



Promising Practices

Intersection of Rapid Charter School Growth and Increased Accountability for Special Education Prompts Action: The Utah Strong Start Academy

The Challenge

Two distinct forces recently converged in Utah that led to the Board of Education office creating a training and mentoring program for new special education administrators and teachers: simultaneous steady growth of charter schools and nagging concerns about the quality of special education programs in these new schools and Results Driven Accountability (RDA) under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).



Charter School Growth

Charter School Growth The Utah Legislature passed the Utah Charter Schools Act in 1998 and since then, the state has seen continuous growth of its charter sector. As of October 2015, there were 118 charter schools in Utah serving 67,509 students. Demand for charters in Utah continues to outpace supply; thousands of students are on waitlists across the state. According to a January 2015 report published by the State Charter School Board, the primary charter school authorizer in Utah:

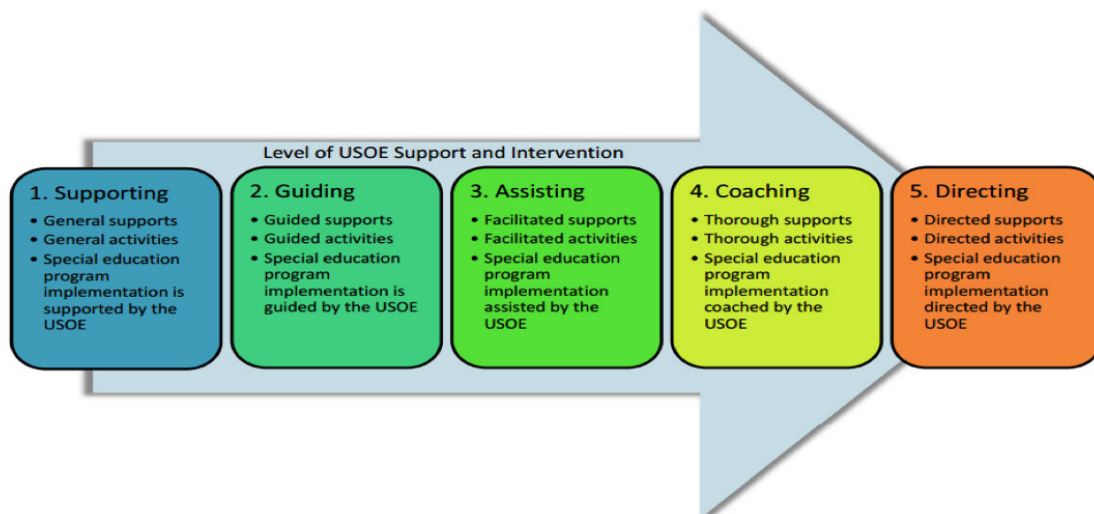
“[M]any charter schools perform well above state averages and other schools serving similar populations. The goal of charter schools is to provide additional educational options with quality outcomes for students and parents. Successful, quality charter schools are more than a gathering of excellent teachers and effective curricula. Some common trends seen among the most successful charter schools are strong professional development, good use of data, smaller class sizes, and leveled learning.”

However, while the charter sector grew in Utah, concerns persisted regarding the extent to which students with disabilities were accessing quality special education programs in Utah charter schools.

Results Driven Accountability (RDA)

Simultaneous to but separate from the growth of charter schools in Utah, in 2012 the U.S. Department of Education introduced federal requirements regarding the performance of students with disabilities relative to the goals of the IDEA and articulated under the auspices of RDA. Under RDA, states are required to track specific performance indicators reflecting not just compliance with IDEA, but more explicitly, outcomes. Performance goals associated with the indicators are articulated in a State Performance Plan (SPP). In Utah, the shift from compliance to performance-based accountability triggered new monitoring structures and tangible consequences for low performing schools.

Under RDA, the Utah State Board of Education office (USBE) collects both performance and compliance data and formulates a score for each school. In line with the transition from compliance-based to performance based special education accountability, each year the state collects data to formulate an overall performance score and categorize each school according to its need for support. Schools identified as Tier 1 and 2 are meeting the requirements to the satisfaction of the State. However, schools designated as a Tier 4 or 5 are assigned a coach. This is mandatory for all public schools – charter or not. This score is then used to identify schools as one of five respective tiers of need for state support and intervention ranging from the lowest, “Supporting,” (i.e. Tier 1) to the highest, “Directing” (i.e., Tier 5). (See the graphic below).



To track performance, the Special Education Services (SES) division of the USBE hires monitors to visit public schools. As the charter sector emerged and subsequently grew, SES initially hired two monitors charged with regularly visiting new charter schools to examine their special education delivery systems. However, this “paper and pencil” monitoring system proved challenging and inefficient as charter school numbers swelled. The new federal monitoring requirements associated with RDA further taxed state monitors. Charging two people to monitor all the new charter schools in accordance with growing federal and state requirements was overwhelming. Furthermore, the system of monitoring needed to evolve from a reflective compliance-based system to a results-driven, needs-specific system.

The first tangible change in Utah’s special education monitoring process was the creation of a state-wide, online program to gather information that would document individual school’s progress; the Utah Program Improvement Planning System (UPIPS). Staff uses the web-based program to track school progress on the federal special education performance indicators and compliance and the system provides a comprehensive overview of every single district and charter school in Utah. The UPIPS team consists of monitors, mentors, and coaches.

RDA introduced a more robust special education accountability system. While positive, USBE realized schools, including new and established charter schools, needed help to meet targets for each of the identified performance indicators outlined in the SPP. Consequently, the state felt a pressing need to disseminate accurate information quickly and build the capacity of new special education directors to meet the ambitious goals of RDA.

For more background information about Results Driven Accountability, see: <http://www.ed.gov/category/keyword/results-driven-accountability-rda> and <http://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/sppapr.html>



The Response

To effectively implement the new accountability and associated tracking systems, the state realized it needed to introduce and expand district-level coaching and mentoring to build school-level capacity. To address this pressing need, the Utah Special Education Services division designed and launched Strong Start Academy to assist schools to build effective and compliant special education programs. The USBE has a strong history of collaboration with charter schools (i.e., supporting as opposed to “doing things to them” or “catching them”) and it was in this spirit that the USBE proactively developed the Strong Start Academy.

The USBE initially designed the program to train and support new charter school special education directors and special education teachers but subsequently opened the program to traditional public schools as well. Rather than simply waiting for new special education directors in charter and traditional public schools to struggle under the rigors of the new RDA performance framework, USBE sought to proactively build capacity to pre-empt and ideally avoid schools being identified as being in need of targeted special education program support.

The Strategy: Strong Start Academy

The state offers Strong Start Academy in partnership with external contractors and special education directors. Special education directors and instructional staff in new and existing charter and traditional districts schools are the core target audience. And, when the subject matter pertains to business managers and school administrators, they are also invited to participate.

The core components of the **Strong Start Academy** are three, daylong training sessions, peer networking, and individualized support and mentoring. Utah uses its state IDEA funds to support the program, which is offered free-of-charge to the participants. Through the program, school personnel are provided substantive content regarding best instructional and administrative practices and the opportunity to engage with peers in both a collegial atmosphere and a more structured mentorship relationship. Over the course of a year, the program provides participants with a wealth of knowledge regarding special education policies and procedures, compliance, behavior and discipline procedures, dispute resolution and more. Each of the three sessions has a unique focus to orient and train charter and traditional public school special education personnel.

Training Sessions

In Session I, participants are provided a general overview of special education and introduced to the core components of a successful special education program. The session includes the opportunity for special education directors to meet with key personnel from the state special education and charter schools’ offices.

In Session II, participants are provided with more in-depth substantive content regarding areas including the provision of specialized instruction, state initiatives, program improvement planning, discipline procedures for students with disabilities, basic overview of special education, file requests, continuum of services, file organization, setting up caseloads, defining a reporting schedule, finance and how to access and use the Utah Program Improvement Planning System.



In Session III, participants are introduced to “hot topics” that every special education director in Utah should know and understand. These vary as issues change. During this session, participants also begin an ongoing assignment to develop an internal performance compliance review of their files. They also write a program improvement plan as required by the USBE that must subsequently be submitted and reviewed annually.

Strong Start Academy Mentors

Mentors are a key element of the Strong Start Academy and are charged with guiding participants through the program. Mentors spend approximately two hours per month supporting their assigned schools, answering questions onsite and offsite, and coordinating their training. The mentors also attend the three training sessions with the participants so they all receive the information at the same time. Amy Trombetti, Lead Team Member for the Strong Start Academy, reflected that the mentor component of the program “dramatically cuts down on the deer in the headlights looks we get as the schools know the mentors have their backs and will support them through any of the processes.”

The USBE developed clear guidelines for mentors and coaches. These include:

1. Candidates must apply for the position through an RFP process where they have to meet certain criteria;
2. Retired special education directors, retired state department of education personnel, special education directors from charter schools and administrators, and people who have left the state department of education are all encouraged to apply;
3. Candidates must have experience in order to be considered for mentoring and/or coaching positions. A qualified person may serve as a mentor in one location and a coach in another. Determinations for positions as coaches and mentors are made based on the candidates areas of expertise, and;
4. The RDA specialist assigns coaches and mentors to schools. Mentors are assigned to all new schools and offer 8+ hours of general special education supports per month to their schools. Schools who have a Tier 4 or 5 score are assigned coaches. Coaches work with their assigned school(s) for approximately 8 hours per month based on the intensity of support needed. New schools do not have a Tier assigned until their second year of operation as there are no data to report in their first year.

The USBE maintains a pool of 25 professionals who serve as monitors, mentors, or coaches. Each Strong Start mentor is asked to work with two to five schools. The mentors are matched with special education directors based on area of need and area of expertise, with geographic location taken into consideration as well as matching personalities. All new schools are provided a full spectrum of support, as it is not yet determinable what their areas of need will be. Existing schools with a Tier 4 or 5 rating are provided additional access to coaches. Mentors are expected to build relationships with their assigned schools and seldom, if ever, need to return to the USBE with any concerns. Because the “gotcha” mentality of a “tattle tale” is taken out of the equation, the benefits to the respective school special education programs, and ultimately the students, are great.

Strong Start mentors remain with a school for the entire school year. They are responsible for a myriad of supports both onsite and offsite. Should a school need additional assistance following the one-year period, the mentor can remain with them for an additional year. Should a school request support beyond two years, the school must then pay for the assistance they seek.



The Expectations

Every new charter school in Utah is invited and their special education personnel are expected to participate in the Strong Start Academy. New special education staff working in traditional public schools is also invited. Consequently, the cohorts typically are a mix of the new directors coming from charter schools and existing traditional districts. When the Academy was initially launched, there was one hurdle that had to be overcome: Participants from traditional and chartered public schools came with mutual misunderstandings about one another. However, USBE personnel have committed to breaking down the barriers between the schools in spite of simmering political disagreements. Experience has shown that over the year, the initial distrust between participants evaporates as the adversarial interactions evolved to more productive collaborative interactions, creating an environment of collegiality that extends far beyond the year of training. Through taking part in the program, participants have developed a culture of sharing and communicating, which has eliminated problems experienced in the past. The participants gain a better understanding of one another, which enables them to learn and benefit from their respective expertise.

New charter schools may opt out of participating in the Strong Start Academy. But since first introducing the program in 2013-14, every new charter school, and then in 2014-15 new Directors of existing programs, have opted to participate. All of the eligible charter schools have used mentors. Schools who contract with local management organizations (i.e., charter management organizations) are participating as well. Trombetti reported that keeping people informed and building trust and relationships have been the keys to getting all the different people to the table.

Rates of Participation :

2013-2014 School Year		2014-2015 School Year		2015-2016 School Year	
Charter	Traditional	Charter	Traditional	Charter	Traditional
6	Not invited	19	6	8	5

Metrics of Success

The USBE is collecting data to track the impact of the Strong Start Academy. Multiple metrics related to overall school performance levels, collaboration between charters and traditional districts, access to statewide support networks, and special education teacher turnover indicate that Strong Start Academy is having a positive impact across Utah.

While only in its third year, early indicators suggest the program is generating valuable returns in line with the goals of RDA. For instance, in the last three years, all of the participating schools—33 charter schools and 11 traditional public schools—have been identified as Tier 1 or Tier 2 in the Utah State Performance Plan tracking special education performance. Given the many challenges new charter schools in particular can face when developing special education programs from scratch; this is an accomplishment worth celebrating.

The USBE has been intentional about ensuring that everyone in the SES department is committed to supporting ALL districts and charter schools. Through Strong Start Academy, the USBE has successful linked charters and traditional public schools in everything from professional development to obtaining resources for students with more significant and intense special education supports.

In addition, Strong Start Academy has fostered a partnership with the Utah Professional Development Network to help participants assure the priorities in their Utah Program Improvement Plan align with broader USBE priorities. The Network maintains a web-based system of support for all schools at: <http://www.updnetwork.org/cms/>.

Finally, turnover of special education staff is a perennial challenge.

Whether it is a resource room

teacher or a special education director, professionals in these challenging jobs often feel overwhelmed and under-supported. In a focused effort to stem the tide of attrition, all new special education staff members are invited to participate in Strong Start Academy and participation has reportedly decreased turnover. Additional data are required to quantify the reduction.

When asked why other states should look into replicating the Strong Start Academy, Trombetti said, “The biggest thing is if you want to open up charters that will succeed, why wouldn’t you want to start successfully? It’s a no brainer. Special education can be overwhelming because nobody thinks that they will need a self-contained room, or have a child they cannot manage. They don’t know what they don’t know. [Strong Start Academy] helps to inform them going forward. If we are opening charter schools and we want to make a great place for kids to learn, this is a great tool that will directly benefit your kids.”



Takeaways

Utah's Strong Start Academy initiative is an example of a state education agency proactively investing resources to ensure new special education directors, working in both charter and traditional public schools, have the technical knowledge, skills and support required for them to succeed. Other states can learn from Utah's efforts to make early investments that have the promise of paying dividends for students with disabilities in both types of schools and break down the walls between charter and traditional public schools. Four takeaways for other states interested in building the capacity of new special education staff emerged from our exploration of Utah's Strong Start Academy:

1. Reach out to new schools and new special education directors early and repeatedly. Provide a system and structure that is effective and includes substantive instructional components. This assists schools in being compliant from the beginning instead of being "caught" out of compliance down the road.
2. Promote a collaborative relationship – don't focus on catching schools doing something wrong. Be collaborative with state officials, authorizers, other providers, districts, everyone. Trust must be built from the beginning. Each year the participants create relationships with one another and develop a support system outside of their own systems. When the state is no longer directly involved with the schools, participants will have colleagues to fall back on.
3. Give new schools and leaders the opportunity to meet key state personnel. Putting faces to names and providing opportunities for interaction, collaboration and networking will help build a relationship with each department at the state level. Include them all: Section 504, Title I, English Learners, Special Education, and the State Charter School Board Office.
4. Provide qualified mentors to develop relationships with emerging professionals to reinforce content provided in training and provide individualized coaching.

Related Resources:

Power Point for Utah State Board of Education: <http://www.schools.utah.gov/charterschools/Training/Directors-Meetings/2013-Directors-Meetings/September-2013/Special-Education---Strong-Start-Academy.aspx>

UPIPS Program Improvement Supports and Activities Rubric

2014-15 Program implementation Evaluation Rubric

Related Publications:

Utah State Charter School Board (January 2015). Utah's Public Charter Schools Report, January 2015: Expanding Our Public Education System. Utah State Office of Education. Retrieved from: <http://www.schools.utah.gov/charterschools/Annual-Report/2014-Public-Report-Final.aspx>

U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) RDA: Results Driven Accountability. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/rda/index.html?exp=0>

Author: National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

April 2016

NATIONAL CENTER FOR
SPECIAL EDUCATION



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