ALL IN:

Getting to Solutions for Students with Disabilities
Students with disabilities in the District of Columbia are languishing academically. Low rates of academic proficiency, chronic absenteeism, and low graduation rates point to a system that is failing students. Charter schools are THE innovators and with the right mindset, a bold vision, and intentional, systemic shifts, we have the flexibility, autonomy, and smarts to change the outcomes for students with disabilities.

In 2020, the Co-op issued a Call to Action urging schools to take a targeted look at what leads a child to special education and the factors that have led Black students to be identified with disabilities at twice the rate of their White peers.

Our Call to Action notes that words are simply not enough. We must use our resources to combat the systemic racism that exists in every American institution – including special education.

Building on this work, on February 10, 2023, the DC Special Education Cooperative, in partnership with D.C.’s Office of the Ombudsman for Education, Schooltalk, Empower K12, and the Gamba Foundation hosted a Special Education Summit designed to build a deeper understanding of how to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Key staff from 27 charter districts, Superintendent of Education Dr. Christina Grant, community partners, parents, and students gathered to discuss barriers and solutions and commit to prioritizing students with disabilities in an intentional, strategic way.

This report summarizes the key questions and recommendations to emerge from this groundbreaking summit.
Students with Disabilities: The Data Story

Getting to solutions requires that we ground ourselves in data to understand the scope of the challenge. For the summit, we focused on academic achievement and growth, chronic absenteeism, and graduation rates.

Scores on PARCC, as well as growth measures such as MAP and i-Ready show students with disabilities (SwD) underperforming all other subgroups of students.

In order to close these gaps, students with disabilities would need to experience more growth than their non-disabled peers. Unfortunately, the opposite is occurring: students with disabilities are not growing enough to even keep pace with their peers. The gap is widening.

Growth Outcomes

Expected growth from Fall to Spring is 5 instructional months

<table>
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<th>All Sample</th>
<th>At-risk</th>
<th>Not At-risk</th>
<th>SwD</th>
<th>ELL</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>White</th>
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<td>3.2</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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Expected Growth: 5.0
Chronic absenteeism also impacts student performance, as students with disabilities miss more days of school than their non-disabled peers. These factors impact graduation rates for students with disabilities, who are disproportionately underrepresented among students earning high school diplomas.

Summit participants also reflected on the fact that 68% of all students in DC identify as Black or African American, but a disproportionate number of students with disabilities – 79% – are Black or African American.

**BIG IDEAS**

To get at solutions, our summit utilized a World Cafe model in which participants discussed a series of critical and provocative questions through four rounds of facilitated discussions. This model is designed to ensure that the voices and perspectives of diverse participants are all heard and accounted for. Intentionally including students, parents, and teachers along with school and community leaders is essential for driving the work that must be accomplished.

**Beliefs and Mindsets**

The first round focused on the **Beliefs and Mindsets** that impact the success of students with disabilities and lead to disproportionate identification and outcomes. Participants were asked to choose one word describing the underlying beliefs that people have about students with disabilities, and how those beliefs impact the school experience of students with disabilities.

Overwhelmingly, summit participants identified a mindset of **low expectations** and **negativity** toward students with disabilities. Students are routinely characterized as unable, unmotivated, and unwanted.
The belief that students with disabilities are incapable of learning flies in the face of what is true: that 90% of students with disabilities are capable of achieving grade level mastery when provided with the right support.1

The impact of these mindsets “pervades everything.” According to summit participants, “expectations are lower, students are excluded, and limited time, talent, and money is invested” in students with disabilities. These beliefs “become a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’.”

Lower rigor and expectations by teachers harms students’ achievement. A wide body of research tells us that teacher expectations impact student success,2 with high expectations producing higher achievement and low expectations leading to lower achievement.

Low expectations for students with disabilities is hardly a new phenomenon; it was a key driver in the creation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Yet, attitudes have barely shifted despite the legal requirements for students to be educated in the least restrictive environment. Summit participants described isolation and “othering” of students with disabilities, the misguided belief that a separate curriculum should be provided, and the siloing of special education staff and services. General education teachers too often regard students with disabilities as “your students” who are the responsibility solely of special ed teachers, instead of “our students.”

Some high school students who attended the summit said that school for them was “draining,” “complicated,” and “boring,” while others described it as “fun” and said they liked school. But all described being stereotyped as “slow” or “delayed” and said that they were not treated as full community members.

Students described embarrassment at being pulled out of class for services or to take a test, and said they often shied away from asking for the help they knew they needed due to discomfort. One student described feeling like she “has no voice,” while others said that teachers don’t let them learn the way that works best for them. They felt that their grades don’t reflect how hard they are working, and wished that their efforts were acknowledged more.

What does help? Relationships! Students stressed their love for the caseworker who treats them “like family”; who offers them help when they need it instead of “just sitting there watching us struggle,” and provides consistent encouragement.

But that type of loving, supportive relationship was cited as the exception.

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2 “A decade of teacher expectations research.” Johnston, Wildy, and Shand, 2019
Participants also reflected on the disproportionate number of Black students in special education. They wondered how racism and implicit bias is driving identification for special education, and how the intersection of race and disability drives low expectations. They noted a lower tolerance for Black students exhibiting certain behaviors and immediate negative judgements about such students that lead to special education referrals and disproportionate discipline.

Summit participants discussed the need to create culturally relevant materials in the classroom, and to connect more with families and communities.

Context and Systems
The second round explored the Context and Systems in which special education operates and how these structures perpetuate the achievement gap between Black and White students, particularly students with disabilities. Participants were asked what would constitute success in creating environments that enable, rather than disable students. They were also asked to identify barriers to getting there.

Summit participants’ definition of success in creating enabling environments for students with disabilities fell into 4 broad categories:
- Student engagement and empowerment
- Growth and achievement
- Greater individualization for students/
Universal Design for Learning
- Parent engagement

“As a parent, success is when students make connections and are included in general education versus barriers – isolation and marginalization – which happens a lot instead.”

Student Engagement and Empowerment
Many participants said that success would happen when students were “comfortable” and “joyful” in school; when students understood their inherent worth and were empowered to advocate for themselves, including having self-directed involvement in their own day to day needs.

love // compassion // empathy // welcoming // embrace change

In this definition of success, students are engaged in the classroom and excited to come to school. They feel confident enough to take risks and persevere, and they emerge as leaders within the school community. They understand their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and where they need to grow, as well as their personal strengths.

“I have an IEP but I don’t know why I have it and what I need to grow on. Teachers need to tell me what I need to work on so I know how to grow.”

- High School student, Thurgood Marshall Academy
Growth and Achievement
Other participants defined success as improved scores and closing the achievement gap. Many advocated for finding new ways to measure student success beyond PARCC, including widening the way we evaluate performance and student test data so that students’ performance and their progress are both represented accurately. This definition of success includes students exiting out of special education, an area in which DC currently ranks last in the nation.\(^3\)

Individualization/Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
Participants discussed the need to see “ability” in dis/ability, and to put the “I” back into IEP through truly individualizing for students. In this definition of success, educators would know from the start of the school year what each student uniquely needs, and schools would plan for the needs of students with disabilities first, rather than treating them as an afterthought in planning. Teachers would recognize that classrooms that set students with disabilities up for success are classrooms in which everyone thrives. The need to implement Universal Design for Learning – a framework for designing learning experiences that meet the needs of all students\(^4\) – was highlighted by multiple participants, as was encouraging teacher creativity and flexibility.

Parent Engagement
Participants shared that under the current system, too many parents are seen as adversarial when they raise concerns and it is a challenge for parents to go through the special education process. Many parents say they feel “judged” by schools. In particular, marginalized parents feel left out of conversations and decision-making, and disconnected from their schools. Success in this context means prioritizing family and student concerns and facilitating true parent engagement and parent partnerships, as well as connecting families with needed resources.

Barriers
Summit participants identified barriers that stand in the way of achieving these successes.

- Teacher morale is low and has led to high teacher turnover. New teachers often don’t have the skills to successfully meet the needs of students with disabilities. Training and coaching for all teachers – both general and special educators – is a critical need, as is increasing teacher pay to attract and retain high quality teachers.

- Schools lack resources or, conversely, have too many resources that teachers are ill-equipped to navigate. There is a lack of accountability about how resources are used.

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\(^3\) Students with Disabilities in the District of Columbia Landscape Analysis, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2019. Statistic refers to students aged 14-21 exiting special education.

High caseloads make individualization difficult. Special education teachers are expected to provide both instruction and case management; they need a more balanced workload.

Too often the focus is on compliance instead of quality instruction and IEP implementation.

Dedicated aides are expected to work with the highest needs students yet receive meager pay and limited training.

Interventions are not done with fidelity.

Trauma, poverty, hopelessness, and a sense that school is not worthwhile (because students have been made to feel they don’t belong) complicate efforts to support students academically.

A culture of testing causes stressed-out teachers and students who don’t care.

Too many things are done the way they’ve always been done, and those who speak up may experience “blowback.”

Mindsets that see students with disabilities as difficult and create low expectations need to change, and school staff need to listen to and care about what students think and feel. Students and parents need to be invited in as collaborators instead of as adversaries.

“The way you treat a plant, that’s how it’s going to come out. If you want us to come out better, treat us better.”

– Alaesia B, 11th Grade Student
GETTING TO SUCCESS
The final rounds focused on What Should Change – the key systemic shifts that will propel change in individual schools and across the city. The recommendations below reflect themes that were repeatedly identified by summit participants.

Professional Development for All
Schools need to ensure that every staff member understands and can address the needs of students with disabilities:

- School leaders must prioritize the needs of students with disabilities; including receiving training themselves to build the knowledge and skill to guide this work.
- Professional development must start with the work of shifting mindsets that create barriers for students and parents.
- Teachers – especially general education teachers – need a deeper understanding of how to address the needs of all learners; understanding disability categories is simply not enough.
- Barriers between special education and general education teachers must be broken; siloing of specialties harms staff and students.
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) needs to be embedded as a core instructional concept, and teachers need to receive professional development and instructional leadership to ensure they have the necessary skills and support to use the UDL framework.
- Paraprofessionals/aides need improved training to support their work with the highest needs students.

Student-Driven Classrooms and IEPs
Students emphasized that key to their ability to succeed are teachers who truly listen, care, and are responsive to their needs. School leaders acknowledged that student voices have been missing from discussions about what students need; adults make decisions without consulting the very individuals impacted by those decisions.

To address these needs, schools must:

- Center the voices of students in the classroom and throughout the school; ensure student input is sought when decisions are being made
- Prioritize and teach students’ self-advocacy skills; ensure that students understand their IEPs and that the supports and services included in the IEP actually work for the student
- Recognize that students may sometimes self-advocate in ways that teachers and administrators prefer not to hear (“Behavior is Communication”); teachers and administrators still need to listen
- Help build general educators’ comfort in teaching and talking to students with disabilities; foster strong, supportive relationships
- Create spaces for students to become leaders

“Some teachers say ‘My Classroom, My Rules’ so I don’t have a voice there.”
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Summit participants identified a well-functioning MTSS system – a framework that ensures that every student gets the targeted academic and social-emotional supports they need to be successful – as key to changing outcomes for students with disabilities and preventing overidentification of students. In particular, participants cited focusing on high quality, differentiated instruction for all students (Tier 1 support) as a critical need to prevent unnecessary referrals to special education.

Particularly in the aftermath of COVID, schools are seeing an exceptionally high number of referrals to special education, but schools are then ill-equipped to meet the needs of higher numbers of students with IEPs. In addition, when students are referred to special education but ultimately don’t qualify for an IEP, schools lack a system to address the needs that led the student to be referred in the first place.

Schools must:

- Make MTSS a leadership priority
- Create functional MTSS teams and structures with protocols for how those teams look at and use data and for how concerns are brought to the team
- Connect MTSS to teacher training in how to support the whole child; reset expectations around Tier 1 instruction and supports to create classrooms where diverse learners get their needs met
- Improve systems of support by providing meaningful coaching for teachers
- Clarify that MTSS is not to be seen or used as a pipeline to special education

“We don’t offer teachers solutions but just tell them to solve it themselves.”
Data Literacy, Quality, and Access

Data around both academic achievement and school culture needs to inform systemic practice. Staff need training in data literacy, including understanding different types of data, and data needs to be presented to them in a way that is digestible. The data should tell a story that drives decision making – around budgets, staffing, training, and programming.

Participants noted that data also leads to accountability: what doesn’t get measured doesn’t get attention, and currently only special education staff are being held accountable for the progress of students with disabilities.

To reach these outcomes, summit participants agreed that schools must:

- Improve data literacy through professional development
- Strengthen MTSS systems
- Measure school culture and climate, along with academics, to ensure that both receive attention
- Support parents in understanding data

Parent Relationships

Just like students, parents are not a monolith, and they don’t all need the same things. But there was broad agreement that schools need to:

- Prioritize relationship-building with parents through both low-pressure social events and through genuinely listening to parents
- Create transparency about data and decision-making
- Make school events, activities, and opportunities for participation (including expressing concerns) more accessible to marginalized parents
- Help families navigate school systems and access support; invest in parent and family mental health/wellness

Teacher Wellness

Teachers are overworked, underpaid, and exhausted. Special education teachers are expected to teach, case manage, and ensure access to general education curricula for students with disabilities while working in siloed spaces. When teachers burnout and leave after a year or even mid-year, it becomes increasingly difficult to provide high quality instruction to students.

Approaches to improving teacher wellness include:

- Improving collaboration between general education and special education teachers by providing and prioritizing adequate time and space for co-planning
- Increasing teacher and paraprofessional pay

Leadership and System Innovation

Engaged leaders who care about, understand, and prioritize special education at all times – not just when crises occur – are essential to lead this work. Without sustained leadership, implementation of the previous recommendations cannot occur. All sectors need to be involved. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) need to hold schools accountable for achieving results, while also holding themselves accountable for providing schools with the resources and support they need.

Leaders must be at the forefront prioritizing essential changes to ingrained systems by:

- Holding themselves and staff accountable for driving the changes identified as necessary for student success
- Fostering a culture of collaboration
- Ensuring that budget decisions are made with the needs of students with disabilities at the forefront
- Taking a holistic approach to meeting the needs of students and their families, including ensuring mental health needs are addressed, promoting wrap-around services, and engaging parents as partners

There was agreement among participants that as solutions are identified, change needs to occur at the city and LEA leadership levels.
教师、管理人员和其他学校工作人员日复一日地工作到精疲力尽，但因为他们所做的工作是在有缺陷的系统中进行的，因此，这些身心俱劳的努力并不能为我们的残障学生带来成功的结果。

改变结果需要重新设想我们的学校和消除系统性不公。多年来，大量的研究都支持了来自峰会参与者对话的建议。我们不能继续年复一年地回收同样的建议，却无法采取行动。学校必须以紧迫感行动，防止另一代学生经历不可接受的结果。

为了实施峰会的建议，合作社将继续创造空间，让DC特许学校及其选民坐在一起，并通过发展对以下关键问题的答案来推动进展。

- 什么是阻碍和发展和实施专业发展（PD）实践的障碍，这些实践能够转化为残障学生改善的成果？我们如何重新设想专业发展，并创建能够真正带来我们所寻求的改变的PD空间？
- 为了改善为服务残障学生的人员的责任，必须存在哪些基本机制？
- 如何确保所有学校都开发出强大的多级支持系统，优先考虑面向所有学生的基础第一级实践，旨在提供高质量的教学和学习空间？
- 如何在所有利益相关者群体中建立数据素养，以确保数据驱动的决策是实践的核心？
- 我们应该如何在教学和学习过程中启动这些渠道？

合作社在过去20多年中一直在提升残障学生的需求。我们在城市中的深厚根系，结合了我们对问题和解决方案的专家理解，以及我们对所服务学生的坚定不移的信念，将推动我们进入这项工作的下一个阶段。但我们不能单打独斗！你全体加入了吗？

“每一个系统都是在设计上获得其结果的。”

归功于W.Edwards Deming

我们想感谢我们的ALL IN合作伙伴！

- SchoolTalk
- EmpowerK12
- DC Office of Ombudsman for Education
- Gamba Foundation