

Inclusive Practice through Distributed Leadership

By Matt Holloway

Dexter Park Innovation School, part of the Ralph C. Mahar public school district in Central Massachusetts, has built its model for inclusive practice around distributed leadership. Shared instructional space, shared planning, and shared decision-making are the hallmarks of the school's approach. Dexter Park won a MA DESE Innovation School planning grant in 2013. Superintendent Tari Thomas explains, "we had an urgency based on our sub-group data. We had to take some action." The vision for the school action plan was set by the building support team, comprised of the principal, teachers, and parents. The goal was to build a school culture that was inclusive, supportive of the whole child, and driven by a distributed leadership model.

If you go looking for principal, Chris Dodge, you probably won't find him in his office. It's not that he's off-site. Unless he's visiting a classroom, you will most likely find Chris sitting in the cafeteria, conducting his administrative duties, at one of the student lunch tables. It allows him to stay more active and visible in the life of the school. He explains by holding up his backpack, "this is my office. Where I go, it goes." Chris has built an inclusive school culture at Dexter Park through a commitment to flexibility, innovation, teacher autonomy, and distributed leadership. Their school slogan is "Every Child. Every Day."

Dexter Park's [School Improvement Plan](#) was the foundation for the work. Then, as a team, they created adult community guidelines in partnership with a PD program called [Leading Together](#):

Adult Community Guidelines	
➤	<i>We will strive to recognize and respect the perspectives and ideas of all staff, while assuming we all have positive intent for our students.</i>
➤	<i>We will work together to create an adult learning community in which all members feel valued and respected.</i>
➤	<i>We will communicate our ideas, concerns, or needs for support openly, honestly, and respectfully.</i>
➤	<i>We will help each other identify root causes of problems and consequences without judgment to problem solve as a team.</i>
➤	<i>We will work together to create and protect time in our schedules to share, discuss, and collaborate with fellow educators.</i>

Every decision at the school is made by a leadership team, comprised of teachers, who have weekly twenty minute "tactical meetings" following the "Death by Meeting" protocol of Patrick Lencioni. Principal Dodge is responsible for sending minutes from these meetings out to all staff and for ensuring that every voice is heard. Professional development is teacher-driven and almost entirely teacher-led. Says Thomas, "I'll pop in on a PD session and Chris will say to me, 'I'm not doing anything.' The teachers are leading the session, EdCamp style, and they feel empowered and then they do the same thing with the students."

The school team has moved towards a collaborative teaching approach to support inclusive practice, with special education and general education teachers partnering throughout the day. The Innovation Action Plan allowed the school team to start from scratch, and the leadership team decided that collaborating teacher teams would be able to set up their classrooms together. Instead of one teacher “coming into” another teacher’s classroom, the space was mutually shared from day one.

Angela Corey, a sixth grade special education co-teacher, describes how the co-teaching model allows her to meet the needs of the students on her caseload all day long. Says Superintendent Thomas, “It has been a thrill to see a teacher like Angela leading a classroom again. She started with us as an elementary teacher, but when she got her special education license she moved to more of a support and compliance role. It felt like we lost an amazing individual. To see her back in the classroom co-teaching is just such a thrill, an absolute joy.”

Corey’s co-teacher, Kristi Bliss, points to the social gains some of the students have made. “One little boy came into the first day of school pushing his cheeks down with his fingers. When we asked him what he was doing he said he couldn’t stop smiling. He said he’d never had friends in his class together before!” The teachers in Dexter Park, along with the students and their families, have embraced the school’s focus on a fostering a positive culture.

About 50% of the students at Dexter Park are economically disadvantaged and 28% of them have IEPs. When the Innovation Action Plan was written, student outcome data was troubling. Since the transition to the inclusive model, however, signs of growth have begun to appear. “I spent quite a bit of time studying the growth data, our SGP [student growth percentile] numbers. It told a better story of the work we are starting to do and I’ve begun to talk about that data with our teachers as well,” says Principal Dodge. From 2016 to 2017, school-wide SGP has improved and SGP for students with disabilities has gone up dramatically. “We are focused on growth,” says Superintendent Thomas.

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Dodge stresses that he is doing his job as principal differently than ever before. “For one thing, I am following the [“Breakthrough Coach”](#) model this year, which means that I spend two full days in classrooms every week, no exceptions. The other three days I take care of administrative duties.” When asked how he can afford to spend two whole days neglecting emails and paperwork. Dodge gives credit to his secretary for being “incredibly competent and reliable.” He is also very active on social media, both as a way to communicate with the families and students at Dexter Park and also as a way to connect with other principals. “The world is so big and we have all these tools to reach out. My first year I didn’t do that but now – I reach out. I am so much richer for my connections to other principals.”

Rebecca Phillips, the district’s Director of Special Education, describes the opportunity: “We asked ‘how do we provide our special education services in more inclusive settings?’” The team held a retreat specifically dedicated to generating creative solutions to the school’s scheduling needs but, according to Phillips, “we really wound up talking more about students than schedules.” Chris Dodge summarizes the change as: “We used to talk about programs and rooms. Now we talk about kids.”