

PATHWAYS TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

How Arkansas is Creating a National Model for Inclusive School Leadership & Professional Development

Jacob*, an elementary school student in an Arkansas public school, was reading four levels below grade level. Since kindergarten, Jacob had learned to read in a self-contained special education program, taught by a dedicated special education teacher and alongside other students with disabilities.

However, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students with disabilities be taught in the least restrictive environment with the appropriate services and supports to access the general education curriculum. Under the law, students with disabilities are general education students first.

As part of its work in the CCSSO Advancing Inclusive Principal Leadership (AIPL) state initiative, Arkansas has made strides in encouraging this inclusive approach to education across the state. Through the state's Inclusive Practices Project, the Arkansas Department of Education is making sure that students with disabilities and other struggling learners can access the general education curriculum. In participating pilot schools, principals play a key role in supporting professional learning communities (PLC) of teachers centered on inclusive practices.

Jacob's elementary school was one of four to participate in the pilot program to promote inclusive practices and support principals in becoming inclusive leaders. The school's principal and teachers worked together to make sure every student in the school participated in the general education curriculum and received core instruction from certified content teachers.

*The student's name has been changed.

Dr. Dawn Childress, the school's principal, said that the pilot program was "transformational" for their students, teachers and community. In the spring of 2020, only 6% of the school's students with disabilities scored 'proficient' on Arkansas' interim reading assessment for special education classes. By the spring of 2021, 31% of students with disabilities scored 'proficient' – including Jacob, who is now reading at grade level.

The program also supported students far beyond academic proficiency. "In the self-contained classroom, [the students with disabilities] weren't able to support each other," Childress said. "With the way we did it this year, the kids were cheering each other on. One day during recess, a student got stuck on the playground slide and was scared, and another boy talked to him about how to get off the slide – and all of the other students were cheering him on."

The Arkansas state AIPL team, including Childress, attributes the students' successes throughout the past year, in large part, to the Inclusive Practices Project. "I felt like there were a lot of barriers before," Childress said. "Now, I feel like all of those barriers have just been ripped down."

Starting the Conversation

The path to implementing Arkansas' inclusive schools pilot program began in 2018 with the formation of a team committed to advancing inclusive principal leadership. The AIPL team included leaders from offices across the state's department of education, including special education, educator effectiveness and licensure, and learning services.

High Leverage Practices

High Leverage Practices (HLPs) are the knowledge and skills principals need to lead an inclusive school, focused on effective collaboration, assessment, social and emotional learning, and instruction.

The team developed an action plan to align the inclusive principal leadership work with the existing state plan for special education, known as the State Systemic Improvement Plan. A key objective was embedding High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) into principal professional development.

The team developed a theory of action proposing that, if HLPs and inclusive practices are incorporated into principals' preparation programs, competencies and professional development, then school leaders will develop, support, and advance inclusive environments for all students, especially students with disabilities. Their goal envisions an Arkansas school system in which all students are meaningfully included in grade-level core content instruction.

"It's really trying to embrace the model of 'all means all' in place of 'Well, all these over here or all these in my classroom,'" said Matt Sewell, Arkansas' director of special education and the state's AIPL state team lead.

The Power of Consistent Engagement

After aligning the state plans to advance inclusive schools, the department developed [twelve learning guides](#) designed to support local special education leaders in implementing HLPs and inclusive practices. The team discussed the learning guides during monthly calls with special education administrators across the state. Creating a forum for learning and discussion built trust between local and state leaders, Sewell said, providing open conversation and ongoing professional development.

The team also hosts conversations about HLPs during a regular call with all the school districts across the state. Every month, the call features a discussion about a different HLP, ranging from “Teaching Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies to Support Learning and Independence” to “Using Strategies to Promote Engagement.” Consistently presenting HLPs to content specialists across the state centers inclusive practices as an essential part of the state’s approach, encouraging local leaders to prioritize HLPs.

By frequently engaging with educators on HLPs and inclusive practices, “I think you arrive at the collective teacher efficacy that is so valuable to driving outcomes,” said Jeff Adams, coordinator for the State Systemic Improvement Plan. “It’s directly linked to student outcomes.”

The state reinforces these regular discussions by offering updated inclusive-practices training, which includes a focus on HLPs. The state team travels throughout Arkansas offering presentations to principals, teachers, counselors, superintendents and others to share the compelling evidence on why inclusive practices matter and how to best implement them in your classroom, school or district.

From Theory to Practice

Arkansas launched its Inclusive Practices Project in the fall of 2020, with four schools participating in the pilot to embed HLPs and inclusive practices into their classes. The schools became

Achieving Student Success

The goals of the Arkansas Inclusive Schools Project are to:

- increase access to core instruction for all students;
- increase the number of students with disabilities in general education content classrooms;
- increase performance on district and state assessments; and
- increase knowledge of innovative models of education, such as HLPs and Universal Design for Learning.

professional PLCs, implementing training and coaching led by Solution Tree, an educational professional development provider. Professional development is a core component of a PLC, and the Inclusive Practices Project provides leaders, teachers and staff members with a mix of onsite training, observation, and coaching with experts from the Solution Tree team.

The Inclusive Practices Project was the first PLC cohort in the state focused on improving school inclusivity. The first four PLCs in the project were elementary schools in four different districts, functioning as working laboratories that ultimately share best practices in inclusivity with other schools across the state.

“We piloted an inclusive principal leadership PLC project to really help principals in leading the collaboration between general and special educators and driving outcomes for students with disabilities,” Adams said.

In the 2021-2022 school year, 11 schools will be included in the project, implementing the PLC process in their journeys toward becoming fully inclusive schools.

Participating schools focus on increasing meaningful access to core instruction and other interventions for students who are struggling learners and/or IEP eligible. The PLC schools take part in a collaborative evaluation process that analyzes student achievement, educator practices, and professional development. As demonstrated by both the data gathered by the Arkansas Department of Education and students’ successes (like Jacob’s), the PLCs have successfully created more inclusive environments for all students.

Throughout this work, the team also asserts that the relationships they have developed—including with principals and other school leaders—are most crucial for advancing and sustaining

inclusive practices. Relationships between state leaders and local educators are essential to help education leaders understand the value of implementing inclusive practices as a philosophy that permeates every aspect of the educational environment.

“It’s not additional work [for principals]. It’s seen as the work you’re doing,” Andy Sullivan, Arkansas’ director of educator effectiveness/licensure said. “And I think the group has done a really good job of showing how it all meshes together.”

Looking ahead, the Arkansas AIPL team hopes to focus more on pathways to school leadership and seeks to build stronger partnerships with university stakeholders. Partnering with university-based principal preparation programs provides a powerful opportunity to embed the ideals and practices of inclusivity in principals’ leadership styles from the outset of their careers. Guaranteeing that all school principals are prepared to promote and implement inclusion will help ensure that students like Jacob can attend and learn in schools where every student has an equitable opportunity to succeed.

