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Make the Numbers Add Up

Problem: A district's ELL students are identified for special education in disproportionate numbers

Response: Develop a new way to determine if referrals are required

Here's a commonsense phrase: Good teams working with good data make good decisions that lead to good school districts. But what happens when the numbers don't add up, and the percentages you expect to see don't match what is showing up in your data?

This is known as disproportionality, and it is occurring in school districts, especially within and across language and cultural groups. It especially has an effect on how English language learners (ELLs) qualify for special education services.

Take, for example, Washington's Kent School District. The district's special education data is similar to what you will find in other schools across the state and nation, especially as it relates to ELL students. If you took a cursory look at the statistics, you might be led to believe that disproportionality doesn't exist. But it does.

What can be done? The district has started a process that we feel is identifying the core problems we face and will lead to improved teaching and learning for all students. We hope to outline some necessary steps so your district can do the same.

Learning from the data

The Kent School District, just south of Seattle, is the fourth-largest school district in the state of Washington, with just over 27,000 students. Known as the most diverse district in the state, with 16 percent of its population qualifying as ELLs, Kent has 130 to 150 spoken languages in its student body. Large groups of students speak Spanish, Russian, Somali, Vietnamese, and Punjabi.

In 2010-11, 12 percent of the district's student body received special education services. The percentage of special education-eligible students who also qualified for ELL services was approximately 17 percent.

So, what's the problem? A closer look shows that the district's Latino students made up roughly 13 percent of the total

population. However, they accounted for roughly 52 percent of the students who were dually qualified for both ELL and special education services. In contrast, Asian students made up roughly 20 percent of the student population and accounted for 20 percent of those who were dually qualified.

Looking at the data, we found another problem. Among the district's special education population, just over 40 percent are qualified in the category of a specific learning disability. Students who are dually qualified as ELL and special education students, however, are far more likely to be in this category.

Both Latino and Asian students were qualified as having a specific learning disability at significantly higher rates than the district's population. Latino students were 75 percent more likely to be qualified under this category than the population as a whole. Also, both Latino and Asian groups are under-qualified in the categories of "other health impaired," emotionally/behaviorally disabled, and autism.

What we decided to examine was our methodology for understanding language development differences from disabilities, especially in our ELL-qualified students.

In Kent, the data showed we have students over-qualified in some areas, under-qualified in others, and rarely qualified in a portion. If 15 percent of your district's population is Latino, approximately 15 percent of the special education population should be as well. And, if the district's rate for a specific learning disability is 40 percent, then approximately 40 percent of the Latino students eligible for special education should be qualified under that category.

This should matter to everyone interested in social justice, cultural competence, and accountability. Special education laws at the federal and state levels require districts to disaggregate data and report on the actions they take to deal with disproportionality issues. Failing to do so eventually can lead to sanctions being imposed, including funds being withheld from districts that do not make progress. This practice has not yet been instituted, but has been discussed as necessary due to the lack of change in the data.

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Addressing the problem

To address the disproportionality concerns, we developed a new process for determining whether ELL-qualified students should be considered for special education referrals. The process helps teams collect the appropriate data to determine whether a student needs interventions or should be referred for a special education evaluation.

The better the data being discussed, the higher the likelihood that appropriate decisions will be made. The data also helps teams differentiate between language learning issues and possible disabilities. The process also helps us meet the research and data-based decision-making requirements found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

We held a series of meetings early in the 2010-11 school year with representatives from special education, ELL, teaching, administration, and general education staff. We collected data, documented existing processes, and examined them closely. It became clear that the existing process of gathering student data did not require a thorough examination of the information. The majority of the questions simply required yes/no answers.

Information was examined from multiple expert sources, which included a state commission on the topic. The processes, data, and expert opinions helped us formulate a series of questions, with the goal of helping to determine whether the student's "presenting problem"—the concern brought forth by the team—indicated a need for an intervention or supported a special education referral.

Our research clearly showed that a large portion of the problem was due to the belief that special education is the only way to get some students help, and they need help. What we found, through reviewing outside research, is that approximately 80 percent of the problems are related to learning to read, which makes the qualification of ELL students as students with a learning disability a difficult task.

Research has demonstrated that ELL students' level of literacy in their primary language is the single best predictor of

success in learning English. In addition, parental levels of literacy—whether English is the primary language or not—are shown to correlate closely with learning performance.

Our goal is to help teams examine the intervention process and identify the issues around educating ELL students in a diverse community. Before our study started, Kent officials had worked diligently to create districtwide multi-tiered intervention structures as part of the school improvement processes. Our study was conducted during the first year that all schools had a multitiered intervention structure in place. This work on differentiating language development issues from disabilities is part of the school improvement work and part of the district strategic planning.

Any intervention you choose must specifically target the problem area. Stating that a reading intervention is needed will not lead to a targeted intervention. Looking at the primary areas of reading—such as sight vocabulary (sight words), phonics, reading vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension—and targeting the specific area of most concern will lead to better data and a more effective intervention.

How we analyze data

It's possible that the portion of our work with the most impact is the system we created to analyze the data that the teams collect. A simple matrix was developed that allows the team to place 16 critical data points onto a chart. Team members discuss the implications of each data point.

The matrix asks three questions: Does the data indicate a need for more intervention? Is the data neutral? Or is it indicative of a need for a referral for a special education evaluation? Once the team has placed each data point on the chart, it's likely that a clear picture of the next step (more intervention or referral) will be evident.

What it comes down to is this: The process must examine how core instruction is designed to assure all students can meet state standards. As board members, help ensure your staff has the skills to lead the students to success with appropriate interventions. Give them the time to review their processes against the research and what experts believe is necessary and appropriate.

This is an outline of the necessary steps. Because the composition of districts varies tremendously, you must develop your own process. In Kent, school-based teams already are reporting a higher understanding of the core problems and the need for appropriate interventions. Also, the staff is reporting that teams truly are examining these students' needs with a different lens, and we believe that ultimately will lead to success. ■

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Data You Should Collect

If your district chooses to embark on this type of process, here are some of the critical areas for which data needs to be collected and examined. Overall, the Kent process includes 16 key areas, including:

- Student's education history in primary language
- Literacy level in primary language
- Parental education and level of literacy
- Rate of learning as demonstrated by the results of targeted interventions
- Type of interventions the student is currently receiving. Are they targeting the specific issue, and how was that specific issue determined?
- Expectations placed upon the student