



Delivering on Equity: Implications for Decision-makers

SWIFT Center

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Abstract

The SWIFT Center will demonstrate how schools can be transformed to provide inclusive educational opportunities for all students. The SWIFT Center will address the key American goal of equal educational opportunity by assisting schools to reorganize in ways that enable them to fully deliver on inclusive, general education for all students—including students with disabilities, students from low-income families, English language learners and students taught the regular grade-level academic curriculum.

SWIFT builds on a long record of research documenting the positive benefits of inclusive approaches to teaching and learning for students with varying aptitudes, prior achievement and advantages or disadvantages. SWIFT offers selected states, districts, and schools a comprehensive set of services and assistance to implement, evaluate and scale up inclusive education in schools and classrooms. Research associated with participating SWIFT schools will be broadly communicated and discussed with education decision-makers.

Introduction

The field of education holds a rich body of literature that supports the basic tenets of inclusive education. That literature has demonstrated, year after year, that when all students have access to the general education curriculum, have the opportunities to develop rich and meaningful social relationships and are provided with needed supports and services, outcomes for everyone improve. The record of research demonstrating the positive effects of inclusive access to general education runs parallel to the history of the Civil Rights Era in our country.



SWIFT: Rooted in Civil Rights and Education Research

Brown v. Board of Education is often cited as the landmark Supreme Court case of the civil rights movement. The Brown decision of “separate is NOT equal” is arguably the link that connects the civil rights movement with the education equity movement. However, more than 60 years after that decision, research continues to show that our schools are more racially segregated now than at the time of the decision. Further, nearly 40 years after the passage of education civil rights legislation directed to disability, significant numbers of students with disabilities are either not included, or only partly included, in the general education activities in schools.

Some may argue that there is no lack of educational opportunities for children and families, all funded with various obligations to federal, state, and local policy. While these opportunities are abundant, access to them is always dependent on two factors: economic power and privilege. Families and communities with less economic power don’t have the same access to high quality educational options as those who have economic power. The SWIFT Center will assist schools and their districts to create equity of access and opportunity for all members of their communities.

Current research on inclusive education tells us that students with disabilities are increasingly educated in the general education environment with positive outcomes. Mcleskey et al.’s (2004, 2010) research results, as well as the Annual Report To Congress on Implementation of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), both show increases in the number of students with disabilities who spend most (80 percent or more) of their school days with peers who do not have disability labels (Toson, 2013). In support of these findings, both qualitative and quantitative research indicate that when kids are included, they experience gains in language skills (Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2001), feelings of membership in the greater school community (Kocklar, West, & Taymans, 2000; Fisher & Meyer, 2002) and expanded peer groups (Kennedy & Itkonen, 1994). Additionally, the National Longitudinal Study of post-school outcomes found graduation rates, independent living and the percentage of students with disabilities who are gainfully employed after high school to be positively related to inclusive versus segregated education placements (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) indicates that as the number of general education courses in which students with identified learning disabilities participation increases, there is a proportionate rise in both their academic and social out-



comes. Waldron, Cole, and Majd (2001), as cited by the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education's 2010 report, found that more students without disabilities made comparable or greater gains in math and reading when taught in inclusive settings versus traditional classrooms where no students with disabilities are included. This suggests that inclusive classrooms provide greater access to the general education curriculum in ways that benefit all students.

Educational researchers have documented concerns with segregated education and the benefits of inclusive education for the past forty years (Dunn, 1968; Brown & York, 1974). Additionally, federal laws put in place to protect the rights of marginalized populations in our schools from the 1970s through today have placed general class placement with typical peers of the same age for all students as the legal presumption of practice (EHA, 1975; IDEA, 2000; NCLB 2001). The academic and social/behavioral benefits associated with inclusive education (Blackorby, et. al., 2004) increased independence and social relationships (Fisher & Meyer, 2002) as well as post-school employment and community living gains (Belanger, Brown, et al., 2009).

The SWIFT framework moves schools toward operating as a fully integrated organization that discourages the formulation of "silos" (i.e., separate categorical systems for discrete populations within a school) and facilitates collaborative teaching at all grades and levels of intervention. SWIFT considers inclusive education as part of a theory of change guiding school reform (Burrello, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Sailor, 2013) as well as an organizational framework that enables teachers and schools to teach all students, including those with significant disabilities, within the physical spaces, routines, social interactions and schedules that are offered and expected for all other students. When a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is used, and more intensive interventions are designed for either academic or behavioral needs, students receive them in addition to participating in the general education instruction offered to everyone else. The key is the fluidity and flexibility of grouping students based on individual need without restriction or qualification based on disability label or type. The SWIFT framework not only combines academic and behavioral support systems, but also guides change in policy, finance and leadership structures to ensure that no organizational barriers impede the delivery of evidence-based practices for all students (Sailor, Wolf, et al., 2009). Teachers and other staff learn how to collaborate to effectively and efficiently deliver general education, behavior supports and more intensive interventions and specialized services so that funding sources and labels of staff are not the sole definers of their particular role within the school.

Equity Framework

While the academic literature holds important value, it does not function in a vacuum to drive change in the classroom. Policies—statutes, regulations, rules, and practices—serve as other important influences to affect improvement in education. Existing laws have deep roots within our country—from the U.S. Constitution to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1991)—and equity is a central intent of these laws. In writing the IDEA, Congress stated:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. 1400 U.S.C. 600 (c)(1)

Likewise, in crafting the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (reauthorizing the ESEA), Congress reiterated:

The purpose of this title 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. This purpose can be accomplished by....meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation's highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance. 20 U.S.C 6301 § 1001 (1)

The SWIFT Center holds equity as a core value: equity of opportunity, equity of access and equity for all. This idea of equity is not simply reserved for students: the SWIFT value on equity extends to the professionals, family and community members who support all children in the educational environment. Equity, as it pertains to professionals, translates to access to high quality technical support and professional development opportunities to acquire the skills to support all students.

As noted above, the body of literature and rich federal legislative context, as well as judicial interpretations of those laws and regulations, puts general education as the best place for all kids, period. Surprisingly, research that examines a school's capacity and

professional development needs for initiating and sustaining systemic inclusive education is limited (Toson, 2013). Supporting educators to actively engage in the transformation process of their own school—helping to harness the resources of all stakeholders to build effective multi-tiered systems of support—that is the work of the SWIFT Center.

What does equity look like for stakeholders?

- **Students**—ALL students have access to high quality general education curriculum, taught with fidelity, with the supports and services that each student needs to be successful academically, behaviorally and socially
- **Educators**—school staff, including all school employees who are empowered to support all children by utilizing all available resources, including access to high quality professional development opportunities to support their own skills
- **Administrators**—leaders who distribute responsibilities within a team, utilize data in all decision-making and instill processes for responsiveness
- **Parents**—parents have genuine opportunities to partner with schools at all levels of decision-making (from administrative to student)
- **Community Members**—access to strong, on-going, collaborative partnerships between the school and the community at-large

Systemic Focus

Schoolwide reform efforts have been underway since the early 1980s with varying degrees of impact. And while strategies have taken different approaches, from top-down, state-based directive approaches, to bottom-up building-based approaches, reform strategies have done little to affect meaningful systemic change (Smith & O’Day, 1991). Early on in the education reform movement researchers identified flaws within a school-based change model. These flaws, when exacerbated by scale, became significant barriers and, in the case of communities without power, created serious inequities for children and communities (Smith & O’Day, 1991). While barriers to schoolwide transformation may be different according to different stakeholder groups, district administrators may have concerns about meeting the strict academic and behavioral requirements of federal and state laws; building administrators may feel that they are not empowered to make significant schoolwide reforms; educators may feel that they are not supported well enough in the classroom to make changes; parents and community members may experience uncertainty due to a lack of meaningful engagement, all stakeholders will feel some anxiety and burn out due to education reform fatigue if all dimensions of a systems capacity are not developed (Toson, 2013). These are barriers that with guidance and ac-



cess to systemic models of success can be shifted to opportunities for meaningful and sustainable change that will improve the outcomes for all members of a school community.

The SWIFT Center emphasizes a systems approach that considers multiple levels of engagement and support: state, district, school, classroom, individual students, families and community. The effectiveness of SWIFT implementation is related to the extent that a common vision and set of principles are used to guide decision-making and implementation efforts. The goals and capacity-building elements of a SWIFT approach are grounded in principles of prevention including whole school reform, evidence-based practices, teaming and evaluation. The SWIFT theory of change holds that school turnaround, defined as significantly increased academic achievement on the part of students at all grade levels and all subgroups, will occur when school reform efforts reflect a set of key organizational features (Morsback-Sweeney, et al, SWIFT Fidelity of Implementation Tool, 2013). The features are organized into five domains: Administrative Leadership, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Inclusive Educational Framework, Family, Community Engagement and Partnerships and Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice.

Meaningful schoolwide transformation encounters significant challenges at many different levels. In this brief we identified some of those challenges, which stem from work that occurs in silos. Below we offer initial suggestions that will allow whole school communities to impact equity driven change for all students. In future briefs we will explore these topics in more depth.

Getting Started

The reality is that policy isn't a spectator sport. All stakeholders have the opportunity to use policy as a vehicle to support and sustain good practice in their communities. SWIFT provides that opportunity for parents, educators, administrators, community members and others to engage in a meaningful process of identifying, aligning and eliminating barriers to good practice. Building an environment that supports schoolwide transformation requires local education agencies, individual schools, and their surrounding communities to embrace a model of equitable analysis, following a systemic capacity-building framework. By working from a model of data-based decision-making—asking important questions without a presumption of the answers—school communities will be better prepared to examine their environments with an eye



toward finding answers that drive obtainable results, instead of laying blame. In future briefs the SWIFT Center will examine specific issues and make thorough recommendations based upon findings.

A SWIFT School will have specific attributes that support policy alignment, full implementation in target schools and sustainability of schoolwide transformation. Critical attributes of SWIFT schools include the following:

- All stakeholders use policy and policy alignment to empower the school community to implement SWIFT.
- School leadership works with the Local Education Agency (LEA) to identify and ameliorate policy barriers to SWIFT implementation.
- School-based policies are aligned to support the implementation of evidence-based academic and behavioral instruction.
- The LEA policy framework removes barriers to the implementation of the SWIFT theory of change by applying continuous improvement-focused monitoring processes.
- The policy framework includes the use of College and Career Ready Standards and curricula and student assessments aligned to the Standards.
- Interventions are scaled up for use at the district and state levels.
- The LEA has an active means of ensuring sustainability of SWIFT transformational efforts.
- The LEA has the capacity to extend SWIFT practices to additional schools within the district.

Conclusion

The SWIFT Center in partnership with states, districts and schools offers great potential for meaningful change in how schooling in the U.S. is organized to deliver equity of educational opportunity. Under a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Education, selected states, districts and schools will work with the SWIFT Center over a five-year period (2012-2017) to implement the initial model, evaluate effects on practices and student outcomes and plan for sustainability and scale-up. For state and local education decision-makers, SWIFT schools have strong potential for fulfilling the promise for all students to realize their potential as envisioned in the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The plans for SWIFT schools are based on extensive research and the results from implementation over the next five years will offer decision-makers evidence from a comprehensive model for systemic education improvement.

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