

All Means All: Building Knowledge for Inclusive Schoolwide Transformation

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Abstract

The Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center identified six schools, nominated and screened by leaders in the field of inclusive education and school reform using a systematic process, and conducted in-depth analyses of these schools to build knowledge and inform implementation of inclusive schoolwide reform. The present study synthesizes findings across five lines of inquiry (classroom practices, teacher and administrator perspectives, student perspectives, family and community perspectives, and supports for students with the most significant needs) that were part of the SWIFT Center's analysis of these schools. The primary themes are organized around (a) how inclusion is defined and practiced, (b) perspectives of inclusion from key stakeholders, and (c) exemplars of inclusive practices. Implications for future research and practice are described.

Keywords

inclusion, school reform, disabilities

A growing body of scholarship examines how schools can promote inclusion and academic, behavioral, and social success for ALL students, including those with the most significant disabilities (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Sailor, 2009). Multiple models and strategies germane to supporting the academic, behavioral, and social learning and development of students with diverse support needs and with and without disability labels have been examined and best practices identified (Burrello, Sailor, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2013; Lane, Oakes, & Menzies, 2014; Sailor & Roger, 2005; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013; Vogel, 2010). However, issues related to fidelity of implementation and sustainability in the school context remain vexing (Cook & Odom, 2013). While the field of implementation science is growing, it is still in its infancy in considering how to promote wide-scale adoption, implementation, and measurement of outcomes (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

The Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT; see Figure 1) integrates research on inclusive educational practices and critical features of systemic school reform as a framework for schools, districts, and state education agencies to promote lasting and sustainable change. SWIFT is based on decades of research and technical assistance practice (Sailor, McCart, & Choi, 2012; Sailor & Roger, 2005; Sailor et al., 2006), and is organized into five evidence-based domains each with a supportive body of research literature (McCart, Sailor, Bezdek, & Satter, 2014). These domains are (a) administrative leadership, (b) multi-tiered systems of supports, (c) integrated educational framework, (d) family and community

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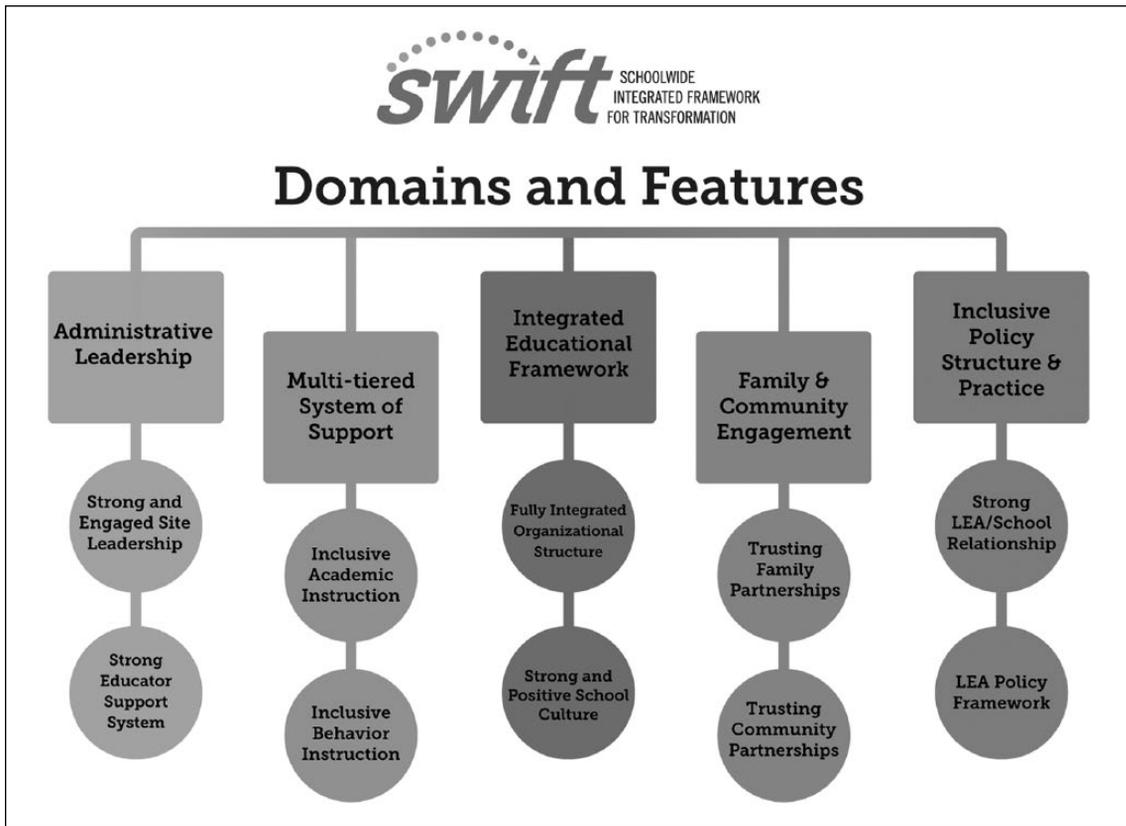


Figure 1. SWIFT domains and features.
Note. LEA = local educational agency.

engagement, and (e) inclusive policy structure and practice. These domains and their identification and operationalization are described in greater detail in subsequent sections and in other sources (McCart et al., 2014).

Although evidence-based practices exist within each of these domains (McCart et al., 2014), little is known about how schools begin the process of transforming their practices to support inclusion and academic, social, and behavioral success for all students. The SWIFT Center received funding from the U.S. Department of Education to work with 64 schools in 16 districts in 5 states to provide intensive technical assistance for implementing the SWIFT framework and to collect data to demonstrate the degree to which the framework is doable, replicable, sustainable, scalable, and results in highly valued outcomes for all students, including students with the most extensive support needs. However, prior to beginning these implementation activities, the SWIFT Center chose to examine other schools that were currently implementing inclusive practices to better understand the factors that affected their implementation. Although many schools have struggled to implement inclusive practices, some schools have emerged as leaders in this area.

The present study and the manuscripts included in this Special Issue serve as part of SWIFT's appreciative inquiry into inclusive schoolwide transformation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Appreciative inquiry values the best of what is, envisions what might be, engages in dialogue about what should be, and innovates around what will be. Specifically, the SWIFT Center identified six schools, nominated and screened by leaders in the field of inclusive education and school reform using a systematic process, and conducted in-depth analyses of these schools. By developing a greater understanding of their successes (and struggles) during their independent implementation of inclusive education, the hope was to inform implementation

efforts, including those now taking place among SWIFT partner states, districts, and schools. Over the course of an academic year, multiple forms of data were collected across three visits to these schools, referred to as Knowledge Development Sites (KDS). Five primary lines of inquiry guided the KDS study: classroom practices, teacher and administrator perspectives, student perspectives, family and community perspectives, and supports for students with the most significant needs. The present article provides an analysis and integration of the findings across these five lines of inquiry, and subsequent articles in this Special Issue provide more in-depth analyses of the specific lines of inquiry. Three questions guided the overall analysis and data collection:

Research Question 1: How do the KDS define inclusion and embody it in their school practices?

Research Question 2: What are perspectives of administrators, teachers, students, and parents on inclusive school transformation activities?

Research Question 3: How, and to what degree, do the schools implement the SWIFT domains?

Method

Participants

Site selection. Six KDS were selected through a systematic nomination and screening process that included surveys, interviews, and site visits. The study design established three overall selection criteria to ensure diverse perspectives on inclusion: geographic diversity located in at least three different states, a range in urbanicity with at least one urban and one rural school, and age diversity with both elementary and middle schools. High schools were not eligible for the study based on the scope of the funding (K-8th grade schools).

Nomination. To develop a sufficiently broad pool of candidates, SWIFT Center's National Leadership Consortium, comprised of nationally recognized researchers and technical assistance providers, used a key informant strategy to nominate 37 schools. The 37 schools were identified by the national leaders as meeting *some or all* of the following conditions or practices that articulate key ideas represented in the SWIFT framework:

1. No segregated classrooms/programs for students with disabilities,
2. Inclusion of students with significant support needs across school activities,
3. Natural proportions of students with disabilities within the school,
4. Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)/Response to Intervention (Rtl) with Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) applied in all tiers,
5. Distributed leadership among staff, and
6. Strong family and community engagement.

Next, to narrow the pool of schools, SWIFT staff screened for two additional criteria associated with exemplary status, leaving 32 schools for consideration:

1. Achievement or growth rates among students with disabilities on state assessments that were significantly higher than the state average achievement or growth rate,
2. Proportion of students with disabilities was at least equal to the proportion of students with disabilities in the state.

Staff contacted school administrators to determine their interest, to inform them about requirements for participation, and describe benefits of participation. Thirty schools agreed to move to the next stage of selection: a survey and phone interview.

Survey and interviews. The 30 schools completed a brief online survey and a phone interview of the principal or member of the school leadership team. The survey included 19 items about basic composition of the

school, service models for students with disabilities, and state achievement data. A 12-question interview protocol was designed to follow-up on survey questions. Staff made notes during each interview, and two other staff independently used these notes and survey to complete a *KDS Scoring Summary*. Staff reviewed the strengths of each KDS and recommended 11 schools for further consideration.

School Visit 1. A team of three to five researchers and technical assistance providers visited the 11 schools, conducted guided interviews, and informally administered several assessment tools. Interviews probed for information on how and to what degree the school had implemented practices associated with SWIFT domains and impacts these practices had on the school, teachers, and students. School leadership teams, teachers, students with and without disabilities, and family/community members participated in these interviews. To gain a picture of a school and its systems of support, the team used several assessments of effective practices associated with inclusive school transformation (described subsequently). These measures were not implemented with full fidelity to assessor instructions because of the brevity of the visits. Thus, results were only used to inform the selection of KDS. SWIFT staff compiled and summarized assessment data for each school. Team members commented on strengths, weaknesses, and knowledge that could be learned from each school.

Selection. SWIFT co-directors and selected members of the National Leadership Consortium reviewed the schools' data and found four schools with consistently positive recommendations from the teams and comparatively high assessment scores; these schools were unanimously selected as KDS. Diversity criteria were applied to select two more schools. These two schools had slightly lower assessment scores, but were still noted by the teams as strong in specific features, namely, family engagement, implementation of MTSS including RTI, and district-level support.

Site characteristics. Table 1 provides demographic data and student achievement scores, aggregated across the six KDS schools to protect confidentiality. As the selection design intended, the KDS characteristics vary widely. For example, some schools primarily serve student populations that are ethnically diverse, while others are more homogeneous. The schools also ranged in their present levels of student achievement on state reading and math assessments. This diversity of the six KDS represents a strength of the KDS inquiry, and also provides directions for future research. Specifically, we aggregated findings across the schools, looking for commonalities to inform inclusive schoolwide transformation. We were unable to disaggregate results to the school level because of our agreements with the schools to aggregate the data and protect confidentiality. Therefore, future work is needed to look at specific school-level factors (e.g., elementary vs. middle; student population demographics, etc.) in larger samples of schools implementing reform.

Data Collection Procedures

To develop knowledge about inclusive practices, teams visited each school two more times in the spring and fall of 2013. These visits were longer than Visit 1, lasting between 3 and 4 days. The teams varied by site and were composed of three to five researchers and technical assistance providers. They used multiple forms of data collection, including interviews, observations, focus groups, and assessments. The findings across data sources were aggregated for the present analyses. The data collected during each visit, including Visit 1, shaped decisions about data collection activities at subsequent visits. Table 2 summarizes how the multiple data sources contributed to the three primary questions.

Visits. During Visit 2, the team conducted classroom observations and focus groups for multiple stakeholders (i.e., general and special education teachers, administrators, and family and community members). Schools identified the focus group participants based on two researcher-provided criteria: (a) people with a depth of knowledge of the school's inclusion model, but also with a range of experiences (positive, negative, and neutral), and (b) to minimize selection bias by avoiding members of existing groups (e.g., leadership team), when possible. To allow for free discussion of ideas, the focus group composition separated

Table 1. Aggregate Knowledge Development Sites Prevalence and Achievements by Demographic Characteristic for 2011-2012 Academic Year.

Demographic characteristics	Prevalence ranges (% of all students)	Student achievement (percent of students that meet or exceed grade-level state assessments standards)	
		Reading/English Language Arts (%)	Math (%)
All students	—	44-69	50-75
Students with a disability	8-27	35-52	30-50
Students who are economically disadvantaged	12-54	18-61	33-61
Students learning English	2-15	21	25
Student ethnic categories			
White	27-90	46-88	66-80
Black or African American	4-24	35-67	28-77
Hispanic or Latino	4-24	53-69	42-75
Asian	0.4-10	62	61
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	<1	—	—
American Indian or Alaskan Native	<1	—	—
Two or more categories	6-11	40-79	60-61

Table 2. Knowledge Development Sites Study Data Sources by Research Question.

Data sources	Research questions		
	1	2	3
Site selection (survey, phone interviews, Visit 1 report of strengths and opportunities)	X	—	X
Assessment of practices (Visits 1 and 3)	—	—	X
Site visit notes (Visits 2 and 3 interview notes, field notes, team meeting notes)	X	X	X
Focus groups (Visits 2 and 3 for family, general teachers, special education teachers, administrators, other support staff, students with disabilities, students without disabilities)	X	X	X
Classroom observations (Visits 2 and 3)	X	—	X
Individual student observations (Visit 3)	X	—	X

some types of stakeholders (e.g., teachers and administrators were not combined). Members of teams who had experience in conducting focus groups led the sessions. For consistency across KDS, leaders used an interview guide developed for each stakeholder group.

Staff who conducted Visit 2 classroom observations used a systematic protocol to document supports for learning and participation in inclusive classrooms (Morningstar & Shogren, 2013). Across Visits 2 and 3, 65 classroom observations were conducted, with each observation lasting an average of 38 min. In addition, members of the team formally and informally met with students, staff, family, and community members. Team members completed field notes and a visit summary individually and as a group, highlighting key things learned as well as strengths and opportunities for growth in the school's inclusion model.

During Visit 3, four data collection activities occurred: student focus groups, assessments of implementation of best practices (this time completed with fidelity to the assessment protocol), classroom observations, and individual student observations. Unique to Visit 3 were the individual student observations. Each school identified three or four students with severe disabilities, defined as students with significant support needs who took alternate state assessments and who were experiencing success in an inclusive school. In each school, a single member of the team conducted the individual student observations. Across the six schools, three team members observed 18 focal students (M age = 9 years, SD = 2.5; males = 16) for

Table 3. Assessment Data From Visit 3.

School code	SWIFT-FIT overall score (%)	RTI essential components (total %)	RTI essential components mean response (out of 5)	Culturally responsive schools (total %)	PBIS benchmarks of quality (total %)	OHI score (500 is average)	BAT Foundations (total %)	BAT Tier 2 (total %)	BAT Tier 3 (total %)
School A	—	90	4.5	76	97	657	90	90	0
School B	—	85	4.3	86	76	695	72	49	79
School C	—	—	—	61	62	—	84	20	66
School D	67	—	—	—	—	611	—	—	—
School E	66	84	4.2	92	90	—	84	74	97
School F	45	78	3.9	79	75	655	—	—	—

Note. Cells without scores indicate the assessment was not administered at that school. SWIFT-FIT = Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation: Fidelity of Implementation Tool; RTI = Response to Intervention; PBIS = Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; OHI = Organizational Health Index; BAT = Benchmarks for Advanced Tiers.

approximately 2 hr each in diverse class and instructional activities using a standard field note protocol developed to allow for analysis across observations. These students had a range of primary disability labels including autism ($n = 11$), orthopedic impairment ($n = 2$), visual impairment ($n = 1$), intellectual disability ($n = 2$), co-occurring autism and hearing impairment ($n = 1$), and other health impairment ($n = 1$); and mean ratings of support needs for overall functioning of 3.38 (range = 2-4) and support needs for learning of 3.41 (range = 2-4) on 5-point scale (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). In addition, teams formally and informally met with students, staff, family, and community members throughout their visits. The team synthesized notes and obtained updated data on school demographics and performance on state assessments. They completed, as a group, a summary of each visit, again highlighting key things learned and strengths and opportunities for growth.

During Visit 3, the assessments completed during Visit 1 were repeated with attention to the administration protocols. The assessments targeted domains associated with SWIFT and included assessments of school climate using the Organizational Health Inventory (Hoy, 2003a, 2003b), cultural responsiveness with the Culturally Responsive Schools Self-Assessment (Richards, Artiles, Klingner, & Brown, 2005), RTI implementation with the RTI Essential Components Integrity Worksheet (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011), and positive behavior intervention and supports implementation with the School-Wide Benchmarks of Quality (Revised; Kincaid, Childs, & George, 2010) and the Benchmarks of Advanced Tiers (Anderson et al., 2013). The team also administered a draft version of the SWIFT: Fidelity of Implementation Tool (SWIFT-FIT; Morsbach Sweeney et al., 2013), a tool under development during the study as an assessment of a school's fidelity of implementation of the core domains and features of SWIFT framework. The results from Visit 3 are presented in Table 3. All schools that completed assessments scored in the very high range on measures of school climate. More variability in MTSS utilization is evident, as indicated by scores on RTI Essential Components Integrity Worksheet (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011) as well as the Benchmarks for Advanced Tiers (BAT; Anderson et al., 2013). For example, some schools emphasized schoolwide PBIS systems as shown in Benchmarks of Quality scores, but did not focus as strongly on Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions as shown in BAT Tier 2 and Tier 3 (classroom and individualized supports) scores, while others focused across all levels of implementation. The three schools that completed a pilot version of the SWIFT-FIT, a measure of fidelity of implementation to SWIFT features, scored in the midrange (45%-67%).

Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, the present article presents an integrated analysis of all data collected through the SWIFT KDS study. Specifically, to address the three research questions described previously, we synthesized findings across the five lines of inquiry that comprised the overall KDS study (classroom practices, teacher and administrator perspectives, student perspectives, family and community perspectives, and

supports for students with the most significant needs) as well as examined all field notes, assessment data, and other data sources not directly connected to one of the lines of inquiry. We organized our analysis around our three guiding research questions and engaged in a systematic analysis of each of the data sources around the three research questions. Specifically, the first and third author—using appreciative inquiry as a lens to view the data sources—reviewed each data source and organized the findings around the three research questions. Then within each research question, the data sources were analyzed to identify key themes from the findings. The first and third author reviewed the data sources iteratively, using a constant comparative method (Patton, 2002) until consensus was achieved regarding the key findings within each research question, which were written in narrative form. Then, as a form of member checking, the second and fourth author as leaders in SWIFT and in the selection of the KDS, reviewed the narrative, and provided input to clarify the key findings.

Values Guiding the Knowledge Development Analyses

An important feature of data analyses is our commitment to protect confidentiality of schools, staff, and students and their families. To honor this commitment, we adhere to our Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols by refraining from using school names and by presenting data in aggregate across schools with de-identified examples of practices or perspectives to give context.

A second important fact to remember about the study design, analyses, and findings is that the KDS inclusion initiatives pre-date the SWIFT framework and technical assistance resources. Some schools had support from their local universities and national leaders in inclusion, but by and large, the schools constructed and implemented inclusive practices on their own.

Third, because KDS are learning organizations, we share general discussion about future growth and development opportunities suggested by KDS aggregate data, particularly around implementation of best practices related to the *where*, *how*, and *what* of inclusion. We present these successes and opportunities for growth and development not only to inform intensive technical assistance but also to provide direction for the field and advancing the knowledge of researchers and practitioners.

Key Findings

As an appreciative inquiry, we present in our key findings descriptions of “the best of what is” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) to be instructive to other schools as they implement inclusive school reforms. This article integrates data across all sources to provide a holistic picture of key findings organized by our three guiding questions: (a) How do KDS define inclusion and embody it in their school practices? (b) What are perspectives of administrators, teachers, students, and parents on inclusive school transformation activities? (c) How, and to what degree, do the schools implement SWIFT domains? Subsequent articles in this Special Issue focus specifically on the four lines of inquiry (classroom practices, teacher and administrator perspectives, student perspectives, family and community perspectives, and supports for students with the most significant needs), and in the present analysis, we present overall findings across data sources.

How Do KDS Define Inclusion and Embody It in Their School Practices?

Definitions of inclusion. A school’s definition of inclusion shapes how classrooms and resources are organized to support students. In focus groups and in interviews, KDS stakeholders tended to define inclusion primarily in line with two waves in the history of inclusive education that emphasized *where* and *how* students learn (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shank, 2004; Wehmeyer, 2009). The first wave, *where* students learn, addressed how to change prevailing segregated educational models. The second wave added focus on *how* students learn, that is, how students with disabilities can be effectively taught in inclusive settings through such methods as co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and family–professional partnerships. A more recent third wave of inclusion introduced the issue of *what* students learn, particularly how students can access challenging general education curricular content and instructional practices that facilitate learning.

The KDS that defined inclusion primarily by *where* students are taught focused on how they eliminated or were making progress toward eliminating separate classrooms. They described their inclusion models as using multiple learning spaces for all students based on student needs, rather than disability label or special education eligibility. Other KDS focused on *how* they delivered inclusive education and emphasized such teaching arrangements as co-teaching, team planning time, and, in some settings, class within a class models where students with specific support needs received instruction in small groups in the general education classroom as an alternative to separate classrooms. *What* students learn, that is, access to the general education curricular content, did not emerge as frequently in KDS field notes and interviews. These differences in definitions likely reflect the stages of implementation or understanding of inclusion at each KDS.

Inclusive practices: Culture. All the KDS inclusive practices are firmly rooted in their school cultures. Every data source clearly communicated that all members of the schools held a strong belief that all students should be valued and have access to supports they need to be successful. Diverse stakeholders in focus groups and in field notes repeatedly voiced the concept “all means all,” and school structures and populations overtly reflected this ideal through such statements as, “There is nothing called special education. Every child receives it,” and “We recognize everyone learns differently. Our goal is to benefit all students. We do not group based on ability because it says one ability has higher value than another. We celebrate differences.”

In many contexts, inclusion conceptually extended beyond disability to encompass other forms of diversity, including language and culture, and even teacher labels and groupings. As one administrator put it, “it seemed a natural part of the educational process for all students to receive individualized support.” Teachers were no longer “cross-categorical special education teachers” or “life skills teachers”; instead, teachers were just teachers.

Another theme was inclusion is a “non-negotiable” commitment at the school. Schools emphasized the importance of everyone being on the same page about inclusion, including school staff and families. This sentiment was expressed in such comments as “We have a culture of sharing responsibility and serving all kids. Kids belong to all of us” and “It’s just the way we do it—not even a possibility that it would be any different.”

KDS identified some challenges they overcame when they began their commitment to inclusion. For example, when schools shifted paraprofessional roles from one-on-one to whole classroom support “some parents were upset about all the changes.” One school administrator responded to the concern, saying “we had to stick together on our focus . . . have many conversations with parents . . . and central office must support the changes.” Another described how as new families moved into the district the school continually built up their understanding and support for the inclusive culture.

Educator buy-in to inclusion is also a vital cultural condition. One school leader, referring to teachers said, “When we started this [inclusion] most people did not want these changes. . . . It has been a true culture shift.” As with families, the process of gaining buy-in was ongoing as new staff joined the school or district. “Initially they don’t filter everything through the inclusive lens, and we have to teach them.” Some schools made it a practice to recruit leaders who believed in inclusion. Likewise, KDS identified central office or district buy-in as important to their inclusive practices. Those schools with strong district buy-in and support did not have to find “work arounds” to district policies that did not align with their inclusive culture.

Inclusive practices: Co-teaching. Some KDS adopted co-teaching models in all classrooms or in several classrooms at each grade level (Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015). The schools accomplished collaborative teaching by changing job descriptions of teachers who were initially hired to serve in separate settings, enabling them to serve in a co-teaching or supporting role in a general education classroom. Other KDS worked to organize supports for students who needed more intensive intervention not based on disability label, but on student need. One KDS described specific policies regarding the number of students with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) who could be included in a classroom to promote natural proportions of students with disabilities in classrooms. Schools also identified that they used paraprofessionals in several ways, including supporting any student with a need, often delivering direct instruction to students while a general or special education teacher took primary responsibility for the teaching and learning process.

Challenges that KDS had to overcome to fully implement collaborative teaching models included reconciling inclusive practices with related services delivered by district personnel outside the general education classroom. Some KDS, particularly those further along in their inclusive school reform activities or that had more district support, were able to adopt policies making elimination of these pull-out services “non-negotiable” regardless of who the service provider was. These KDS staff reported always asking, “Why can’t we teach this in the general education room?” and indicated pull-out actions had to either accelerate student learning or provide very unique supports for students in severe crisis for a period of time. In another case, a segregated classroom remained, primarily to teach life skills to students with the most significant support needs. This KDS described their vision for fully reconfiguring resources to eliminate this separation and were working toward that end.

Overall, KDS demonstrated clear, strong cultures that valued inclusion and had high expectations for all students, regardless of their support needs. No KDS thought they were doing a “perfect job,” and all viewed themselves as learning, growing communities with the hope of being “research to practice sites, where we hold ourselves accountable for latest and greatest” ways of meeting students’ needs.

What Are Perspectives of Key Stakeholders?

To address perspectives of key stakeholders, focus groups were conducted with (a) administrators and teachers, (b) parents and community members, and (c) students with and without disability labels. These perspectives are more deeply examined in other articles (Francis et al., 2015; Gross et al., in press; Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, & Turnbull, 2015; Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, & Haines, 2015; Shogren et al., 2015); here, we briefly describe key findings from focus groups, field notes, and school and classroom observations, synthesizing common issues across stakeholder groups.

Administrators and teachers. Frequently brought up by administrators and teachers were ways that teachers worked together and key values and patterns that defined their collaborations, such as using data to determine student instructional groupings, evaluating collaborative instruction, and building roles for and relationships with families (Kozleski et al., 2015). Six themes weave through these topics: (a) importance of defining and organizing around inclusive education, (b) building capacity of people to understand and implement components of a system of inclusive education, (c) understanding the context of inclusive education in schools and districts, (d) the role of family support and communication with families, (e) how inclusive education affects students, and (f) need for professional learning opportunities.

Family and community members. An overriding theme in the family discussions was importance of school culture (Francis et al., 2015; Haines et al., 2015). Participants highlighted the importance of guiding beliefs, values, and attitudes related to inclusion that permeated all aspects of the schools. Discussions emphasized communication among parents and teachers, suggesting the high value of frequent, high-quality, culturally sensitive, and reciprocal communication strategies. Family members identified barriers to partnerships and inclusion, including issues related to their own time and ability to collaborate and communicate, as well as differences in definition of inclusion across stakeholders. Despite these issues, parents of students with and without disabilities identified strong benefits of inclusion for all students, particularly increased classroom staffing and acceptance of diversity.

Community members talked about two benefits of inclusion: improved student interactions and improved future communities (Gross et al., in press; Haines et al., 2015). They described school–community partnerships as reciprocal relationships with benefits both to community partners and to the entire school. They cited several factors that supported such partnerships, including principal leadership, an open door policy, teacher commitment to student success, teacher support, and communication among partners. Community partners were able to identify strategies that supported inclusion, including use of assistive technology; consistent, knowledgeable staff; teacher training; use of universal design for learning (UDL); strong principal leadership; co-teaching; fostering friendships; problem solving; and using student strengths. They identified barriers to inclusion such as limited financial resources, replicating school culture, willingness to collaborate, and leaving the old way of doing things.

Students. Like family members, student discussions were grounded in school culture and the critical importance of school norms, values, and expectations that promote inclusion (Shogren et al., 2015). Three primary themes emerged from focus groups that included both students with and without disabilities: (a) teachers and administrators fostered a sense of belonging, (b) the inclusion model supported all students getting what they needed in the classroom, and (c) school, classroom, and individual practices promoted success. Examples of these practices were as follows: clear school and classroom expectations, co-teaching, promoting self-determination, and multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (e.g., UDL).

Overall stakeholder perspectives. All stakeholder groups emphasized the critical role of a strong school culture defined by inclusion and an emphasis on the *where* and *how* of inclusion. The value of supporting all students in general education classrooms was a recurrent theme, and discussions centered on how professionals worked together and how professionals and families worked together to support a positive school culture. Each school had a strong school culture with clear values of inclusion and supports for all.

How, and to What Degree, Do the Schools Implement the SWIFT Domains?

KDS were selected because they demonstrated excellence in one or more of SWIFT domains. Their implementation of these domains, however, was not directly linked to a SWIFT framework, but instead each school's local understanding of inclusion. Thus, we did not expect they would have fidelity of implementation across all SWIFT features; rather, our intention was to learn about their practices and experiences in implementing the best practices by which the SWIFT framework is defined. Overall, data from assessments, observations, and field notes suggest that KDS strongly emphasized several features of SWIFT, most notably the fully integrated organizational structure and a strong and positive school culture. They implemented other SWIFT features in different ways, depending on school culture and contextual considerations relevant to each school.

Even as we begin to compare KDS practices with SWIFT domains, we reiterate, KDS were not attempting to follow a SWIFT framework. Yet, in answer to our guiding questions, we examine congruence between their practices and SWIFT domains. In one way, this analysis provides information on the social validity of the SWIFT domains, as well as areas of success and ongoing growth in KDS, which have significant implications for the field in devising methods of supporting schools engaged in inclusive school transformation.

Administrative leadership. The roles of principals and school leadership teams were extensively described as key to inclusive reforms. Members of school communities also highlighted the importance of professional development and opportunities to learn and grow together around the schools' key values.

Strong and engaged site leadership. All KDS had a strong principal whose personality and commitment to students, their families, and faculties were palpable. Commonly used words to describe these principals were energetic, passionate, and devoted. We heard such comments as, "[Principal] makes a huge difference in how the culture of this school is. I've heard parents say wherever [principal] goes, I will go" and "[Principal] welcomes everyone as they enter the building, provides personal attention, knows students and staff, and checks in on how kids did on the bus or over the weekend."

KDS exhibited a sense of community that led to collective work around inclusive education, with teachers excited about coming to work and students excited about learning. Inclusive cultures influenced choices principals made regarding resource allocation. For example, one leadership team described how their school had the same resources as other schools (which were not inclusive) but that their principal's vision for inclusive education led to resources being used differently with input from all stakeholders. KDS principals not only provided clear direction for teachers but also empowered them to engage in shared decision making, which was described by one person as the "professionalization of teachers." Principals created opportunities for teachers to be leaders, often through building-level teams. For example, in one school,

grade-level teachers are in teams of five and have a common planning time. Interventionists [special education teachers] are connected with grade level teams and their schedules allow them to be at planning times with [general educators] and helped facilitate collaboration and planning. Co-teachers are able to create specially designed instructional strategies, which creates a spillover effect for all students in the room.

In another KDS, such meetings used to be viewed as “have to” and now are “get to” events. This shift in perspective was attributed to a new understanding about why they were meeting and to more effective structures for their collaborations.

All KDS highlighted the importance of reviewing data to support all students. Teachers consistently reported that team structures allowed them to be innovative and “step outside the box.” They felt that they could “continually organize and reorganize themselves to meet student needs,” and were “constantly focused on improvement and growth.” They also felt empowered to ask for help when they needed it.

Strong educator support system. Teachers emphasized how their collaborative cultures created nonhierarchical support systems and fostered teacher-to-teacher support in unique ways. They were not as isolated in their classrooms as they had been in other schools, and able to work collaboratively. They cited the importance of identifying staff strengths and using those strengths to support each other (e.g., informally coaching one another). A teacher described the use of “instructional rounds, like those used in a hospital for interns” and opportunity to “see what peers are doing with instruction, class management, interactions with students.” A teacher team discussed how co-teaching created more of a sense of safety among teachers, and having an “agreed upon set of ‘look-fors’” lowered apprehension of peer evaluation. Overall, open communication between instructional staff was a critical feature of instructional coaching.

Several KDS described professional learning as a strong focus. One school had professional development activities that centered on co-teaching and issues that emerged from PBIS data, while another had mini professional development during faculty meetings each week based on needs identified by the teachers. A teacher said, “we’ve learned over time that a child is really unique and requires teachers to learn new skill sets to work with them. We have to always be learning.” One school used a train-the-trainer approach to bring specialized training to all teachers in their building. Paraprofessional learning, particularly during the school’s shift to an inclusive model was also cited as important. Overall, a key feature that emerged across schools was that professional learning was needs based and that teachers were responsible for setting their own goals related to learning.

MTSS. All schools showed a strong commitment to ongoing growth and development in providing high-quality academic and behavioral instruction for all students through MTSS. The sentiment was “we work on quick identification of supports—we do not let things go.” Across KDS, systemic emphasis on promoting student growth and development frequently led to discussion of data-driven decision making. Many KDS were still working to determine the best sources of data, particularly related to academic instruction, as well as the best ways to use those data to make instructional decisions. Several schools had created their own data collection and management systems, developed around pressing needs within their schools. However, they reported that this approach sometimes led to difficulties in using the data in consistent ways across teachers and teams and in determining the best ways to link data to instruction.

A strong emphasis on data led to discussions about schools’ MTSS and PBIS structures. Some stakeholders felt such supports naturally fit within their school culture, and so Tier 1 was much more robust and familiar to them compared with Tiers 2 and 3. Schools strongly valued emerging research on the benefits and outcomes of MTSS, but were still working on how to use data to make the *what* of inclusion happen in each classroom and consistently across classrooms. Strong fidelity to the values of inclusion was clear. Ultimately, schools were working to “change the environment to fit all kids” and at the same time working to define curriculum and instruction that benefited all students within the environment. Generally, they were implementing the best practices that were available to them and crafting new practices that worked for them when other practices were not available through professional development or tools and resources in the field.

Inclusive academic instruction. In addition to the structural work described above, schools were continuing to work to define the *what* of inclusion, namely, curricular and achievement expectations for all students and how to effectively and systematically support students who were struggling to meet those expectations. KDS were working to find and access research-based interventions matched to their contexts, which was often difficult because of the newness of this body of research. Some schools emphasized core curricula, building the foundation in their schools for all students to be academically supported; other schools more strongly emphasized Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports; however, all schools were more confident in the progress they were making in reading or literacy-related supports than in math supports. KDS primarily viewed their MTSS as relevant for all students with no separation of students with and without disabilities.

Inclusive behavior instruction. Most KDS had Tier 1 behavior supports in place, including “catching students being good” and providing rewards customized to the school (e.g., “school money,” tokens), and students typically referenced schoolwide expectations in focus group discussions, some wanting to recite them. In many cases, the tiered behavioral support system had direct links to the positive school culture and focused on respect and support for all. One KDS indicated their positive school culture mitigated the need for more formal tiered behavioral interventions and supports saying,

We have a simplified system . . . not really a need for intense behavioral interventions because of the culture of the school. We have schoolwide expectations that we model and practice. Classes have a 1-2-3 system of reminders and formal problem solving strategies, but these are rarely needed.

Data-based decision making was present in all KDS. As one school described, “At our school, all classes used leveled color system to indicate where students are performing based on expectations and we review data every 9 weeks.” Overall, the KDS had strong emphases on shared behavioral expectations among all stakeholders.

Integrated educational framework. Each KDS also strongly emphasized their efforts to fully integrate their organizational structure to promote inclusion of all students, although schools were at different points on the integration continuum, typically related to contextual factors at the school.

Fully integrated organizational structure. Each KDS worked to be nimble in the ways they used human, organizational, and structural capacities to achieve integration. Several observers indicated difficulty in determining the roles of adults in the school because each adult provided support to all students—which is what we would expect in fully integrated structures. Furthermore, in KDS where paraprofessional development was strongly emphasized, observers noted limited examples of close one-on-one support of a single student by a paraprofessional.

Co-teaching frequently occurred in several KDS. Two schools paired a general and a special educator in classrooms during 100% of our observations, and in one case, one of these teachers was also certified to teach English as a second language. Other schools did not have the staff available for co-teachers in every class and so grouped students into specific “co-teaching classrooms.” The most common co-teaching model was a general educator leading instruction and special educators providing support or highlighting other skills needed for success (e.g., self-management). Even when co-teaching was not used, we often observed more than one adult in the class providing instructional support, but the roles played were something other than a co-teacher.

KDS emphasized the time and planning involved in moving toward “full integration” of students with the most significant disabilities, exemplified by such comments as,

We have to go to a different level of planning to support successful integration and progress in general education. For a student with cerebral palsy . . . after two years we learned that looking at every moment of their schedule, and what for each and every setting was needed . . . This level of planning takes about 3 hours.

Another school described how their “teams create a schedule for the week—whole group instruction, co-teaching, small group instruction and one-on-one time are scheduled each week as needed based on data.”

While all students in this study, including those who take alternate assessments, had a grade-level classroom as their primary placement, KDS varied in their use of pull-out models to provide intensive interventions for students with and without disabilities related to academics and related services for students with disabilities. In some circumstances (e.g., counseling services), pull out may be the best way to organize services. Some schools highlighted that they were working on eliminating unnecessary pull out, which was often a function of district-level policies and district staff who were not “on-board” with the school culture and emphasis on inclusive education. Some schools provided pull-out interventions for academic instruction that were open to all students and aligned with MTSS-determined student needs, not on disability label. For example, one KDS had an “intervention block,” during which all students received interventions using decision rules about who needs what. Other KDS emphasized avoiding all pull out by providing small group instruction in the general education classroom. As one teacher explained, “There is no pull out. Sometimes small groups meet in co-taught classes, but it is not just for SPED [special education]. It is for any students. Try to avoid stigma.”

Strong and positive school culture. KDS had different strategies for communicating and sharing their mission. One school regularly shared with all school staff and families, including those new to the school, a one-page handout that defined core elements of the school and how they promote inclusive education. KDS frequently set the expectation that all adults would support all students, with no questions, like a big family. Overall, the mentality was, as one teacher put it, “We won’t give up and we won’t wait. We try numerous things until it works.” Schools emphasized happiness, satisfaction, and excitement—creating a positive learning community where all stakeholders “like the way it feels here.” Often, the general education teacher was the instructional leader, although in schools where a special education teacher was assigned to only one classroom in a full co-teaching model, that teacher’s level of engagement with all students was considerably higher. In other settings, special educators floated, that is, dropped in and out of classes primarily giving attention to students with disabilities.

Family and community engagement. KDS had strong relationships between parents and school staff, in which families reported being highly involved in schools, as well as serving in leadership roles. Likewise, partnerships with a wide variety of community organizations were evident in KDS.

Trusting family partnerships. In several KDS, family advocacy was the major factor that led to inclusive reforms, and parents tended to stay highly involved and bring in the “next generation” of parent leaders to maintain close family–school relationships. Families cited the importance of trusting partnerships defined by communication, respect, commitment, equality, and professional competence. Although families and professionals often describe these ideals in the literature, KDS embodied these characteristics in the relationships between families and professionals.

Students perceived these partnerships as natural, describing their families as highly connected to schools and integral to school culture. For example, a student explained how some parents got together at school each week. “They just hang out and talk with other parents. It’s really not that important [to the student], but to him [the father], it’s pretty cool to talk to people . . . They probably talk about how their children are doing in class.” Students also understood the importance and benefits of connecting what they were learning across home and school. “My parents help with homework and help me understand something that I don’t get at school, and my teachers can help me while I’m at school if I need help, like right now.”

Teachers highlighted ways that family members were involved in school activities, such as volunteering at events and starting breakfast programs to support all students. Challenges to strong family–school partnerships were noted, including time demands on both parents and educators; nevertheless, they found unique ways to build partnerships through frequent and open communication. For example, some schools used phone blast messages, e-communication technologies, and weekly newsletters to stay in touch with families. The personalized nature of direct communications between schools, teachers, and individual family members helped build “real” relationships. One school sent home birthday cards for all family members. Teachers and family members emphasized building personal connections, such as learning about hobbies

that the family and educators had in common and participating in shared events (e.g., nonschool sporting events).

Trusting community partnerships. KDS partnerships with such organizations as universities, businesses, local municipalities, nonprofit organizations (e.g., 4-H, arts programs), and social services agencies produced outcomes such as instructional and extracurricular student programs, curricula development, teacher training, and wraparound services. Some KDS included community leaders on their site councils and planning processes. At one KDS, the mayor was involved with a strong partnership between the community and school. Other KDS invited local community groups to hold their meetings on campus to promote relationship development and trust between school and community.

Schools recruited volunteer programs from retirees, local businesses, and university programs to spend time with students on both academic (e.g., writing coaches) and other valuable life skills (e.g., a bank representative talked to students about savings accounts). Schools leveraged community connections to support student learning and volunteerism, such as helping at a food pantry, or with city council to engage in city projects (e.g., painting a mural in a park).

Educator support systems were bolstered through strong relationships with local universities, including access to student teachers. One KDS educated student teachers about their inclusive school reform model, which in turn created a ready pool of future teachers committed to the vision. Several schools identified local university and national research collaborations that brought research-based strategies and supports to professional development and school activities. Finally, one KDS built a relationship with local mental health providers for service delivery on the school campus in a wraparound model.

Inclusive policy structure and practice. Some strong local educational agency (LEA)–school partnerships existed. In some cases, the LEAs pushed for or supported inclusion and created mechanisms to support inclusion. One district representative said, “[schools in the district] better take responsibility for all kids; it’s the expectation.” A teacher elaborated, “Blurring the lines between general and special education is a district focus—you should not be able to see who has a disability.” One KDS has a district employee stationed inside the school to provide support. Another KDS emphasized support for inclusion existed “up and down the line,” all the way up to the superintendent. Some KDS emphasized sharing responsibility for reform with district personnel and district support with such activities as applying for grants. Another KDS reported a growing district focus on inclusion that pointed to their school as a model for other schools.

Across KDS, stakeholders articulated the importance of leveraging all available resources to support all students, rather than being constrained by restricted funding streams. One KDS performed so well that they “scored themselves out of the coaches”—that is, the district-funded coaches for low-performing schools seemed no longer needed when, in fact, these coaches were integral to the school’s ongoing inclusive practices.

Two examples of district policies that advanced inclusion are a district-wide inclusion specialist and a volunteer coordinator to recruit community volunteers with specific expertise needed in a school. Another KDS cited district-level training and protocols for PBIS and individualized behavior plans that were very helpful in streamlining the work of the school. Highly important district policies cited by KDS were those that allowed flexibility and funding to support all students, and use of instructional staff in ways that worked best for the individual schools.

Implications

The previous sections described key findings from multiple data sources collected during three, multiday visits to KDS that exemplified one or more SWIFT domain. Findings suggest three areas of implication for future research and practice, including intensive technical assistance to schools engaging in schoolwide inclusive transformation: (a) building a positive school culture; (b) addressing the where, how, and what of inclusion; and (c) leadership and sustainability.

Building a Positive School Culture

KDS confirmed the fundamental importance of building and sustaining a positive school culture during school reform (Amatea, 2012; Burrello, Hoffman, & Murray, 2005; Wenger, 2000). These cultures emphasized a community value to provide needed support to all students, regardless of any labels (e.g., disability, diversity, socioeconomic status). Natural variation influenced the specific cultural values expressed by each school, but data suggest that catching the vision of “all means all” was the starting point.

Building a shared culture was a foundational activity that brought together stakeholders who were typically separated into programmatic and funding “silos” among general education, special education, and administration (O’Day, 2002; Sailor, Doolittle, Bradley, & Danielson, 2009). Teachers, administrators, parents, and students cited ways that inclusive school culture allowed them to create new and different working relationships and be “nimble” in meeting needs of students. These working relationships broke down long-standing silos and program fragmentation, and led to positive schoolwide outcomes. In fact, many KDS significantly reduced the typical divisions between general and special education in *where* and *how* they educate students (Sailor, Doolittle, et al., 2009).

This study confirms the value of taking time and investing resources to build strong and positive culture with shared vision among a broad range of stakeholders and highlights some of the challenges associated with sustaining such a culture. The findings suggest need for technical assistance that builds ongoing capacities, such as systems for inculcating new staff in inclusive values and practices, year by year forging new trusting family–school partnerships, trusting relationships, and open lines of communication between school and district that help avoid conflicts with new policy initiatives.

Some KDS defined their MTSS or tiers within MTSS models by special education services and supports. We suspect this is a natural by-product of existing laws, regulations, policies, and practices, particularly when funding and placement decision are not blended at the district and state education agency levels. Technical assistance that introduces or reinforces a lexicon that no longer labels people, processes, or systems in this way may help move schools toward full integration. This requires attention, particularly, to ensure that students with the most significant support needs and who will require specialized education services are not defined by services within a specific tier.

Limitations and future research on school culture. Our study purposefully explored diverse settings where inclusive practices have been successful, that is, unique microcosms that self-selected into inclusive school transformation. In some instances, teachers, administrators, and even families self-selected into these schools, introducing bias into their perspectives. Furthermore, a selection bias among individuals who participated in the focus groups, interviews, and other data collection activities may have existed. Therefore, we caution against over generalization of these findings to other schools.

Ultimately, more research is needed on the best terminology to describe the cultural value for “all means all,” how to blend funding sources to eliminate the need for “special education” but instead provide specialized instruction and supports for all students based on need particularly for students with the most severe disabilities (Burrello et al., 2013). More work is needed to define the role of students without disabilities in inclusive schools beyond simply supporting students with disabilities toward engaging in meaningful, positive, and reciprocal relationships (Snell & Brown, 2010).

Addressing the Where, How, and What of Inclusion—The Total Education Program

KDS tended to emphasize the *where* and *how* of inclusion. These foci may be important or even necessary first steps in inclusive school transformation. However, we wonder, must inclusive reform happen in a step-wise process, as suggested by many KDS (e.g., we need to figure out how to structure placement and instructional arrangements first or we need to build universal supports first, before moving to tiered supports)? Or can the three waves of building inclusive practices occur concurrently? SWIFT Center, in fact, is currently supporting 64 schools in building total education programs that simultaneously advance the *where*, *how*, and *what* of inclusion for all students.

KDS were not only diverse in ways that we planned but also in their stages of implementation of the *where*, *how*, and *what* of inclusion, as described by researchers in implementation science (Fixsen et al., 2005). Some KDS were really still in exploration and installation phases with regard to the *where* of inclusion. Others were beyond exploration and were installing and implementing elements of structural inclusion that define the *where* of education for all students as the general education classroom, and moving ahead with reforms around the *how* of inclusion. All KDS were just beginning to tackle the *what* of inclusion—that is, access to the general curriculum for all students.

We speculate from our findings that the newness of the concept of unified academic and behavioral MTSS merits further discussion and investigation. MTSS can help educators make well-informed decisions about the level of academic and behavioral support students need in the general education classroom and curriculum. An effective MTSS offers students *what* they need when they need it, often by tailoring specific interventions (Sailor & Burrello, 2013). In the SWIFT framework, the assumption is that inclusive academic and behavior instruction occur across all three tiers of a unified MTSS. MTSS is being adopted by districts throughout the United States (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009), and becoming embedded in state education agency initiatives (e.g., <http://www.kansasmtss.org/>), even as the refinement and validation of these models are still underway. KDS, as forward-thinking and innovative organizations, have expressed the desire to implement best practices related to MTSS and the need for access to formal training on MTSS as well as school-specific professional learning opportunities. In the absence of such educator supports, some KDS developed their own forms of MTSS, largely based on perceived needs within the school. Conversely, some KDS indicated that they did not need tiered models of behavioral instruction because of their strong and positive school culture, despite a robust research base supporting tiered frameworks for inclusive behavioral instruction (Sailor, Dunlap, Sugai, & Horner, 2009). Indeed, the PBIS literature acknowledges that changing the environment can reduce the need for behavioral intervention; but research still suggests the critical importance of formal, data-driven systems of support that address a varying range of student needs in a systematic way.

Future research is needed to explore how to build buy-in for interventions when a strong school culture is in place, blending cultural values with more systematized interventions such as MTSS, and the degree to which specific types of support are necessary for both academics and behavior in a strong positive school culture and ways to ensure that students with a range of support needs, including those with the most severe disabilities, are effectively included and receive supports across tiers. Research that demonstrates how to achieve the same explicit focus on the *what* of inclusion may lead to even greater growth, achievement, and expectations for all students. Students with and without disabilities highlighted how they wanted to be held to high expectations, and identified a desire to be self-determined learners who were part of a challenging academic curriculum that provided choices and engaged them in meaningful ways. These student attitudes are the goal of any model of inclusive school transformation.

Leadership and Sustainability

Leadership and sustainability are linked both to administrator training and creating a cadre of leaders who believe in inclusion, as well as a balance between site-based leadership and district and state policies that create the conditions for inclusive school transformation (Fixsen et al., 2009). SWIFT emphasizes building systems at state and district levels that promote sustainability and flexibility of implementation of inclusive school transformation (Burrello et al., 2013). The present study was not structured to determine best practices for making high-level policy changes, nor did it examine the degree to which they filter down to actual practices in local schools. However, the study identified important considerations about sustainability and leadership at the local level. For example, at many of the KDS, the principal was viewed as the educational leader and driver of the school, and was a charismatic leader who led efforts for inclusive school reform. Although all KDS had strong building leadership teams, the degree to which these teams would be able to sustain their inclusive culture and practices if a different principal was assigned to the school is unclear.

Perhaps as important to sustainability as the principal are policies that allow flexible use of funding and staffing within buildings, and an infrastructure at the district and state levels that provides materials that

support fidelity of implementation and systematic adoption of MTSS and inclusive practices that can be customized to individual schools. Under these conditions, schools do not have to “go it alone” and barriers inherent to creating systematic data collection and intervention systems are removed.

Conclusion

KDS provide valuable insights into how innovative schools develop and sustain inclusive school reforms. These insights highlight key issues to consider in future research and technical assistance, most notably the criticality of considering how to support the concurrent development of all domains of the SWIFT framework. Conceptually, the domains are mutually reinforcing. For example, co-adoption of MTSS and an integrated organizational structure provides mechanisms to enhance school culture, build administrative leadership, and promote inclusive policy structures and practices and further break down the silos that have, for too long, characterized schools. Reciprocally, building a strong school culture, administrative leadership, and inclusive policy structures and practices provides a vehicle to build MTSS and an integrated organizational structure. The existing body of research and findings from KDS suggests interconnectedness of each of these domains, yet challenges are inherent when simultaneously transforming a school in all domains that effectively supports all students, including those with the most severe disabilities.

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