



Promising Practices

Building Relationships Leads to Improved Special Education Services for Students in Michigan

The Challenge

Charter Schools have been a part of the national landscape for more than 20 years. Yet, with regard to special education, there continues to be considerable confusion and differences in perspective between charter schools and the diverse entities that oversee them. There is also considerable variation in how each oversight entity works with charter schools to assure that all students with disabilities are receiving the free and appropriate public education to which they are legally entitled. In instances where charter school practices are insufficient, they can be out of compliance with special education requirements and underserving their students with disabilities due to a lack of information, understanding and collaboration.

This Promising Practices post profiles the Kent Intermediate School District (ISD) in Michigan to present an example of how an existing special education infrastructure evolved to support and hold charter schools accountable in order to ensure that students with disabilities have access to quality programs in the charter schools that serve them.



The Facts

Charter school oversight in Michigan comes from the Michigan Department of Education, as well as one of a number of possible authorizers, and finally an area Intermediate School Districts (ISD) or Regional Educational Services Agency (ESA). Every ISD and ESA has a structure unique to its governing area. What occurs in one section of the state may look a bit different in the other regions surrounding it. But one thing they all have in common is they must have a Plan for the Delivery of Special Education Programs and Services. These plans are jointly developed by representatives from the ISD, their constituent local school districts – including charter schools, and their Parent Advisory Committees. Because there are 56 different ISD/ESAs in Michigan, there are a number of things that are variable as well as common in these plans.



While many of the ISDs in Michigan provide a variety of supports for their charter schools and their students with disabilities, Kent ISD has implemented a proactive and positive approach to working with charter schools. Kent ISD provides instructional and administrative services to more than 300 schools, including 43 charter schools, serving more than 120,000 students.

Kent ISD has built an infrastructure (i.e., an external special education support system) that has caught the eye of NCSECS. Kent ISD Director of Special Education, Laurie VanderPloeg, has brought regional collaboration to the way the ISD works, both with the

school districts and with their community partners. She and her team have targeted more dollars directly to the classroom by providing essential services, collaborative initiatives and valuable learning for the region's students and teachers.

The Strategy

When Laurie became the Director of Special Education for Kent ISD, one of her considerations was how to best support the charter schools in her catchment area. She put several practices in place to encourage charter schools to participate with the ISD. The practices include but are not limited to:

- Providing an open door policy to the ISD and her staff, welcoming everyone from the charter community that wishes to be involved,
- Sending invitations to attend monthly special education administrator meetings, including charter schools, management companies and authorizers in the invitations,
- Encouraging participation in Kent ISD Workgroups,
- Urging schools to nominate parents to sit on their Parent Advisory Committee (the charter schools now have the largest share of participants),
- Inviting schools to participate in all of the professional development opportunities offered to the traditional districts,
- Providing technical assistance, in many different forms, available to all staff, parents, and school administration,



- Offering support for the completion of mandated forms (such as financial reports) and will begin offering her ISD staff when charter schools are not invited to other meetings (i.e., business meetings), to assure they fully understand and complete mandated forms and understand the fiscal responsibilities of special education from Maintenance of Effort, to fiscal reviews, to IDEA funding, and more,
- Assisting in developing cooperative agreements between local districts and charters,
- Drawing up communication plans with authorizers and management companies,
- Assisting staff responsible for gathering accurate count day information with data scrubbing, and
- Providing program evaluations for the schools.

In addition, the Kent ISD special education team created and maintains a listserv for charter administrators and other charter special education contacts so Kent ISD is able to disseminate its information via email. Telephone and personal contacts are also made frequently to assure that every charter school is fully aware of the opportunities and supports being offered.

The Expectations

Laurie makes it clear to the charter school leaders and special education coordinators that they will be held to the same expectations and standards as their traditional public school counterparts. She holds all schools accountable for providing the full continuum of services should one of their students require a more restrictive placement. Each of the schools in Kent ISD may access any of the programs within its radius and pay any related excess costs (e.g., transportation costs). This ensures that all students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to access the program that best provides them with a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as is required by law. Should any school district, traditional or charter, not meet the accountability expectations, Kent ISD will withhold federal dollars until the school comes into compliance. This includes systemic as well as programmatic issues that might negatively impact the education of any student receiving special education services.

Laurie is personally involved in providing targeted, intentional technical assistance and professional development to ensure that schools continuously improve and meet explicit accountability metrics. It is not uncommon to see her sitting at a table in a school working on an Educational Benefit Review for a student that a school is struggling to conduct, or answering a 10:00 p.m. Facebook question from a resource room teacher when there is no administrator to assist them in their school. Laurie explains this as her opportunity to “individually build leadership capacity.”



The Benefits

Laurie understands both the challenges and importance of building an infrastructure that provides supports. When asked what advice she would give other states interested in developing special education infrastructures to provide the same types of support Kent ISD is providing to its charter schools, Laurie replied, “It takes intentionality. I was tired of people badmouthing charter schools. Communicate with them and treat charter schools the same as your local school districts. Have them all be in the same room for meetings, workgroups, and professional development. Make the message very clear - that the same accountability system is being used for all districts. Help the charter schools develop collaborative relationships with your local schools.” Laurie further explained that she “has developed relationships with the charter schools and their chartering agencies. Collaboratively we address the concerns. These interactions provide open, ongoing relationships leading to true collaboration.” It is a collaboration that has benefitted both the traditional and the charter school communities.

The payoff? A 96% attendance rate at her administration meetings, a positive perception from both traditional public school and charter schools about their counterparts, a place where accountability is modeled, the level of negativity has gone down remarkably, and the focus on building relationships has led to better overall compliance, and ultimately greater service for students.

Takeaways

In an environment such as Michigan where charter schools are their own Local Education Agencies (LEA) within a larger state system of Intermediate School Districts, the following takeaways may facilitate charter schools accessing key supports that will build their collective capacity to enroll and provide students with disabilities with high-quality services:

- Collaboration between traditional districts and charter schools is a must and should be facilitated by all those providing oversight.
- Technical assistance and professional development must be intentional and provided to all schools – at the same tables, at the same time, in the same ways.
- Clear expectations and repercussions must be agreed upon by the oversight organizations, and shared openly with constituent districts.
- Build relationships, build relationships, and then build more relationships.

Related Publications:

[Kent ISD Plan for the Delivery of Special Education Programs and Services](#)

[Intermediate School District Plan Criteria for the Delivery of Special Education Programs and Services](#)

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