children with the label mental

retardation/intellectual disability who are not educated in regular classrooms. The settlement requires (1) an increase in the percentage of students with these labels who are placed in general education classrooms 80% or more of the school day, (2) a reduction in disproportionality, (3) an increase in attendance at neighborhood schools, and (4) increased participation in school-sponsored extracurricular activities with non-disabled students. Teachers in Eagle referred to the PJ case multiple times as an additional incentive to thinking about what students to refer for what outcome.

The Expert Advisory Panel overseeing the resolution of the PJ Settlement in general is concerned with the slow progress and believes that districts are showing little leadership in accomplishing the settlement goals (Burrello, Coulter, Freagon, & Sailor, 2007). Thus, the discussion not only among senior management but among the teachers about PJ is notable. This Eagle teacher noted:

If I think, it's not a deterrent but it's the um, it's helpful by eliminating those who really need to be in special ed and those who just need a little bit of extra help in class or need a little more differentiating from the rest of the classroom. It sets them apart from special ed kids.

Leadership. The popular Eagle superintendent remains so because of the work that she has done over time to establish a shared understanding of what inclusive education might mean. She is supported in that effort by her special education director. Hence, when the edict came from the state to include students with disabilities in their general education classrooms, teacher and administrator leaders were able to articulate a variety of reasons for doing and engage their practitioners in strategizing ways to make it work. This analysis came from multiple sources and groups but was summarized by this individual:

But the change in the superintendent I think has been key because Dr. S. moved it from talking about it quietly, whispering I'll say, to talking about it quietly and pointing at it and saying this is not ok, but Dr. F. is actually a table banger. I mean, you do not want to get in that woman's way. I mean...this is not going to be like this in this community and I'm serious. And when somebody's your leader and is speaking that way, that passionately with that kind of commitment, you may have been aware before, you may have been kind of swinging, you may have been thinking what can I do with this, but when now it's required, you line up and you make the change. Irrespective of how you felt about it before, you just say, ok, well, we're doing this now and that helped I think a great deal with the momentum (p. 6, A004).

Cultural Difference. In all the focus groups the discussions about race, difference, and practices were discussed freely. It was apparent that staff, families, and community members were concerned and deeply involved in understanding. This teacher talks about her experience:

And for the most part, I don't know why, but it seems that African-American students, or students of color have a harder time learning in classrooms with, well, just period, just learning in classrooms. The classroom setting itself seems to be harder and whether that's a cultural thing I don't know. I don't know. It's hard for me too and I'm African-American, so, I don't necessarily think it's the color of the teacher, it could be just the environment. It's also on the other end where people are aware that there is a disproportionate amount of students in certain groups and they try to overcompensate, you know, forcing kids to be in groups or lets say for example the challenge program, you know, to take an African-American student who's not necessarily challenge material but putting them in that program just because you need to meet your quota, that's unsettling as well. I guess it goes both ways, when I think of disproportionality I get unsettled. I think oh my god, which direction is this pendulum going to swing and who's going to feel it? In some ways I think it should be addressed because it opens up our eyes, you know, all of our eyes so that we're aware that the problem exists but is there a true solution to this? I don't know. And if there is, then we would like to know it.

While clear direction and solutions are not forthcoming, many facets of this community are wrestling with the issues in open forums trying to find ways out of the dilemmas that they see.

Structural Issues. The district has invested in sharing student performance data with its principals and teachers. This administrator describes the current effort:

For example in the elementary schools this year, every teacher, kindergarten this would not apply to, but were handed a disc at the beginning of the year with their 20 children listed and any kind of data from one year previous, and now this year with the assessments and we have a calendar of assessments at the elementary level, every bit of that data has been centralized and so next year the teacher will be handed, and they'll have 2 years worth of data. Meanwhile all of that information is accessible through the network within the school system. Our issue is we need to do a lot more with training people on how to use it because it can be overwhelming. What are the questions, to me the most essential thing with respect to the use of data are the questions. The data, you can be buried in data but if you don't know what questions that you're seeking an answer to it's worthless. We have a lot more to do with that, but we certainly, and you would know this, but we have moved tremendously from where we were. I don't think that lots and lots, the majority of teachers even had data in their hands 4 years ago. I don't know that they, they may have been given the result of the CMT or something like that but maybe they were just lists and no one worked with them to say well start to wrestle with this.

This principal goes on to describe how she works with her faculty to use data:

I think one of the messages that teachers are getting too is that not only, I mean, we talk all the time about putting a name and a face on the data so to speak. Within the next couple of weeks I'll sit with every one of my teachers with their class book and with the assessment information that we have from every child in their room and we'll talk about them name by name. And I sit and I make a note, there's several levels of accountability now for the teacher having told me what they're going to do and my having written it down so that when we sit down in the next quarter, say where are we? Or they know I'm going to come in so there's a level of accountability that teacher's know they have now that I don't know that they always had, kid by kid, score by score, skill by skill.

Yet, when we talk with teachers their perception of the data mining initiative, they tell us:

I know last year when you were inundated with you've got to teach this, you've got to teach that, CMT this, CMT that, make sure you do this, I was in a bad mood all year. And granted, our kids did extremely well on the CMTs and we did the comparison, but it just wasn't easy. It was hard. And to differentiate is not easy. That's hard as well.

You go to 4 years of college and they didn't teach you anything like this. You spent all this money and you get into class and you have to learn something completely new and so for the most part, all of us are learning new things. We're learning how to teach again and teach with a new type of kids that we have and a new environment and a new expectation that they now have for us, so it wasn't an easy process and we're not happy every day. We're sometimes downright pissed. But you get the job done, so, and I don't know if that, and we get it done because we like the kids, so, well, not all of them, but most of them. We care about them and we want productive citizens out there working to put money in our social security fund, but it just wasn't an easy process. It was hard.

Rewriting curriculum, aligning curriculum across grade levels so the teachers aren't just doing their favorite things. We're constantly rewriting and updating and mapping and sometimes I think we're not ready to have that conversation yet with the high schools and the elementary schools because we're still in the process of lining everything up and there's talk about things being done differently, in the elementary schools we hear that things are being differently and you're going to see the difference, I've been hearing that for a long time and so I look forward to seeing the difference, before I retire hopefully.

While this commentary on the relevance of the teacher education program that this teacher experienced is negative, much more can be seen in her viewpoint. What is

hopeful about this comment is that the teacher reports that the work is happening, in spite of the sense that they have needed to retool their own expertise. It's also evident that the teachers are working across grade levels to ensure that students have a smooth curriculum progression from one grade to the next. But, the structural issues of getting data to teachers in a timely fashion and making sure that they know how to use the data to improve instruction are still evident.

Instructional Practice. In Eagle District, one of the middle schools, serving students ages approximately 12 through 15 or grades 6 through 9, offers classes in language arts. In one classroom, a lesson on interpreting text and developing an argument is taught. The teacher has selected a chapter from the autobiography of the U.S. comedian, Dick Gregory. Dick Gregory achieved some degree of public recognition during the civil rights movement in the sixties and seventies. In his autobiography, he traces the roots of his commitment to civil rights. One anecdote is devoted to his first conscious experience of racism, an encounter in elementary school. Students in the class we observe have read the excerpt, "Not Poor, Just Broke," from Gregory's autobiography and are engaged in small groups about the room, answered a set of questions on a handout the teacher has prepared. The questions include the following, "Why did Gregory interpret this experience as racism? What evidence is provided that might have led him to make that conclusion? What do you think the teacher's intent was in this situation? What in the text makes you think that? Have you ever experienced or witnessed a similar situation? What do you think that the group could have done in this situation?" Students in the small groups are closely reading the text, offering support from the text for their interpretation. Other students are note-taking for discussion that will occur later. There is dialogue, contention, and resolution occurring. On close observation, there are some students in the room who are unable to locate their evidence. It seems that they cannot read the text. Their fellow students help them out. The teacher is observed coaching the small groups to organize their evidence. Periodically, the teacher looks up from her small group discussions to check on the group as a whole. The students are engaged in the task. There is obvious intensity and focus. Our guide tells us, as we leave the classroom, which students in the classroom had identified disabilities. Observations like this, where students with various skill levels are engaged in the tasks and supporting one another, are made in several of the classrooms in that building, on that hallway.

Later, we interview the teacher about her feelings and judgment about the success of the inclusive mandate. She tells us that she enjoys having students with different learning abilities and skill levels in the room:

I actually teach an inclusion class so I have special ed children within my classroom but I don't even look at it that way.they're all children and they all learn the way they learn and I have to try to reach every one of these children in the way that they're going to learn. I look at them all as learners and that I've just got to take them from one place to another and I think a lot of it has to do with expectations (p. 3, A004).

There are perhaps 10 teachers who skillfully manage these learning levels and learning interests. However, in Eagle and Falcon district, we also see the opposite scenario.

This is a draft version for the superintendents of Eagle & Falcon and the Connecticut Department of Education. All correspondence and corrections should go to Elizabeth.kozleski@asu.edu.

Teachers with similar numbers of students in their classroom, who, when interviewed know that they should be able to teach students at varying levels but struggle individually and as a group to make it work. An example from a language arts class at Eagle High School demonstrates this.

The class is divided into five small groups of five students in each group. The teacher introduces a lesson on epics and distributes an article for the class to read. She explains that she wants each group to read a specific part of the article, discuss it among themselves, and then be prepared to share that part with the rest of the class, a reading activity called a “jigsaw.” Her monotone voice and slow pace of delivery has a soporific effect. By the time that she has given this brief introduction five minutes have transpired. Students are quietly glancing at one another and making hand gestures. The teacher does not seem aware of this, although she may be purposely ignoring what is going on.

In the same slow monotone, she tells the first group, which she calls “Group A,” to read the entire first page and approximately to the middle of the second page. After the entire direction is given, a student in another group asserts, “We’re group A.” The teacher looks at him and concurs that the student is right, his group is A. She then turns to that group and gives them the same instructions as slowly and deliberately as she did to the group that she first thought was Group A. She then walks to each group, assigning them a section to read. The students are quiet, showing no emotion when they look at the teacher. Several stare into space. One has his head down on his desk. Another, who is seated with his back to the blackboard, sits back, closes his eyes and rests his head against it. No attempt is made to engage the students individually or as a group. When the teacher has finished giving the assignment to each group, which has taken about 10 minutes, several students seem puzzled. One whispers to a tablemate, “What’s the assignment?”

The variability in instructional practice and the degree to which teachers were and were not conscious of their instructional methods in relationship to connecting with the students they were teaching was marked. In one building we observed an entire hall of teachers where the teaching was vibrant, the students engaged, and the atmosphere for learning electric. Yet, even in the same school, other classrooms lacked that vibrancy and sense of engagement.

Community. In a focus group of the mayor, the director of the local chamber of commerce, two ministers of local churches, and the police chief, all but two individuals had graduated from the local high school. This generational connection between the school and local leaders created a powerful sense of ownership over the direction of the school district and a close scrutiny of the current superintendent of schools. Over a significant period of time, local residents remained and maintained their sense of concern and stewardship over the role of the public schools in their community.

People have noticed that the top achieving students are not of color. Seminar program, the AP classes, that’s where we actually physically see that there are very few children of color and you start to think, well, what happened? And you start backtracking it. Were they identified at an early

age as having some kind of special need and then just were only expected to live up to that low expectation? ... We've had 3 referendums this year for our budget so it's a pretty involved community and there are a very good base of parents that are now starting to look at this whole picture and say alright, let's get it out in the open and say where's the problem and are these kids not being challenged? Are they begin targeted or identified early and saying, ok, we're going to get you graduated and that's about it? Or are they being challenged really to their fullest? And I think there's more parental involvement. Reverend xxx represents a very strong community based church and a lot of programs that they've got, so there's a lot of interaction between everybody. ... been involved in the whole, how many now? Is it 12 or 16, 10? meetings they've had, the conversation on race and it's just, throws stuff out there and it's been very well attended (p. 4, A004b).

As this meeting went on, it was evident that the community members believed that the superintendent was providing leadership for addressing disproportionality:

But if you really want to look at one thing, like if you want us to start going backwards, just remove the superintendent. It's the one factor that has moved us from a community that first became aware, to a community that started talking about it quietly, very quietly behind the scenes, almost whispering, and we didn't quite know how to get beyond that because of the great ethical moral difficulty with the root cause of the problem, if the root cause of the problem is racism and all these kids are coming from the north end of Hartford which is a ghetto and they're all black there and it's all white here, well, who put them there? And nobody really deals with that question, how'd they get there? How did it get like this? Well, it must be our fault because we're white. Why didn't you do something about it? You know, I mean, those real basic questions never get addressed so people go around not knowing how to address them and therefore they stay away from them, so, the conversations on race I think helped. Other kinds of dialogue in mentoring, training classes, discussions about literacy, I think the literacy push in the school has had a big impact because it's given a lot of kids at the elementary level little bits of kind of incremental success and they take that success and run with it and that again changes expectations of them by their teachers and again it just helps with that community mentality as well (p. 5, A004).

Participants also indicate an increased awareness of issues that lie under the surface but need addressed, including conversations about race and culture, the norms of dominant culture, the influence of poverty on students, changing demographics in the districts, and working with families and communities.

Summary. The decreases in Eagle's disproportionality data are influenced most heavily by its attention to building a common understanding of cultural responsiveness that is bolstered by focused professional learning about instruction and learning materials.

With strong leadership in the district and the township as a whole, Eagle has engaged the challenge of becoming multicultural not only demographically but within the social and political patterns that shape organizations and community politics. This context provides a backdrop for conscious practice on the part of teachers to address the needs of their students by changing shifting norms for behavior while maintaining academic standards. To do this well requires new choices in curriculum materials, new patterns of classroom management, and careful attention to student performance so that shifts in practice are made as teachers test out new routines and processes. Further, intensive work with multidisciplinary teams of practitioner focused on pre-referral to special education that provides technical assistance to classroom teachers has shifted attention from student deficits to instructional improvement. There is much left to be done in Eagle and scores of classrooms in which traditional teaching continues to dominate. However, it is evident that changes in disproportionality can be attributed in part to becoming more culturally responsive as a district.

SOME SHARED THEMES

Factors that may have contributed to the overrepresentation of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in special education

A variety of factors contributed to over-representation in these districts. At the same time that the populations in the two districts were changing, the advent of No Child Left Behind, an intense focus on state accountability, and internal leadership changes in both districts meant that attention was focused elsewhere. In addition, a lack of systemic and strategic planning (particularly related to the implementation of professional development and sporadic change initiatives) balanced with a significant group of practitioners intent on maintaining the status quo were significant contributors. Teachers told us in many ways what this teacher said, “*This is the way we did it, this is the way we’ve always done it and it’s always going to stay that way.*” An administrator noted:

We don’t have a K-12 mindset. Everything is done by itself. That’s why we have, in my mind, that’s why we have disproportionality, because Penguin school’s going to do whatever they think. Tern school’s going to do whatever they think. Albatross [school] going to do whatever they think. There is no K-12 thinking. There is no continuum.

However, with the current strong leadership in both districts the vision for building schools that are culturally responsive and provide high quality instruction that reaches all students in the general education environment is palpable.

What interventions were used to reduce inappropriate identification and placement of special education students?

Several initiatives seemed to help lead change efforts effectively. These included

- Focused work with multidisciplinary assessment teams at the building level retooling prereferral and identification processes

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- Courageous conversations that deepened understanding of the role that hidden or unspoken assumptions about race, class, and cultural difference play in institutional practices like determining eligibility for gifted and talented programs, special education, remedial reading, and alternative education programs.
 - District-wide leadership to surface these assumptions and the practices that are based on such assumptions at the district, school, and classroom level.
 - Thoughtful hiring practices that invest in recruiting, selecting, and retaining new teachers who understand these issues, can provide leadership within the teaching force, and can model culturally responsive, academically rigorous classroom instruction.
 - Policy decisions at central administration that ensure that principals, building leadership teams, and teaching faculty understand that culture is a key component in instruction, classroom management, and school-wide behavioral expectations.
 - Focused work led by the superintendent with principals on skill development around the use of data for decision making. This entailed intensive analysis of student performance data, instructionally focused building walk-throughs, and consistent, disciplined approaches to instructional improvement.
 - Vertical alignment of curriculum and instructional practices so that schools provide a seamless experience between grade levels and schools. One administrator noted how the district is:

...trying to create a genuine system of schools, understand that we're all connected to one another and whether we're at Puffin at the early childhood center or we're at the high school, what we do impacts on kids learning at different points in the system and we can't operate independent of one another...

- Collaborative work among principals to share practices that improve results for students.
- Family and community Involvement that focuses on access to schools, extracurricular, and recreation programs for all students.

How were these interventions implemented?

The superintendents in both districts saw their role as leaders of the principals. They both spent time in focused professional development with their principals, frequently using data to focus on areas of concern, using walk-through protocols to focus attention on what happens in classrooms for students. A shared commitment to the same process

of progress monitoring through data was used by all central administrators as they worked with practitioners or principals on specific problems of practice.

What influence did these interventions have on teachers, students, family/community and administrators?

Families were aware of both the changes occurring and that these changes were neither universal nor the majority experience of families who identified as Black or Hispanic. However, a sense of hope and possibility was expressed by the family members that we spoke with, balanced by skepticism that pervasive, historical lowered expectations for students of color would change.

How state and federal policy impacted efforts at the district level

Wherever the researchers went in Eagle, teachers were discussing the PJ settlement. Having students with disabilities in their classrooms influenced their thinking about how and why to use special education services. Because changes made because of PJ were more recent than the disproportionality letters, many of the practices that teachers reported to attributed to teaching students with disabilities in the general education classroom. It seemed to us that both the focus on disproportionality and least restrictive environment created a more powerful impetus to change practice than a focus one or the other. However, this theme was more prevalent in Eagle than in Falcon.

What transferable practices can be identified for use by other districts? The role of the superintendent in leading these changes, consistent mentoring of key central administrators to align perspectives and messages, the focus on instruction in schools lead by the superintendent were key supports.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

While there are a variety of lessons learned from studying Falcon and Eagle, many questions remain. Both Falcon and Eagle are fairly small districts where the demands on the superintendent's time might offer the opportunity to provide instructional leadership and mentorship to building leaders. To do the kind of transformational work that we observed takes concentrated time weekly to keep a shared focus on the district mission. We wondered about the extent to which districts could form consortiums for principal development that would create the possibility for intensive summer development, shared leadership development among superintendents to support a network for principal learning that might transcend district boundaries.

We also wondered about direct and formal feedback between families and the superintendent that could provide an ongoing reality check on the experiences of families and students in district schools. We talked with several families that had compelling stories that, if heard by senior management, might provoke creative problem solving at the structural levels of the organization.

In Eagle, where we had the opportunity to talk with religious, business, and city leaders, we were struck by the potential for aligned support among these various groups. We

envision ongoing blueprints for social action in which schools, religious organizations, businesses, city planners, social services, recreation, and police develop comprehensive plans for inclusive communities in which access, usability, and engagement are collective agendas, buttressed by access to meaningful use of school and community data would be important.

The experiences of Eagle and Falcon have much to offer in terms of sustained change initiatives over time. We appreciate the opportunity they created to learn from their situations.

Appendix A: Evaluation Tools

Classroom Walkthrough Observation Form

Grade/Subject:

Observer:

School:

Date:

Instructional Expectation/Focus of the Walkthrough:

To what extent are all students actively engaged in learning behaviors such as listening, observing, discussing, modeling, problem solving?

To what extent are culturally responsive practices (such as curriculum materials, lessons, activities, and discourse) observed in the classroom?

To what extent do students understand the learning objectives?

To what extent are students achieving the learning objectives?

Evidence:

Family and Community Interview Guide

We are taping this interview which will be transcribed later for coding purposes. Your name will not be used in any analysis. If for any reason, you need to leave this focus group, please feel free to leave. Copies of our report will be made available to the district.

We are interested in understanding how your district and your building policies, practices, and people have shaped progress on addressing disproportionality for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

1. What do you understand about the issue of disproportionality and its impact on schools and students?
2. To what extent is disproportionality an issue here in Eagle schools?
3. How well do you think your schools are addressing this issue?
4. What is being done to improve results and what results are being achieved?
5. To what extent are you involved in supporting schools around disproportionality?
6. What has and hasn't worked from your perspective? Why?
7. From your perspective what kind of impact have you seen on students? On families? On teachers? On administration in your schools and at the district level?

NCCRESt Interview Guide for Principals

We are taping this interview which will be transcribed later for coding purposes. Your name will not be used in any analysis. If for any reason, you need to leave this focus group, please feel free to leave. Copies of our report will be made available to the district.

We are interested in understanding how your district and your building policies, practices, and people have shaped progress on addressing disproportionality for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

1. What do you understand about the issue of disproportionality and its impact on schools and students?
2. To what extent is disproportionality an issue here in Eagle schools?
3. Tell us about how your leadership has shaped progress in this area.
4. How do you measure success?
5. What steps have you taken and what results have you achieved?
6. What worked and what didn't work, from your perspective? Why?
7. From your perspective what kind of impact have you seen on students? On families? On teachers? On members of your leadership team?

Practitioner Interview Guide

We are taping this interview which will be transcribed later for coding purposes. Your name will not be used in any analysis. If for any reason, you need to leave this focus group, please feel free to leave. Copies of our report will be made available to the district.

We are interested in understanding how your district and your building policies, practices, and people have shaped progress on addressing disproportionality for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

1. What do you understand about the issue of disproportionality and its impact on schools and students?
2. To what extent is disproportionality an issue here in Eagle schools?
3. What is being done to improve results and what results are being achieved?
4. To what extent have you been involved in changing your own practice to address disproportionality?
5. How have your practices changed or what practices have you used to address this issue?
6. What has and hasn't worked from your perspective? Why?
7. From your perspective what kind of impact have you seen on students? On families? On teachers? On administration in your schools and at the district level?

Appendix B: References

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