Executive Summary

Success for All
Ensuring Academic Outcomes for Unique Student Populations in Hartford Public Schools

June 2015

Research confirms the ability of English-language learners and students with special needs to perform at high levels with the correct supports. To ensure our schools are able to provide these supports and meet the needs of diverse learners, Hartford must prioritize support for its unique student populations.
This year, E4E-Connecticut held more than 150 focus groups, school visits, and individual conversations with educators and stakeholders and surveyed more than 180 Hartford Public School educators across diverse content areas, grade levels, and teaching backgrounds. Our research and engagement led us to four research-based recommendations to improve academic outcomes for unique student populations in Hartford Public Schools.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

INDIVIDUALIZATION

Challenge: Our instructional practices do not currently meet the unique needs of all students, especially English-language learners and students with special needs.

Solution: The district should support principals and teachers to individualize instruction inside their schools and classrooms.

STUDENT-CENTERED INSTRUCTION: Student-centered instruction addresses the distinct learning needs and interests of individual students. To improve and expand on the work that is already happening on student-centered instruction, Hartford Public Schools should:

• Expand the pilot of student-centered instruction and blended learning that Hartford started in 2013 with the support of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

• Provide opportunities for teachers in schools already piloting student-centered instruction techniques to share best practices and lessons learned with their colleagues as they implement student-centered instruction.

• Promote accountability by releasing a report to highlight progress and areas for continued improvement in the district’s execution of student-centered instruction.

STUDENT SUCCESS PLANS: Student Success Plans (SSPs), which were created in 2011 as part of Connecticut Public Act 11-135, are individualized plans developed to address each student’s unique needs and to ensure the student’s postsecondary educational and career success. To improve the impact of Student Success Plans, Hartford Public Schools should:

• Start the SSP process earlier by requiring elementary school teachers to start exploring and documenting student strengths and interests, beginning in first grade.

• Ensure follow-through with Student Success Plans by providing time and guidance for middle and high school teachers to have regular conversations about SSPs and postgraduation goals with students who have unique needs.

STREAMLINED DATA SYSTEMS: Knowing which skills and concepts our students have mastered is necessary if we are to individualize instruction effectively. When fully operational, Performance Plus—a student assessment data tracking software—has the potential to provide teachers with a single point of contact to easily access all academic student data. To maximize this potential, Hartford Public Schools should:

• Set a public timeline for the transfer and consolidation of all student data into Performance Plus to provide teachers with easier access to student academic data.

“If we expect our students to collaborate as 21st-century learners, we, too, need to prioritize teacher collaboration.”

Paul Griswold, High School English, Bulkeley High School
COLLABORATION

Challenge: Classroom teachers are often unsupported to effectively collaborate with their colleagues who specialize in unique student populations.

Solution: The district should invest in teacher collaboration, particularly between general education teachers and teachers specializing in unique student populations.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TIME: We envision a redesigned schooling experience where teaching unique student populations can become a true partnership between general education teachers and specialists. To realize our vision, research confirms what we, as educators, already know: teacher collaboration is key. To ensure adequate time and space for collaboration, Hartford Public Schools should:

• Require school administrators to build in weekly time for teacher collaboration between general education teachers and teachers who specialize in unique student populations.

• Offer workshops focused on the needs of diverse learners during existing districtwide professional development days. These workshops could:
  » Be facilitated by teachers in the district who have achieved success with unique student populations.
  » Provide opportunities for teachers to share data, successes, and challenges, and begin to norm what high expectations should look like for diverse learners in the district.

CO-TEACHING: Co-teaching is an alternative instructional practice in which multiple educators, often general education teachers and a teacher specializing in unique student populations, work collaboratively to deliver instruction to a shared classroom of students with diverse needs. Hartford Public Schools should:

• Pilot models of co-teaching in several elementary, middle, and high school classrooms across the district with a particular emphasis on schools that serve high numbers of students with unique needs.

PARENT EMPOWERMENT

Challenge: Parents of students with unique needs are too often not authentically and consistently engaged in their school community, which limits their ability to advocate for their children’s success.

Solution: The district should ensure parents of students with unique needs are empowered to be true partners in our schools and district.

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION: Parent knowledge is the starting point for parent engagement. To ensure all parents have accessible and relevant information, we recommend Hartford Public Schools:

• Translate the Hartford Public Schools website into Spanish and release a timeline outlining when the website will be translated into other languages native to our families, including Karen (Burmese), Portuguese, Arabic, and Bosnian.

• Revise language on the Hartford Public Schools website and in other key documents in the Special Education Document Library to ensure jargon-free and accessible special education resources for parents.
EMPOWERED PARENT VOICES: Once information is shared in a way that is accessible to parents, the district must also proactively approach parents as partners in our education system. Hartford Public Schools should:

- Hold schools responsible for convening high-quality School Governance Council (SGC) meetings, and ensure greater transparency about when meetings occur and what decisions are made, including posting minutes of each school’s SGC meetings every month on the website.
- Encourage SGCs to include parents of students with unique needs.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Challenge: As a district, we have not held ourselves accountable to achieving consistent academic growth for unique student populations.

Solution: The district should use the existing accountability and support structure of the portfolio district model to drive academic growth for unique student populations.

SCHOOL QUALITY DATA MEETINGS: Through the portfolio district model, the district already has a structure in place that could be used to drive growth for unique student populations. The first component of the portfolio model in Hartford includes school quality data meetings in which school administrators present data and conduct data reflections with their Associate Superintendent for Instructional Leadership. To ensure the district’s portfolio model is based on growth-based accountability and support for unique student populations, HPS should:

- Ensure school administrators engage all educators in their buildings as they prepare student data for school quality data meetings with their associate superintendent.
- Review school data with an emphasis on growth and challenges among unique student populations.
- Provide clear and consistent follow-up to celebrate successes and address concerns reflected in data, particularly for students with disabilities and English-language learners.

INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS: The second component of the portfolio model in Hartford includes instructional rounds in which a team of associate superintendents conduct a school walkthrough to observe and collect data related to an identified problem of practice or focus area for feedback. To ensure the district’s portfolio model is based on growth-based accountability and support for unique student populations, HPS should:

- Ensure school administrators work collaboratively with all educators in the building to identify a problem of practice that will be the focus in the walkthrough. The problem of practice selected should highlight its impact on unique student populations.
- Conduct school walkthroughs with a diverse team of associate superintendents, parents, and teachers. During the walkthrough, the team should collect data and observations with particular attention to the problem of practice in a variety of education settings, including inclusion classrooms, pullout services, and self-contained classrooms.
- Share overarching observations with all educators in the building, not just administrators, after school walkthroughs.
CONCLUSION

As teachers, we believe in the ability of every child. To ensure all our students achieve their full potential, our district must individualize instruction to meet students’ diverse needs, encourage teacher collaboration, treat parents as true partners, and then hold our schools accountable to achieving ambitious growth for unique student populations.

“Meaningful and effective communication and collaboration among all stakeholders is critical to the success of all students.”

Justin Taylor, High School Social Studies, Bulkeley High School
For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table—the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators 4 Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers.

E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers’ Principles and Beliefs. E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action by advocating for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

Learn more at Educators4Excellence.org.
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