



FROM ABC TO THRIVE

Spelling Out Success in Special Education

CASE STUDY

PAUL'S* STORY:

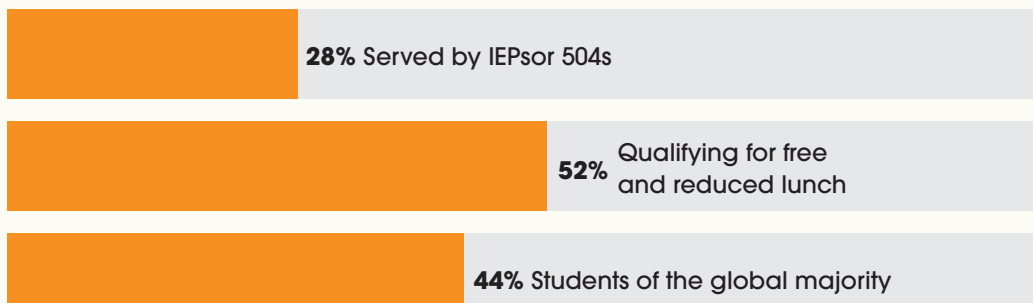
Building School Culture where All Students Belong

“When I arrived as principal, there was a lot about what we were doing that nominally aligned with inclusion. But once you got past the surface of what was actually happening in classrooms, we weren’t truly supporting inclusivity,”

reflects Paul, middle school principal.

Paul was a new principal at this school and as such, he spent time getting up to speed on what had been happening across his school and district community. The school had a diverse student population:

365 total students



While staff had been hard at work addressing the needs of their student population, Paul understood that at his school, similar to schools across the country, there were longstanding opportunity gaps for marginalized groups. For example, students of the global majority, students with disabilities, and students qualifying for free/reduced lunch showed lower academic outcomes and higher rates of discipline referrals. Especially striking was the 25-point gap in reading proficiency between the overall student population (65%) and students qualifying for free/reduced lunch (40%). Learning more about these disparities, Paul knew he needed to rally his team to move beyond current practices to create real, systemic change that would transform opportunities and outcomes for all students.




Setting Priorities and Aligning on Vision

Paul's District, committed to supporting their secondary programs, brought in ABC to support. Working with ABC as part of our Inclusive Schools Blueprint product, Paul and his leadership team grounded their transformation work in data and equity. "If we take that students are students are students — that no one is more able to learn or more likely to commit infractions — then we have a problem with our instruction, policies, procedures, and the culture surrounding all of that," Paul explains.

Through collaborative planning with ABC, among other efforts with his District cohort, Paul and his leadership team identified three strategic priorities to transform their school culture and improve outcomes for all students:

Success Indicators

- #2 "Belief that All Students Can Learn and Grow"
- #3 "Belief that an Inclusive School Environment Benefits All Students"

-  a student advisory model to build belonging
-  collaborative planning for inclusive instruction
-  anti-racist instructional practice development

Student Advisory Model to Build Belonging

Research shows that belonging is a critical foundation for learning, yet data from Paul's school indicated disparities in how different student groups felt about school. To address this, the school undertook a systematic redesign of student support through the creation of a new advisory structure where every student has a consistent adult advocate. This included:

- A year-long inclusive design process that included engaging a steering committee, the instructional leadership team, and an operations team
- Engaging 100% of staff through a phased approach, with 40% involved in the initial planning, while the remaining staff shaped the initiative through four school-wide sessions
- Creating a Family Advisory Group to provide regular input and incorporate voices from the school community
- Maintaining consistent focus on ensuring every student feels seen, heard, and valued

Success Indicators

- #7 "Implementation of Action Plan for Making & Sustaining Inclusive Change"
- #6 "Creation of a Bold, Clear Vision for Inclusion"

Collaborative Planning for Inclusive Instruction

Research also shows that when educators plan together with multiple perspectives from the start, instruction better serves all learners. From meeting with teachers and students, Paul knew that the current instructional models weren't translating into the best program possible for all learners. So he set out to deepen the way teachers worked together by developing a new collaborative planning structure where general educators, special educators, and ELL teachers design instruction together. This included:

- Restructuring existing Professional Learning Community (PLC) time to enable meaningful collaboration between general educators, special educators, and ELL teachers
- Developing clear protocols to guide planning sessions and ensure they focus on designing instruction that works for all learners from the start

Success Indicators

- #9 "Effective Formal & Informal Collaboration"
- #17 "Effective Planning and Co-Planning"

- Implementing quarterly data reviews that examine student achievement, discipline patterns, and implementation indicators
- Maintaining consistent focus on increasing engagement and learning while reducing the need for discipline by making instruction more accessible from the start

The goal of integrating planning more intentionally was to increase engagement and learning while reducing the need for discipline by making instruction more accessible and effective for all students.

Anti-Racist Instructional Practice Development

Aligned with District initiatives, Paul's school's Instructional Leadership Team recognized that examining how instructional practices either perpetuate or disrupt inequitable patterns could make their inclusion work even more impactful. **The team set out to design a two-year professional development arc that would build skills gradually, rather than rushing through training, to create lasting and meaningful changes in teaching practices that promote equity.**

Success Indicators

- #8 "Implementation of Practices for Mitigating Bias"
- #4 "Understanding of the Leaders' Role in Shaping Culture"

Paul was able to build a coalition of supporters and start shifting both mindsets and practices. As he explains, teachers need to internalize their own role in this work: **"If 30% of my class is failing the assessment, the problem is not the students. The problem is my instruction or the assessment or both."** This recognition has led to tangible changes in how teachers approach instruction and student support.

Success Indicators

- #1 "Belief that Serving Exceptional Learners is a Collective Responsibility"

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The school is moving toward what Paul describes as "a more anti-racist educational community that deconstructs barriers to remedy culture so that we have equitable practices that lead to equitable outcomes for all learners... so that we have a happy, healthy, safe, joyous community."

** The names of the partners in these case studies have been changed to protect their privacy and create a safe space for honest dialogue. This anonymity allowed them to openly share both their struggles and successes, including sensitive details about organizational challenges and the sometimes difficult process of finding effective solutions. By maintaining confidentiality, we were able to capture authentic stories that offer valuable insights for others facing similar situations.*