

# Community School District 17 Students With Disabilities

FINAL REPORT



New York City Department of Education External District Curriculum Audit | August 2011

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# INTRODUCTION

This final report summarizes findings from an external district curriculum audit of Community School District 17 (CSD 17) by Learning Point Associates (LPA), an affiliate of the American Institutes for Research. This audit was conducted in response to the district being identified as in need of improvement under the NYSED differentiated accountability plan, pursuant to the accountability requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The audit process utilized was developed for and carried out under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Office of School Development, within the Division of Portfolio Planning.

CSD 17 was identified as in need of improvement in part due to its failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in English Language Arts (ELA) for its students with disabilities (SWD) and English language learner (ELL) populations. The audit process focused on strategies and practices related to the ELA instruction of SWDs and ELLs. In particular, the audit process examined practices and strategies being implemented in schools in good standing (“high-performing” schools), and compared those to practices and strategies being implemented in schools not in good standing (“low-performing” schools). The purpose of the audit was not to determine compliance, but rather to ensure that the NYCDOE and CSD 17 gain useful feedback about challenges and effective practices that can have an impact on the achievement of SWDs and ELLs.

This particular report includes findings related to SWDs and all information relates to SWDs only. A companion report includes findings related to ELLs.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

Several questions guided the data collection, analysis, and reporting for the CSD 17 audit. The questions focused on differences between high- and low-performing schools on critical factors related to educating SWDs. We asked how high- and low-performing schools in CSD 17 differ with respect to the following:

- Curricular standards used to guide instruction of SWDs
- Modifications to the curricular materials and/or programs when teaching SWDs
- Implementation of differentiation instruction
- Implementation of appropriate instructional strategies for teaching SWDs
- Implementation of data-driven instruction
- Use of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to inform instruction
- Availability and quality of supplemental services and interventions for SWDs
- Strategies to manage behavior in classrooms and throughout the school
- Professional development focused on topics related to the instruction of SWDs

- Collaboration among general education and special education teachers
- Availability and quality of support staff for educating SWDs; and
- Administrative leadership regarding the education of SWDs

Data that pertained to each of the 12 guiding questions above were examined across all data sources.

## **COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 17**

CSD 17 is located in Brooklyn, New York. In 2010–11, when the audit was conducted, the district had 50 schools, including 17 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 13 high schools, 5 K-8 schools, and 5 secondary schools (grades 6-12). The district serves 26,897 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, of whom 13 percent<sup>1</sup> are SWDs and 9 percent are ELLs. Eighty-five percent are African American, 11 percent are Hispanic, and 2 percent are Asian. Many of the students are economically disadvantaged, with 80 percent qualifying for free lunch and 7 percent for reduced-price lunch.

## **METHODS**

Data collection and analysis focused on a subset of schools where SWDs have been successful, as well as a subset of schools where success educating SWDs has been more of a challenge, to identify focused strategies and practices to improve the achievement of all students. Analysis of these data was combined with analysis of data gathered from all principals in the district, and a sample of network staff interviewees. All data are aggregated at the district level.

Data were collected from six sources. Two sources (principal survey and district administrator interviews) represented *all* schools in CSD 17, and four sources (school staff interviews, classroom observations, teacher surveys, and document review) represented a sub-sample of three high-achieving and three low-achieving schools within the district. The district-level sources give a more comprehensive picture of potential differences between high-performing and low-performing schools district-wide, while the school-level sources present a more focused and nuanced picture of these differences at the school level. Combined analysis of these data sources supported development of the key findings presented later in this report.

### ***District-Level Data Sources***

Two district-level data sources were used to inform findings for this audit: (1) a principal survey and (2) network administrator interviews. The principal survey was administered to principals of all 50 schools in CSD 17. Web-based surveys were administered over the course of six weeks in May and June 2011. The purpose of the survey was to collect information on curriculum and instruction practices for the 2010–11 school year related to teaching students with disabilities

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from the 2010-11 enrollment data provided in the CEP for each school in CSD 17.

and English language learners. Survey questions addressed issues such as access to the general education curriculum, instructional strategies, school-wide interventions, professional development, collaboration among staff, and administrative support. The overall response rate for the survey was 84 percent. Survey data were analyzed by comparing responses from principals in high-performing schools with those from principals in low-performing schools. High-performing schools were those identified by the district office to be “in good standing,” meaning the school met AYP for all subgroups in all subject areas based on most recent state test data (2009–10). Low-performing schools in the sample were those whose accountability status was Improvement, Corrective Action, or Restructuring.<sup>2</sup> The number of respondents to any given item for high-performing schools ranged from 20 to 25; for low-performing schools, the range was 13 to 16.

In addition to the principal survey, district-level data were gathered through a set of interviews with network staff who work with schools in CSD 17. Four network leaders participated in telephone interviews, offering their perspective on how high- and low-performing schools differ with respect to the education of SWDs. These interviews were used to add contextual, supporting information to the overall study findings.

### ***School-Level Data Sources***

The four school-level data sources used in this audit were collected as part of site visits to three high-performing and three low-performing schools within CSD 17. The sample of site visit schools was selected in collaboration with NYCDOE. All six schools had relatively high percentages of SWDs (19 percent or more) in their school populations. High-performing schools were those whose accountability status was determined to be “in good standing” during the 2009-10 school year. The accountability status of the low-performing schools was Improvement, Corrective Action, or Restructuring, due in part to failure to make AYP for the SWD subgroup.

One-day site visits were conducted in each of these schools during May and June of 2011. During the site visits, researchers conducted approximately eight staff interviews and eight classroom observations. Interviewees typically included the principal, special education coordinator, three special education teachers (representing self-contained, resource, and co-taught settings), and three general education teachers (including at least one co-teacher and teachers who have at least three SWDs in their classroom). Interview protocols included questions about curriculum, instruction, professional development, and staffing. All interviews were recorded (with the permission of the interviewee) and transcribed, and then coded using

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible, although unlikely, for a school to be not in good standing, but still have made AYP for its SWD population. A school in this situation would technically not be “low-performing” with respect to its SWD population. In 2010-11, of the 16 CSD 17 schools categorized as low-performing for this study, 8 did not make AYP in ELA for their SWD subgroup. None of the remaining eight made AYP for SWDs. Seven had insufficient numbers of SWDs to determine AYP status for this subgroup, and one made AYP for SWDs through the “Safe Harbor” provision. Because these eight schools were deemed not in good standing overall, and because there was not enough information to determine if they could be considered “high-performing” for SWDs, these schools remained in the “low-performing” group for this study.

ATLAS, a qualitative data analysis software program. Researchers then reviewed all codes to identify common themes and emerging differences in interview responses between teachers in high- and low-performing schools.

Observations were conducted for an entire class period in both general education and special education settings. Classrooms were selected in collaboration with the school principal, in order to accommodate scheduling and to ensure that a range of settings was included. Observers used an observation protocol covering the following topics: classroom environment, behavior management, grouping strategies, student activities, instructional practices, differentiated instruction, student engagement, and student-teacher interactions. Researchers reviewed observation data and notes to identify any consistent differences between classrooms observed in high- and low-performing schools.

In addition to the site visits, all teachers in the selected sub-sample of schools were asked to complete a teacher survey. This survey focused on actions, resources, and strategies related to identifying students for academic interventions and provision of effective interventions for SWDs; classroom practices; and school capacity, particularly instructional leadership, school management, professional development, and collaborative opportunities. The survey was administered in hard copy and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Response rates ranged from 14 percent to 93 percent in the sample schools. Data were analyzed by comparing responses between teachers in high- and low-performing schools.

Finally, LPA collected and analyzed relevant documents from each of the selected schools. These data included redacted IEPs, and the school's CEP, Quality Review report, school-wide behavior plan, and professional development plans. IEPs were coded to determine the extent to which goals are reflective of the general education curriculum and based on performance data, the reasons for removing a student from the general education environment are indicated, and the range of instructional accommodations is listed. The CEPs and Quality Review reports were coded to note language and action items relevant to the needs of students with disabilities. The school-wide behavior plans were reviewed and analyzed in conjunction with interview and observation data related to behavior, to determine the extent to which consistent expectations for behavior are communicated and implemented in the school. Professional development documents were reviewed in conjunction with interview data to determine the extent to which teachers are participating in professional development related to the instruction of students with disabilities. Again, researchers looked across schools to identify any consistent patterns of difference between documents submitted by high- and low-performing schools.

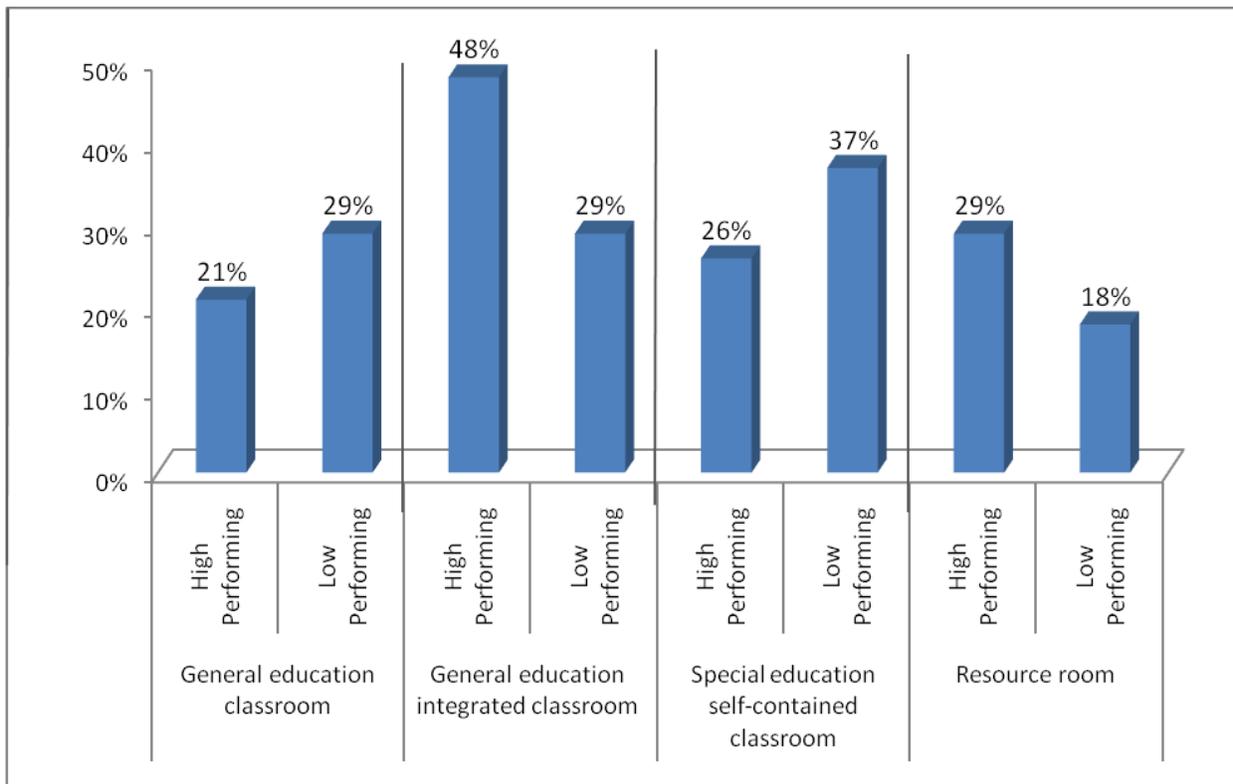
### ***Study Limitations***

This is a comparative study of high- and low-performing schools in CSD 17, with respect to the education of SWDs. However, three caveats must be noted. First, the definitions of “high-performing” and “low-performing” used for the purposes of this study are based on schools’ 2010–11 accountability status. These definitions do not directly take into account academic

performance of SWDs, nor take into account recent progress that schools may have made with respect to their SWD population.

Second, it is important to note that this study is not intended, nor able, to make determinations about what kinds of practices or strategies *cause* better outcomes for SWDs. This study identifies a set of practices and strategies that appear to be more consistently present in high-performing than in low-performing schools. There are likely many other factors that contribute to differences in SWD performance between the categories of schools, and these were not controlled for in this study. For example, according to the principal survey administered in this study, the identification rate for SWDs is higher in low-performing than in high-performing schools (17 percent compared with 13 percent). Additionally, principals in high-performing schools reported a higher percentage of SWDs in general education integrated settings (48 percent) and resource rooms (29 percent) than did principals in low-performing schools (29 percent and 18 percent, respectively). Conversely, principals in low-performing schools reported a higher percentage of SWDs in self-contained classrooms (37 percent) than did principals in high-performing schools (26 percent; see Exhibit 1).

**Exhibit 1. Average percentage of students with disabilities by reported educational setting, for high- (n=13) and low-performing (n=11) schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

Note: Students may be reported in multiple settings; therefore the sum across the categories do not equal 100 percent for a given school type. A “general education integrated classroom” was defined in the survey as a general education teacher and a special education teacher co-teaching in the same classroom.

These data demonstrate that SWDs in high-performing schools, in general, are served in less restrictive settings than those in low-performing schools. While one could argue that this difference in service delivery models may be one of the factors contributing to the differences in SWD performance, it could also reflect differences in the populations of SWDs. For example, those SWDs enrolled in low-performing schools may have higher needs than those in high-performing schools, and this difference may be a contributing factor to differences in their performance.

Third, most of the findings from this audit are based in large part on data gathered from a sub-sample of six schools. In some cases, school-level data are combined with data from the district-level principal survey to inform a finding. In all cases, multiple data sources are used to inform findings, and no findings are based on one data source only. Nonetheless, caution should be taken in generalizing findings from these data to all schools in the district. These findings should be used to inform district and NYCDOE personnel about challenges and effective practices that could potentially have an impact on outcomes for SWDs in CSD 17 schools and elsewhere.

## KEY FINDINGS

This section presents key findings from the District 17 audit. Key findings reflect strategies and practices that were observed more consistently in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools, and are supported by multiple data sources. Below, we present each key finding, followed by a narrative describing the supporting evidence.

### KEY FINDING 1: ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

**Administrative leadership in general, and regarding the instruction of students with disabilities, is stronger in high-performing than in low-performing schools.**

Key Finding 1 is supported by data from the principal survey, network leader interviews, teacher surveys, school staff interviews, and document reviews. Stronger administrative leadership was generally reported in high-performing schools compared with low-performing schools, including administrative leadership regarding the instruction of students with disabilities. This theme was consistent across interviews with network leaders and school staff, principal and teacher surveys, and a review of the documents that were submitted by the schools.

#### ***Supporting Evidence***

Network leader interviewees reported that strong leadership is the key to success for high-performing schools. One network leader said, “When it comes down to it, that’s what it boils down to. How effective is the leadership?” When asked how high- and low-performing schools differ with respect to the instructional strategies and accommodations that their teachers are using, another network interviewee responded, “I am going to start with leadership. It’s really about leadership and how the leadership capitalizes on who they have in their building to ensure

that you know all get all. And how there are high expectations for all. It starts from the leadership.”

According to teacher interviews, more teachers in high-performing schools described their school administration as supportive (83 percent vs. 53 percent) and reported that the administration is a visible presence in their classroom (67 percent vs. 58 percent) through walkthroughs and classroom observations. A teacher illustrated the administrative support in the school:

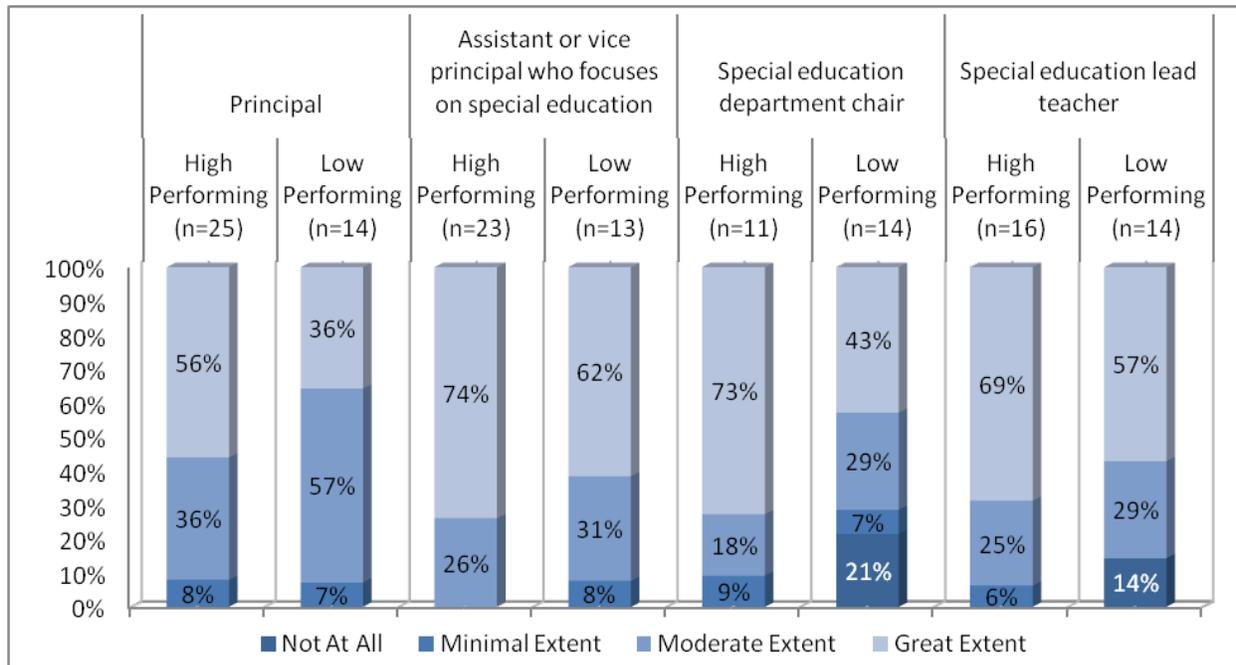
“If you're having a problem, you can always speak with them ... if you're short of resources, if you know of the resources that you can use to make your life better, you can always say to them, I went online, or, there is this thing going on at Scholastic or somewhere else today. There are some magazines that I can order for my students, and—or, there are some books that I would like to get for the whole class to read. And so, they support you. You can always go to them ... they are willing to go the extra mile to get you what you need in your classroom.”

A special education teacher described the administration as “very supportive. When it comes around at the beginning of the year, we have the same materials, and we're pretty much informed, and there's certain professional development workshops, just like the general ed.”

One aspect of effective administrative leadership involves the knowledge that administrators have about special education. As one special education teacher in a high-performing school said, “Usually you find a lot of administrators—they don't really know too much about special education, but fortunately we have key people in place who have the background, who have the knowledge. So, the support is there at an administrative level.” Indeed, data from the principal survey showed that the percentage of principals in high-performing schools who reported that their level of knowledge on issues related to SWDs is “high” (41 percent) was greater than those in low-performing schools (20 percent).

Principal survey data also showed the greater degree of direct support that principals and other leaders in high-performing schools provide to improve teachers instruction of SWDs, compared with low-performing schools. A greater percentage of principals in high-performing schools (56 percent) than principals in low-performing schools (36 percent) reported that they themselves provide direct support “to a great extent” to staff to improve instruction of SWDs. Additionally, high-performing schools appeared to receive greater levels of support from their special education department chair (91 percent of 11 principals reported “moderate” or “great” support, in comparison with 71 percent of 14 principals in low-performing schools) and their special education lead teacher (94 percent of 16 versus 86 percent of 14; see Exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2. Principal respondents' perceptions of the extent of direct support provided by staff to improve teachers' instruction of students with disabilities, by staff category, for high- and low-performing schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

Teacher survey respondents from high-performing schools reported greater levels of support from their principals regarding the instruction of SWDs than did teacher survey respondents from low-performing schools. Fifty-nine percent of teachers (29 of 49) from high-performing schools reported that the principal provides direct support to improve their instruction of students with disabilities to a moderate or great extent, compared with 39 percent of teachers (23 of 59) from low-performing schools. This difference was particularly pronounced among general education teachers who teach SWDs. Seventy-two percent (15 of 22) of general education teachers of SWDs from high-performing schools reported that their principal provides direct support to a moderate or great extent to improve their instruction of students with disabilities, compared with 24 percent (8 of 33) of teachers in this group in low-performing schools.

Teacher survey respondents in high-performing schools also rated principal leadership skills higher than teachers from low-performing schools. More teachers from high-performing schools than from low-performing schools agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- The principal at this school makes clear to the staff expectations for meeting instructional goals (87.0 percent compared with 79.1 percent).
- The principal at this school communicates a clear vision for our school (81.4 percent vs. 73.4 percent).

- The principal at this school sets high standards for teaching (85.2 percent vs. 77.5 percent).
- The principal at this school presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development (84.9 percent vs. 75.4 percent).
- The principal at this school carefully tracks student academic progress (87.0 percent vs. 75.8 percent).
- The principal at this school actively monitors the quality of teaching in this school (86.8 percent vs. 80.6 percent).

For each of these statements, the difference in responses between teachers in high- and low-performing schools was again particularly large among general education teachers of SWDs.

## **KEY FINDING 2: INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES**

**Teachers in high-performing schools described and implemented a wider range of appropriate instructional strategies than those in low-performing schools.**

Key Finding 2 is supported by data from school staff interviews, classroom observations, and the principal survey. Instructional strategies include modeling, scaffolding, grouping, assistive technology, and the use of graphic organizers and manipulatives. Interview and observation data demonstrated more consistent implementation of many of these strategies in high-performing than in low-performing schools.

### ***Supporting Evidence***

All of the teachers that were interviewed in high- and low-performing schools described instructional strategies that they use to teach students with disabilities. However, teachers in high-performing schools described, and were observed implementing, a wider range of appropriate instructional strategies than those in low-performing schools. Seventy-two percent of teachers in high-performing schools (13 of 18) described three or more instructional strategies they use with SWDs, and 28 percent (5 of 18) described one or two strategies, compared with 53 percent of teachers in low-performing schools (10 of 19) describing three or more strategies and 47 percent (9 of 19) describing one or two strategies. Some of the more commonly reported instructional strategies included modeling, scaffolding, grouping, assistive technology, and the use of manipulatives.

Among the strategies that were reported, grouping was observed and reported in teacher interviews more often in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools. Seventy-eight percent (14 of 18) of teachers in high-performing schools reported that they use grouping as an instructional strategy to teach students with disabilities, compared with 42 percent (8 of 19) of teachers in low-performing schools. This finding is further supported by classroom observation data, where whole class instruction was observed more frequently in classrooms in low-

performing schools than in classrooms in high-performing schools. Specifically, whole class instructional activity was being implemented at least 50 percent of the time in 65 percent of classrooms observed in low-performing schools, compared with 57 percent of classrooms observed in high-performing schools. Additionally, students were observed working collaboratively in 14 of 18 (78 percent) classrooms visited in high-performing schools, compared with 7 of 12 (58 percent) of classrooms visited in low-performing schools. Classroom observation data further showed that instruction provided opportunities for students to work collaboratively in 14 of 18 (78 percent) classrooms visited in high-performing schools, compared with 8 of 16 (50 percent) of classroom visited in low-performing schools.

The use of technology was also more frequently reported as an instructional strategy for teaching students with disabilities, and found to be more prevalent, in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools. Fifty percent of teachers (9 of 18) in high-performing schools and 26 percent of teachers (5 of 19) in low-performing schools reported using technology as an instructional strategy for SWDs. A teacher from a high-performing school said, “I love to use the SMART Board with them because it’s a very good interactive tool that all the students benefit [from]—not just those with disabilities, but all the students.” Another teacher from a high-performing school noted,

“We do really well differentiating our instruction and making sure the activities that are presented to the students are not just like a one size fit all. We try to incorporate different approaches ... we have a handful of the smart boards in the class. But we're using technology. That's a big thing.”

Forty-four percent of teachers (8 of 18) observed in high-performing schools were using technology to support instruction, compared with one third (5 of 15) of teachers observed in low-performing schools. Students were observed using technology to support learning (e.g., using computers) more frequently in classrooms in high-performing schools (29 percent, or 5 of 17) compared with low-performing schools (9 percent, or 1 of 11). Principals that were surveyed from high-performing schools were more likely to report offering extensive PD coverage on using technology for instruction and learning (50 percent, or 12 of 24 principals) compared with principals from low-performing schools (29 percent, or 4 of 14).

Observation data revealed some additional differences in instructional practices between teachers in high-and low-performing schools (see Exhibits 3 and 4). For example, students were observed working on sustained writing/composition and sustained reading more frequently in classrooms in high-performing schools compared with low-performing schools. Students were observed working on sustained/writing composition for at least 25 percent of the class period in 6 of the 17 (35 percent) classrooms in high-performing schools compared with 3 of 12 (25 percent) classrooms in low-performing schools. Students were observed reading for at least 25 percent of the class period in 10 of the 17 (59 percent) classrooms in high-performing schools compared with 1 of 12 (8 percent) classrooms in low-performing schools.

**Exhibit 3. Number and percentage of classrooms where sustained reading and writing/ composition were observed, by time observed, for high- (n= 17) and low-performing (n=12) schools**

	High-Performing	Low-Performing
<b>Students working on sustained writing/composition</b>		
0-25% of Time	4 (24%)	4 (33%)
25-50% of Time	7 (41%)	5 (42%)
50-100% of Time	5 (29%)	3 (25%)
75-100% of Time	1 (6%)	0 (0%)
<b>Students working on sustained reading</b>		
0-25% of Time	2 (12%)	8 (67%)
25-50% of Time	5 (29%)	3 (25%)
50-100% of Time	7 (41%)	0 (0%)
75-100% of Time	3 (18%)	1 (8%)

Source: District 17 Curriculum Audit Observation Data (LPA, 2011)

Literacy-rich environments were observed slightly more often in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools. High-quality literacy-rich environments were observed in 14 of 18 (78 percent) classrooms in high-performing schools compared with 9 of 15 (60 percent) classrooms in low-performing schools. Additionally, students appeared on task and engaged in ELA activities slightly more often in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools. High-quality student engagement in ELA activities was observed in 13 of 18 (72 percent) classrooms in the high-performing schools compared with 6 of 16 (38 percent) classrooms in the low-performing schools (see Exhibit 4), with the greatest differences observed in self-contained and general education settings. High-quality student engagement in ELA activities was observed in all of the self-contained classrooms that were observed in high-performing schools (6 of 6) compared with 20 percent (1 of 5) of self-contained classrooms in low-performing schools. High-quality student engagement in ELA activities was also observed in all of the general education classrooms that were observed in high-performing schools (5 of 5) compared with 67 percent (2 of 3) of the general education classrooms in low-performing schools.

**Exhibit 4. Number and percentage of classrooms where high-quality classroom environment was observed, by setting, for high- (n=18) and low-performing (n=15–16) schools**

	High-Performing	Low-Performing
<b>Literacy-rich environment</b>		
All settings	14 (78%)	9 (60%)
GenEd	5 (100%)	2 (67%)
Co-taught	3 (60%)	1 (20%)
Self-contained	4 (67%)	4 (80%)
Resource	2 (100%)	2 (100%)
<b>Students appeared on task and engaged in ELA activities</b>		
All settings	13 (72%)	6 (38%)
GenEd	5 (100%)	2 (67%)
Co-taught	1 (20%)	0 (0%)
Self-contained	6 (100%)	1 (20%)
Resource	1 (50%)	3 (100%)

Source: District 17 Curriculum Audit Observation Data (LPA, 2011)

Note: Among high-performing schools, five classrooms observed were general education settings, five were co-taught, six were self-contained, and two were resource rooms. Among low-performing schools, three classrooms observed were general education settings, five were co-taught, five were self-contained, and three were resource rooms.

### **KEY FINDING 3: DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION**

**Differentiated instruction is implemented more often, more consistently, and with greater quality in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools.**

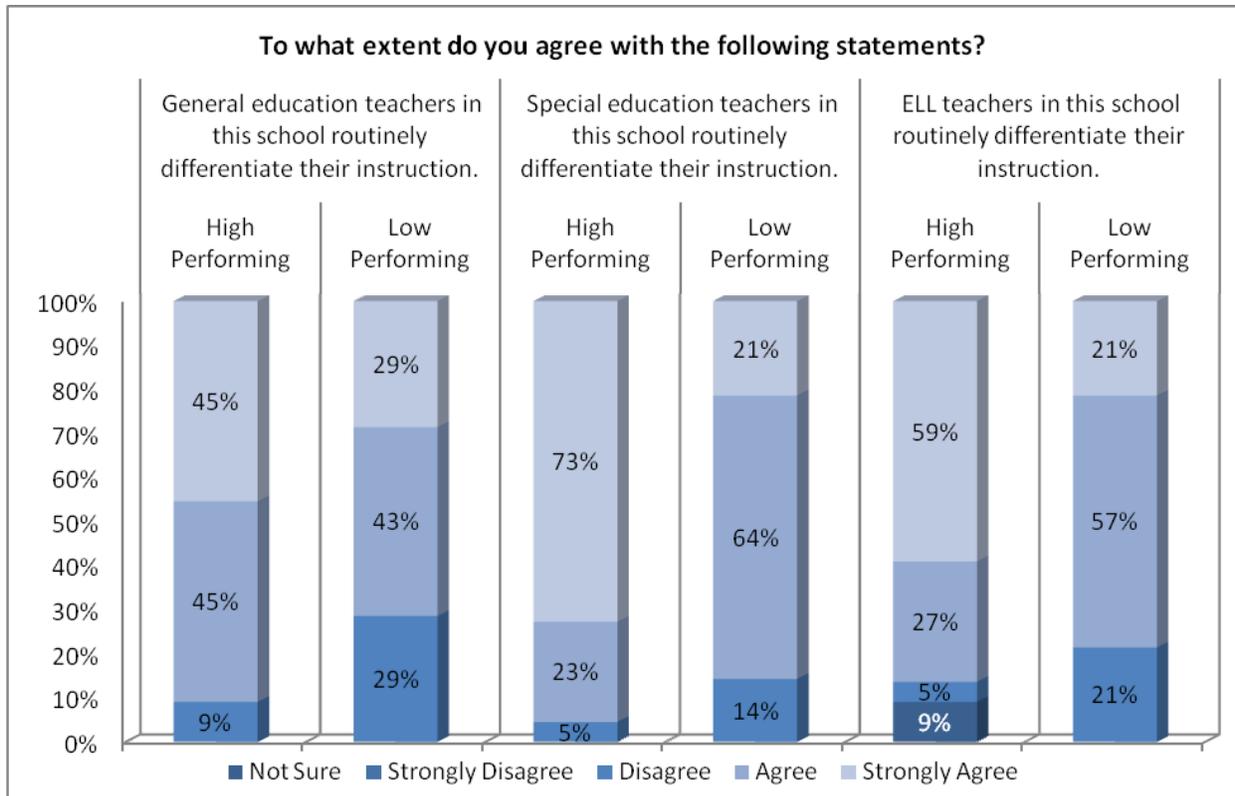
Key Finding 3 is supported by data from the network leader interviews, principal survey, teacher surveys, school staff interviews, classroom observations, and document review. Together, these data sources demonstrate a difference between high- and low-performing schools in the frequency and quality of implementation of differentiated instruction. For example, although the majority of teachers surveyed and interviewed in both samples of high- and low-performing schools reported differentiating their instruction, those in high-performing schools gave more detailed examples of how they did this than those in low-performing schools, and were also observed implementing differentiated instruction more often than were those in low-performing schools. Reports from principals and network leaders lend further support to the finding that teachers in high-performing schools are differentiating instruction more routinely and with better quality than those in low-performing schools.

#### **Supporting Evidence**

Key Finding 3 is supported by data from all six data sources. One network leader said, “Our higher-performing schools, they do a much better job [of implementing differentiated instruction].” According to the principal surveys, teachers are more likely to routinely differentiate their instruction in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools (see

Exhibit 5). For example, 16 of 22 principals (73 percent) of high-performing schools strongly agreed that their special education teachers routinely differentiate their instruction, compared with 3 of 14 principals (21 percent) in low-performing schools. Additionally, 45 percent of principal respondents in high-performing schools strongly agreed that their general education teachers routinely differentiate their instruction, compared with 29 percent of principals in low-performing schools.

**Exhibit 5. Percentage of principal respondents by their perception of the use of differentiated instruction in their school, for high- (n=22) and low-performing (n=14) schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

All of the teachers that were interviewed in both high-performing schools (n=18) and low-performing schools (n=19) reported that they differentiate instruction. Additionally, according to teacher surveys, the majority of teachers in both high- and low-performing schools reported that they differentiate instruction daily or almost daily. However, 67 percent of teacher respondents from high-performing schools reported that they differentiate instruction at least daily, compared with 58 percent from low-performing schools. Differentiated instruction was also observed slightly more often in high-performing schools (9 of 18, or 50 percent of classrooms visited) than in low-performing schools (6 of 17, or 35 percent of classrooms visited).

Differences in the quality and implementation of differentiated instruction emerged through school staff interviews and classroom observations. Seventy-eight percent (14 of 18) of teachers

that were interviewed in high-performing schools provided detailed examples of how they differentiate instruction, compared with only 42 percent (8 of 19) of teachers interviewed in low-performing schools. For example, one special education teacher described determining small groups for instruction this way: “So the students were pretty much grouped according to their likes and also in terms of their needs.” A general education teacher with SWDs in the classroom shared,

“One group went over [to] the computers, and they read some drawing conclusion paragraphs, and they answered some questions. In another group, two students listened to the tape, and in front of them they had a book that they could follow along. And then some questions were asked and they were asked to choose A, B, C, or D [rather than generate their own response].”

A greater variety of differentiated instructional strategies was observed in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools. For example, students in a general education classroom in a high-performing school were divided into eight groups for a lesson on drawing conclusions. The group activities included some students working independently on a computer, some following along to a selection read aloud with text provided, some working in collaborative small groups (with some small groups assisted by the teacher and paraprofessional), and one student working independently on a worksheet. A similar practice was observed in a co-taught classroom in a high-performing school; students were divided into three groups. Each group received varying levels of support from either the special education or general education teacher. This support ranged from one-on-one assistance to facilitating the efforts of peer collaboration. In a self-contained special education classroom in a high-performing school, students were observed participating in a variety of follow-up activities to a story read by the teacher on animals. Activities included cutting out pictures of animals and sorting them by type, placing pictures of animals next to a sentence description, drawing an animal and writing the first letter of the animal name, and drawing animals and writing descriptive sentences about them.

In contrast, in low-performing schools, differentiated instruction appeared limited to different-leveled worksheets for independent activities. Differentiation was not observed in two of the three general education classrooms visited, and in the third, packets were distributed for independent seat work with worksheets assigned by reading level. In two of the five co-taught classrooms observed, no differentiated instructional strategies were observed. In the remaining three co-taught classrooms, there was some slight variation in the complexity of worksheets provided for independent work. In two for the four self-contained classrooms observed, no differentiation occurred, with differentiation in the remaining classrooms being leveled worksheets for independent seatwork.

Principals that were surveyed from high-performing schools were more likely to report offering extensive professional development coverage on differentiated instruction (18 of 24, or 75 percent) than were principals from low-performing schools (6 of 14, or 43 percent). According to

a review of professional development documents, there appeared to be slightly more coverage of differentiated instruction in professional development among high-performing schools than among low-performing schools. For example, two of three high-performing schools offered professional development on differentiated instruction, and the third offered professional development on topics related to differentiated instruction (e.g., Accelerated Literacy Learning, use of manipulatives). Only one of three low-performing schools offered professional development on differentiated instruction, and only one offered professional development on topics related to differentiated instruction (e.g., Achieve 3000). The third low-performing school submitted vague documentation of professional development. Review of additional school documents showed that two of three high-performing schools included increasing professional development related to differentiated instruction as a school goal, while none of the documentation from the low-performing schools referenced professional development related to differentiated instruction.

## **KEY FINDING 4: DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTION**

**Data are used to inform instruction more consistently in high-performing than in low-performing schools.**

Key Finding 4 is supported by data from the principal survey, network leader interviews, school staff interviews, and document review. Together these data sources demonstrate that in both high- and low-performing schools, data on student achievement are being collected. However, the *use of data to inform instruction* is more prominent in high-performing than low-performing schools.

### ***Supporting Evidence***

Data from four data sources show evidence that data are more consistently used to inform instruction in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools. Teachers that were surveyed and interviewed in both high- and low-performing schools reported that they are referring to and using data when planning and delivering instruction. However, while the majority of teachers from both high- and low-performing schools reported that they use data to inform them of their students' achievement and to guide their instruction, more teachers interviewed from high-performing schools (8 of 18) than low-performing schools (2 of 19) provided detailed examples of how they use data to adjust their instructional strategies (e.g., forming instructional groups) and/or content focus in a particular lesson.

One teacher in a high-performing school described using student achievement data to plan and guide instruction as follows:

“We use Acuity, and we group them according to tier one, two, three, and four. Sometimes we have kids who fall in tier one and maybe ELA, but they may be tier four in math, so we shuffle them around ... for the subject areas. We do the Acuity—we did one predictive, the diagnostic, and an IT—three times, I think, already, for the year. I

look at them, like, once, but the grouping—when I look at the results, I use the item analysis, and I put them according to groups to work on strategies that they are weak in. So, I might have kids who are weak in inferencing, so I would work on that group with inferencing while another group may be doing predictions, and another group may be doing main idea.”

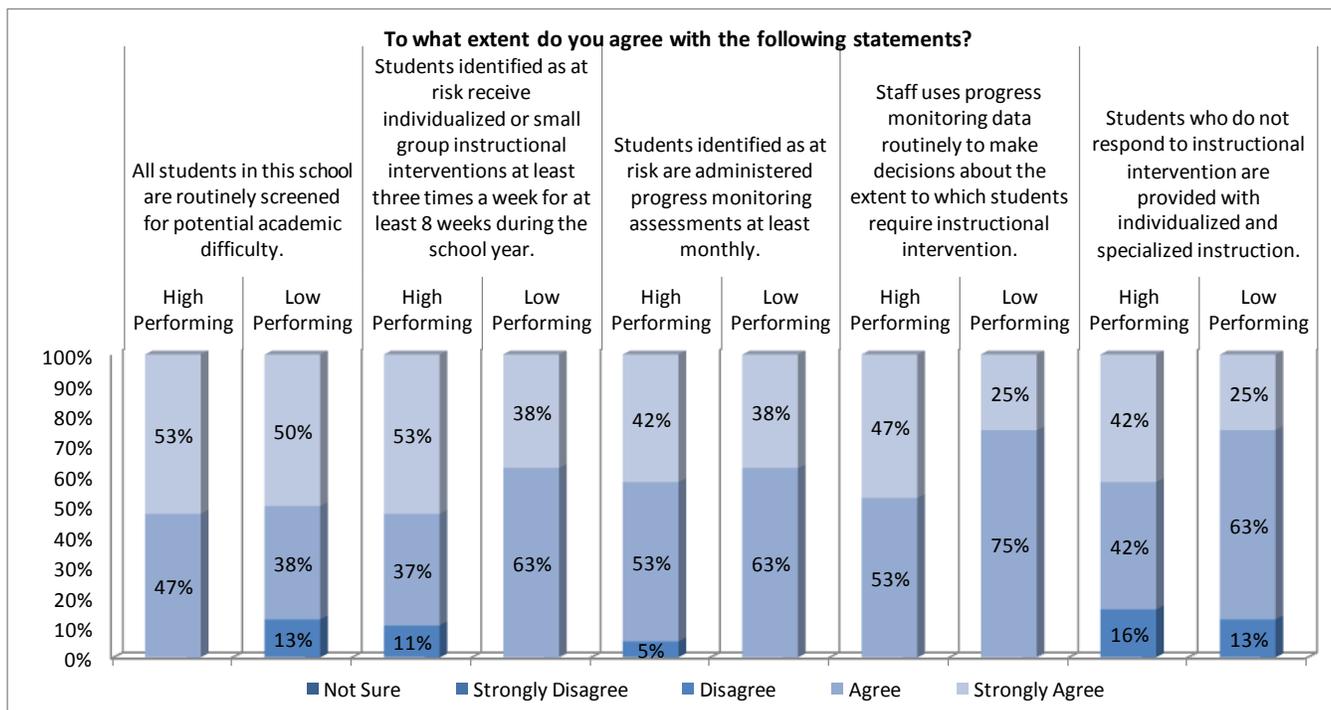
The average rating for both high- and low-performing sample schools on the Quality Review Standard “Gather and Analyze Data” was *proficient*. The school documents that were submitted indicate that both high-performing and low-performing schools have appropriate systems for collecting achievement data; however, CEPs and/or QRs from two of the three low-performing schools described a need to extend the analysis of assessment data, and use it more effectively to improve student performance. This is consistent with network leader reports that, while both low- and high-performing schools prioritize data and have systems in place for gathering student achievement data, the high-performing schools are more skilled at taking the next step and using data to drive instruction. One district administrator said, “I think more than likely it’s the high-performing schools ... they are really using data to plan.” This administrator went on to say, “I think everybody has some sort of system to collect data. I think it’s the next level [that is more of a challenge]. You’ve got all this stuff collected. How are you using it? How are you monitoring your instruction and revising?” Another network leader noted, “High-performing schools have great systems in place: collaborative inquiry, teams of teachers really working around the assessment pieces ... those schools that don’t function as well have weaker systems.”

According to the principal surveys, principals from high-performing schools were more likely to report offering extensive PD coverage on using formative assessments (46 percent, or 11 of 24 principals) compared with principals from low-performing schools ( 21 percent, or 3 of 14). Additionally, 19 of 24 principals (79 percent) of high-performing school reported having a Response-to-Intervention (RTI) system in place, compared with 8 of 14 principals (57 percent) of low-performing schools. RTI is a framework that heavily relies on the consistent use of data to make instructional decisions. Although all schools with an RTI system reported that staff used progress monitoring data routinely to make decisions about the extent to which students require instructional intervention, 9 of the 19 principals (47 percent) from high-performing schools strongly agreed that this occurred, in comparison with two of the eight principals from low-performing schools (25 percent, see Exhibit 6).

**What Is RTI?**

*Response to Intervention (RTI) integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems. With RTI, schools use data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities ([www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)).*

**Exhibit 6. Principal respondents' perceptions of the implementation of their school's response-to-intervention (RTI) system, for high- (n=19) and low-performing (n=8) schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

Note: Only those principals who responded that their school had an RTI system in place were asked to respond to this survey question.

## KEY FINDING 5: IEP USE

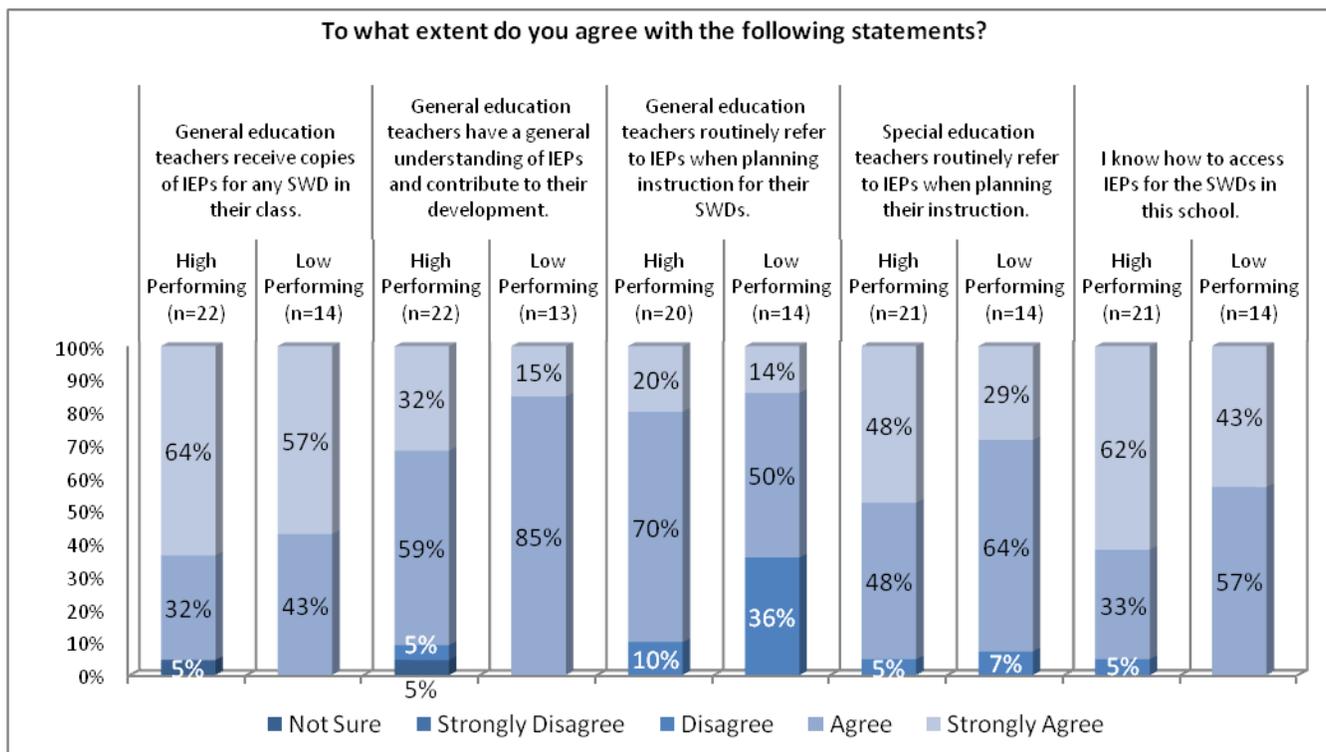
**Teachers in high-performing schools use IEPs to understand students' needs and goals more consistently than those in low-performing schools.**

Key Finding 5 is supported by data from the principal survey, teacher survey, and school staff interviews. This finding refers to the usefulness of IEPs for planning and informing instruction. Teachers in high-performing schools are more consistently using IEPs to understand their students' needs and goals and to plan and deliver their instruction when compared with teachers in low-performing schools.

## SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

According to principal surveys, general education teachers in high-performing schools are more likely than those in low-performing schools to routinely refer to IEPs when planning instruction for their SWDs. Specifically, 90 percent of 20 principals from high-performing schools agreed or strongly agreed that this was true, compared with 64 percent of 14 principals of low-performing schools. Principals in high-performing schools were also more likely than principals in low-performing schools to strongly agree that general education teachers receive copies of IEPs for SWDs in their classes; general education teachers have a general understanding of IEPs and contribute to their development; special education teachers routinely refer to IEPs when planning their instruction; and they know how to access IEPs for the SWDs in their school (Exhibit 7).

**Exhibit 7. Principal respondents' perceptions of the use of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in their school, for high- and low-performing schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

The teacher survey also showed a greater reliance on IEPs in high-performing schools, with more teachers in high-performing schools (66 percent) than low-performing schools (59 percent) reporting that they refer to students' IEPs for planning and delivering instruction at least monthly.

Eighty-nine percent of teachers who were interviewed in high-performing schools (16 of 18) reported that they use IEPs to understand their students' needs and goals and check on progress towards meeting the goals. A teacher from a high-performing school explained,

“[The] IEP generally outlines the need of the child and the objective in terms of what is to be taught, so you have to use the IEP, that is what drives instruction. So you look at it from time to time just to determine what you need to do. What I do is at the beginning of the year when you look at it ... you write down what the child needs, so as you go along you keep a checklist as to are you achieving this, is the child achieving this and stuff like that. You revisit it maybe every three months dependent on if the child is achieving because you have to—remember, you have to rewrite the child's IEP so you need to know if the child is meeting these goals.”

Comparatively, only 53 percent of teachers who were interviewed in low-performing schools (10 of 19) reported using IEPs to understand their students' needs and goals. Furthermore, seven teachers interviewed in low-performing schools were vague and unclear in explaining how they used IEPs to inform their instruction. For example, when asked how often they refer to student IEPs and how they use IEPs to plan and deliver their instruction, a general education from a low-performing school said, "Very seldom, rarely. I'm very familiar with [name], the school psychologist, and one of the members of our school based support team and I'll go to her and ask her [about] her thoughts on a child that she sees and sort of bank on her for information. Anything more specific than that though, I couldn't really say."

## **KEY FINDING 6: SCHOOL-WIDE BEHAVIOR PLAN**

**A school-wide behavior plan, reflecting principles of *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)*, and implemented consistently throughout the school, was more prevalent in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools.**

Key Finding 6 is supported by data from the principal survey, teacher surveys, school staff interviews, and document review. According to these data sources, high-performing schools were more likely than low-performing schools to have a school-wide behavior plan in place and implemented consistently throughout the school.

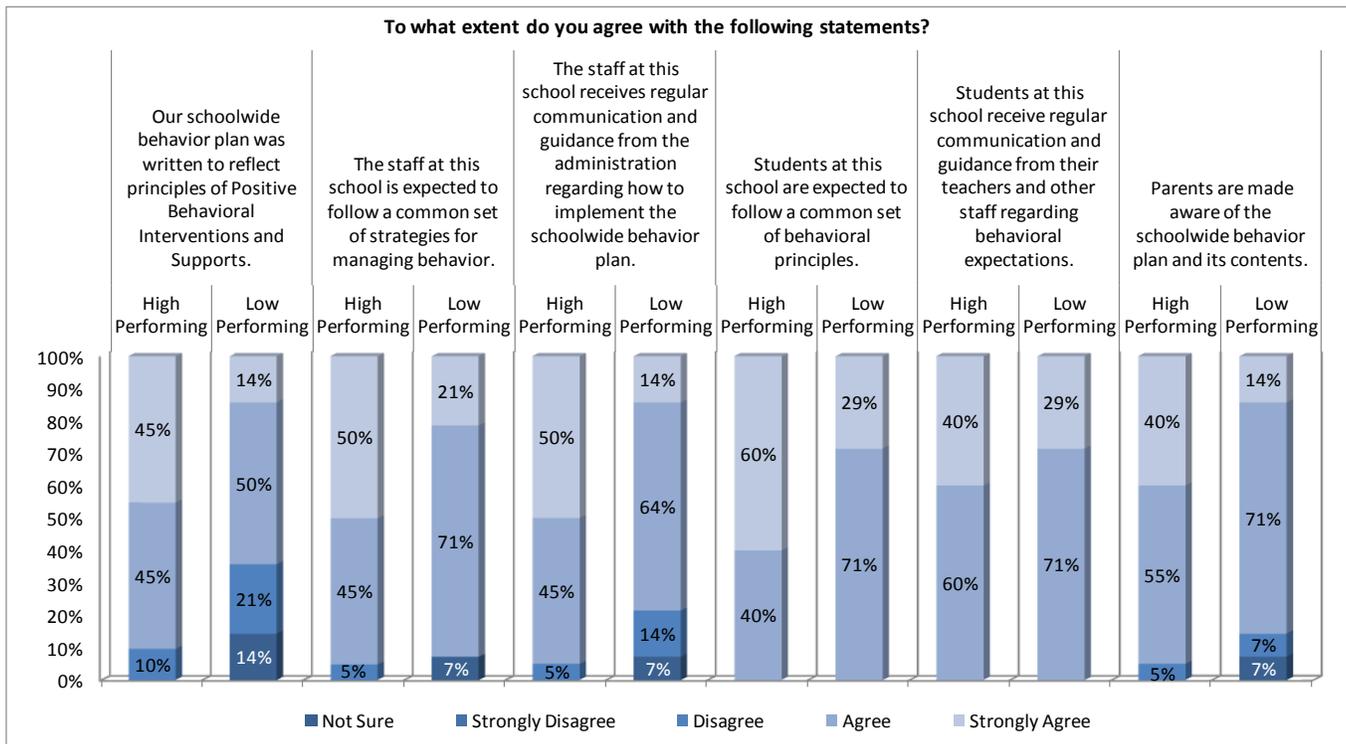
### ***Supporting Evidence***

Most principals who completed the survey reported that they have a school-wide behavior plan in place. However, responses from principals in high-performing and low-performing schools differed with respect to how their school-wide behavior plan was written and how it was communicated to staff and parents (see Exhibit 8). Specifically, 18 of 20 principals (90 percent) of high-performing schools, compared with 8 of 14 principals (64 percent) of low-performing schools, agreed or strongly agreed that their school's behavior plan was written to reflect the principles of PBIS. In terms of communication, 19 of 20 principals (95 percent) of high-performing schools agreed or strongly agreed that staff at their school receive regular communication and guidance from the administration regarding how to implement the school-wide behavior plan, compared with 11 of 14 principals (78 percent) of low-performing schools. Parents appeared more likely to be made aware of the school-wide behavior plan and its contents in high-performing schools, with 19 of 20 principals (95 percent) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, in contrast with 12 of 14 principals (85 percent) from low-performing schools.

#### ***What Is PBIS?***

"PBIS is a framework or approach for assisting school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students." ([http://www.pbis.org/pbis\\_faq.aspx](http://www.pbis.org/pbis_faq.aspx))

**Exhibit 8. Principal respondents' perceptions of the implementation of their school's school-wide behavior plan, for high- (n=20) and low-performing (n=14) schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

Note: Only those principals who responded that their school had a school-wide behavior plan in place were asked to respond to this survey question.

Similar proportions of principal respondents in low- and high-performing schools agreed or strongly agreed that 1) staff were expected to follow a common set of behavior management strategies, 2) students were expected to follow a common set of behavioral principals, and 3) students received regular communication and guidance on the behavioral expectations. However, these practices appeared more common in high-performing schools. For example, half of the 20 principals of high-performing schools, compared with 21 percent of 14 principals from low-performing schools, strongly agreed with the first statement. Similarly, 60 percent and 40 percent of principals from high-performing schools strongly agreed with the second and third statements, respectively, while 29 percent of principals from low-performing schools strongly agreed.

Interviewees from high-performing schools were also much more likely than those from low-performing schools to describe following a school-wide behavior plan grounded in PBIS. Sixty-seven percent of interviewed teachers (12 of 18) and 83 percent of administrators from high-performing schools (5 of 6, with representatives from all three of the sample schools) reported they had a school-wide behavior plan in place, and all of these respondents described a school-wide behavior plan reflecting principles of PBIS. A principal from a high-performing school said, “Our program has been so successful that the behavior in the school has improved dramatically over the past 10 years due to the implementation of PBIS.”

Comparatively, 32 percent of teachers (6 of 19) and 60 percent of administrators (three of five, with representatives from two of the three schools) from low-performing schools. Only one of these interviewees described a school-wide behavior plan reflecting principles of PBIS. Instead, all three administrators and four of six teachers described a system for disciplining and intervening with students who exhibit challenging behaviors.

Teachers who were surveyed from high-performing schools agreed or strongly agreed slightly more often than teachers from low-performing schools that the strategies they used for managing behavior are consistent with those used in classrooms throughout the school (65 percent versus 59 percent). In high-performing schools, 79 percent of special education teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the strategies they used for managing behavior are consistent with those used in the classrooms throughout the school, compared with 47 percent of special education teachers from low-performing schools.

Two of the three sample high-performing schools submitted documents that discuss PBIS as important to the success of their school. Evidence included descriptions in one school's Quality Review report of the school's positive behavior intervention and support program, noting that it has significantly decreased suspension rates by giving students alternatives to poor behavior, offering guidance services to help them resolve conflicts, and providing incentives for improved behavior. Another high-performing school provided documentation of its PBIS plan, and also listed professional development sessions on "addressing the social emotional needs through effective classroom management strategies," "creating Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP)," defining aggressive behaviors and bullying, and on PBIS. Comparatively, PBIS was mentioned in documents submitted by one of the three sample low-performing schools.

## **KEY FINDING 7: PARAPROFESSIONALS**

**Paraprofessionals play a stronger support role regarding the education of students with disabilities in high-performing schools compared with low-performing schools.**

Key Finding 7 is supported by data from the principal survey, teacher surveys, school staff interviews, and classroom observations. High-performing schools are more likely to have sufficient support staff, and their support staff, particularly classroom paraprofessionals, play a stronger support role in the education of students with disabilities.

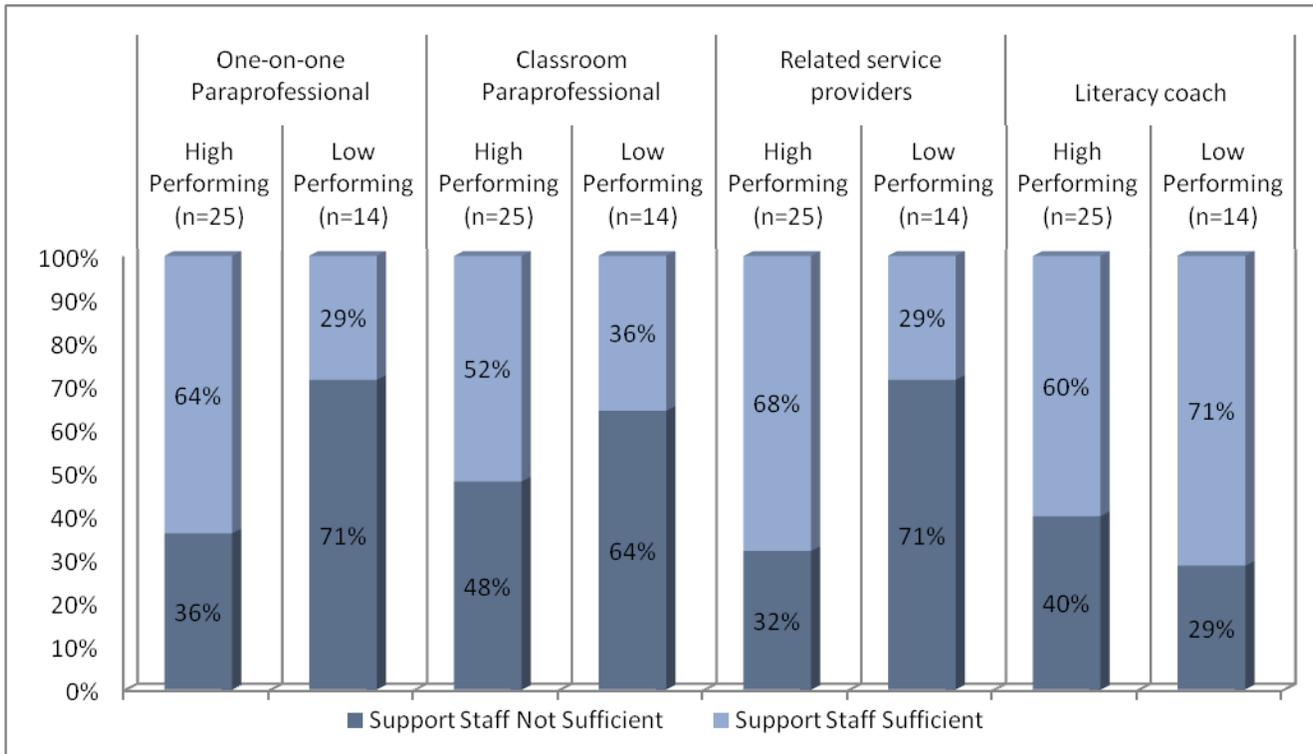
### ***Supporting Evidence***

Principals from low-performing schools were more likely than their counterparts in high-performing schools to report insufficient support staff (Exhibit 9). Among the principals of low-performing schools, 64 percent reported insufficient support from classroom paraprofessionals, and 71 percent reported insufficient support from one-on-one paraprofessionals, compared with

48 percent and 36 percent, respectively, of the principals from high-performing schools. When asked if they believed that additional staff were needed to educate students with disabilities in their school, a special education coordinator from one of the low-performing schools said, “Paras. We need more paras.”

Indeed, data from other sources revealed that teachers in high-performing schools rely on paraprofessional support more often than teachers in low-performing schools. A classroom paraprofessional was observed instructing students in 44 percent (8 of 18) of classrooms visited in high-performing schools, compared with 19 percent (3 of 16) of classrooms in visited low-performing schools. These classroom paraprofessionals were observed instructing students for more than half of the observed class time in both high-performing (63 percent, or 5 of 8) and low-performing schools (67 percent, or 2 of 3). Consistent with this finding, teacher surveys show that more teachers in high-performing schools (36 percent) than low-performing schools (19 percent) rely to a great extent on a classroom paraprofessional to effectively deliver instruction to their students with disabilities. The difference is more pronounced among special education teachers, with 54 percent of special education teachers in high-performing schools reporting that they rely on a classroom paraprofessional to effectively deliver instruction to their students with disabilities to a great extent, compared with 18 percent of teachers from low-performing schools.

**Exhibit 9. Principal respondents' perceptions of whether their school has sufficient support staff available to support the instruction of students with disabilities and English language learners, by staff category, for high- and low-performing schools**



Source: CSD 17 Curriculum Audit Principal Survey (LPA, 2011)

Further, one-third of teachers interviewed in high-performing schools identified paraprofessionals as a critical source of staff support, compared with only one of the teachers interviewed in low-performing schools. As a special education coordinator from a high-performing school noted, “The paraprofessionals are a very intricate part of the planning.”

## CONCLUSION

This report presents data demonstrating differences between high- and low-performing schools in CSD 17 related to strategies and practices for educating students with disabilities. The following key findings were presented:

- (1) *Administrative leadership in general, and regarding the instruction of students with disabilities, is stronger* in high-performing than in low-performing schools.
- (2) Teachers in high-performing schools described and implemented a *wider range of appropriate instructional strategies* than those in low-performing schools.
- (3) *Differentiated instruction is implemented more often, more consistently, and with greater quality* in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools.

- (4) ***Data are used to inform instruction*** more consistently in high-performing than in low-performing schools.
- (5) Teachers in high-performing schools ***use IEPs to understand students' needs and goals*** more consistently than those in low-performing schools.
- (6) A ***school-wide behavior plan, reflecting principles of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)***, and implemented consistently throughout the school, was more prevalent in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools.
- (7) ***Paraprofessionals play a stronger supportive role*** regarding the education of students with disabilities in high-performing schools than in low-performing schools.

These findings reveal areas in which high-performing schools are demonstrating success, and low-performing schools are experiencing challenges. The data presented in this report can be used to inform recommendations and action planning for improvement in CSD 17 schools and elsewhere.

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