



Special Education Teachers in the Fellows' Network

OSPI/AESD Evaluation Brief, 2018-2019 School Year

AESD ASSOCIATION OF
EDUCATIONAL
SERVICE DISTRICTS

Nine ESDs. One Network.
Supporting Washington's Schools and Communities.

Executive Summary

Convened by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD), the Washington State Fellows' Network is a group of instructional leaders who support district and community implementation of state learning standards in mathematics, English Language Arts (ELA), science, and the Early Learning Guidelines.¹ Out of the 1,100 Fellows statewide, 33 work in special education (SPED) serving students with disabilities. Most (61%) of the special education teachers in the Fellows' Network teach early learning, 18% teach math, and 21% teach ELA.

To better understand how the Fellows' Network assists SPED teachers, Puget Sound Education Service District (PSESD), OSPI, and AESD contracted with Kauffman & Associates, Inc., (KAI) to conduct a focused study as part of the statewide evaluation work. The SPED teachers involved in this study shared their experiences and opinions on a wide range of topics through interviews and focus groups. They shared that they joined the Fellows' Network: (1) to provide high quality, equitable, and accessible education to prepare their students for the future; (2) to build an expanded understanding of system organization and change management strategies; and (3) to reduce their isolation and receive support in their profession.

Two overarching professional learning goals emerged. SPED teachers wanted to better understand state content standards for math, science, and ELA. They felt that this knowledge would lead to more effective collaboration with general education (GenEd) teachers to make content more accessible for students with disabilities. SPED teachers also wanted to learn how to build strong, trusting relationships with students' families. They found value in learning how to work with parents to reinforce skills taught in the classroom, leading to a reduction in challenging behaviors at home and school.

The Fellows appreciated the requirement to complete an Action Plan with their administrator to proactively approach equity in student achievement. Their considerations of equity began with introspection of their own personal assumptions and biases. Then, they looked beyond academics to include equity in a student's ability to perform academic and physical tasks, such as opening Ziplock bags during lunch. They also included SPED students' families, who may also be English learners, in equity. As a result of participating in the Fellows' Network, they said they (1) are more confident leading discussions on equity, (2) are more aware of how systems work together to meet student and families' needs, and (3) have a reinforced understanding of the importance of family engagement.

The focus group participants said the Fellows' Network helped them learn how to mitigate GenEd teachers' apprehension when working with students with disabilities. They noted improved collaboration with GenEd teachers, leading to better understanding how to make math and science content more accessible for students with disabilities. However, they have ongoing

¹ Visit <http://k12.wa.us/CurriculumInstruct/Fellows.aspx> to learn more about the Fellows' Network.

challenges with GenEd teachers' lower expectations of students with disabilities, little understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and fear of doing the wrong thing for these students.

Several recommendations emerged from the study to expand the knowledge and abilities of all Fellows to improve experiences for students with disabilities. One recommendation is to provide opportunities for all Fellows to learn more about SPED. Another recommendation is to actively recruit SPED teachers from the four content areas into the Fellows' Network.

Introduction

This study began by interviewing two SPED subject matter experts (SMEs). The SMEs included Glenna Gallo, Assistant Superintendent of SPED at OSPI, and Erin Stewart, Co-Director of SPED Services at PSESD. The SMEs provided guidance and expertise regarding prominent issues and challenges in the SPED discipline. This information informed the development of the focus group and interview protocol used with a sample of SPED teachers in the Fellows' Network.

Using the protocol, KAI conducted focus groups with four SPED teachers in the Fellows' Network. Three of the Fellows teach early learning and one teaches ELA and math. One early learning Fellow teaches pre-K students (ages 3 to 5) with disabilities, most of whom have individualized education programs and experience delays in the areas of adaptive, social, language, fine and gross motor skills, and/or cognition. The second early learning Fellow teaches in a specialized program for students with autism. The third early learning Fellow teaches in a classroom dedicated to high school students with disabilities. Lastly, the Fellow that teaches ELA and math works with 13 high school students in a classroom dedicated to students with disabilities. Many of these high school students read and write at a third-grade level thus requiring collaboration with the GenEd science teachers to make their content accessible.

This brief first highlights why the four teachers felt motivated to participate in the Fellows' Network and their personal learning goals. Next, the brief reviews the Action Plan and other professional learning components. The brief shares key themes around their perspectives of leading with equity and collaborating with GenEd teachers. Lastly, based on the interviews and focus groups, the brief provides recommendations to enhance state-level efforts to support students with disabilities.

Reasons for Participating in the Fellows' Network

All of the interviewees shared similar motivations for why they became Fellows. They wanted to advocate on behalf of their students for systems change and to improve their teaching and learning skills with research-based practices. These Fellows view themselves as change agents working to improve the quality of SPED. They focus strongly on achieving equity for their students to better prepare them for transitions, such as graduating from pre-K or middle school. Fellows are eager to learn about the content standards above their students' current grade-level

achievement. This knowledge assists them in collaborating with GenEd teachers to scaffold instruction and better prepare students for successful transitions.

Participants' experiences reflected diverse content areas, grade levels, class sizes, and learning abilities. They joined the Fellows to ensure they are providing a high quality, equitable, and accessible education that prepares their students for the future. One Fellow shared, *"I noticed that there was a big need in our school for equity in science and meeting the needs of all students in science and making sure that everybody has access to it regardless of cognitive ability, or home life, or ability to understand science, or background."*

The SPED teachers were excited to join a statewide community of practitioners that includes GenEd teachers. They appreciated that the community encouraged them to share their SPED knowledge and experience. These Fellows expressed how their understanding of system organization and change management strategies deepened through the Fellows' Network. One Fellow shared:

I was really excited about the opportunity for new ideas and new learnings, and also the rich discussions that we've been having with the other teachers that are a part of our group. And then learning about change within a large system with colleagues and improving my own craft and utilizing best practices.

Similarly, participants described how the Fellows Convenings reflect diversity in geography, school type (public and private), student ethnicity, and more. They said this diversity adds to their professional learning. One Fellow shared:

I like that Washington is such a diverse state, and there [are] teachers that are in the Fellowship that are [teaching in]... public schools, rural areas, suburban areas. And I like that I get to learn from them. I do like to give my information, coming from special education, because as far as I believe, I'm the only early childhood special education at least in the cohort that I'm in.

Participants shared that the Fellows' Network reduces feelings of isolation that SPED teachers sometimes experience due to their limited numbers. It provides professional support and a safe-space for reflection. It also keeps them informed about state- and national-level systems change issues, enabling them to join a more significant movement to support diverse learners with varying skills and needed supports.

Fellows' Personal Learning Goals

The Fellows shared their personal learning goals are to increase their content knowledge, better understand learning standards, and learn how to implement the standards. They also wanted more strategies to engage students' families in their academic, social, and emotional learning. Additionally, they emphasized the need to improve communication and collaboration between themselves and the GenEd teachers. The SPED teachers in the Fellows' Network frequently

mentioned the goal of bridging gaps in terminology use and co-construction of instructional scaffolding between SPED and GenEd teachers.

Several of the Fellows wanted to better understand the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Washington State's learning standards. They also want to increase their content knowledge and adopt best practices in math, science, and ELA, especially those that help scaffold instruction to promote entry points. A Fellow shared:

I want to learn the best practices in science. Like when we look at the science content, I can identify ways that teachers can expand and provide equity to all students with small adjustments. So, taking their best practices and then applying accommodations or shifts or slight teaching changes to make it more accessible.

The Fellows set personal goals to build good rapport with their students' families. Strong teacher-family relationships increase families' likelihood to accept assistance. This assistance could be as simple as helping the family obtain the right information, locate additional support, or problem solve. A Fellow shared:

We are welcoming to families of all walks of life. When we approach families with that [open attitude] we are not making judgments... I really get to know my families. I do really understand what each family's background is. I try to meet them where they're at to help them with their children.

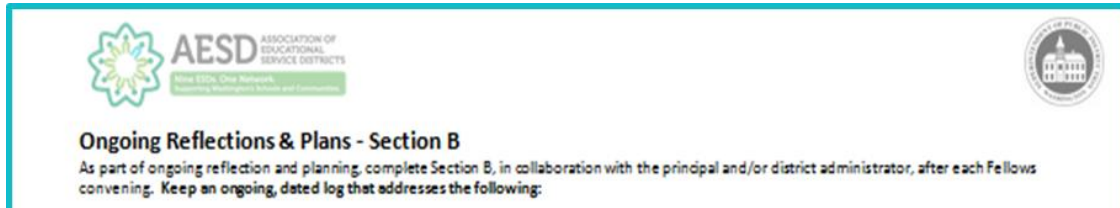
Focus group participants expressed that they found value in learning how to successfully engage their students' families during the Fellow Convenings. They learned ways to involve parents with their students' academic, social, and emotional learning. Some interviewees learned how to collaborate with parents to reinforce skills taught in the classroom and reduce challenging behaviors in the school and the home. A Fellow shared, *"So, for me, it's to learn new ideas and strategies in working with people, working with the families, understanding the challenges that they may face and helping them find bridges and solutions to those to help their children in learning."*

Action Plans

To participate in the Fellows' Network, all teachers first need to get their administrator's approval. The SPED teachers interviewed appreciated this requirement. They felt it resulted in the co-development of an Action Plan with their school principal and helped ensure leadership support. The Fellows led the development of their Action Plan, which they said was a highly valued and integral part of their experience.

Some Action Plans focused widely on a systems-level understanding of how SPED programs overlap at the classroom, school, district, and state levels. Interviewees perceived the Action Plan requirement as a pro-active approach to equity, student learning, organizational change management, and teacher professional development. One Fellow shared, *"We create equity from the beginning instead of trying to get to it once the students are failing, and realizing that something's off."* Other Action Plans focused more narrowly on the creation of a curriculum for a self-contained

classroom. Action Plans frequently included collaboration with other teachers to create tailored, quality curricula for students with disabilities.



Ongoing Reflections & Plans - Section B
As part of ongoing reflection and planning, complete Section B, in collaboration with the principal and/or district administrator, after each Fellows convening. Keep an ongoing, dated log that addresses the following:

Action Items/Strategies <small>What is your next action item for your school/district? What are the steps you will take to implement this element?</small>	Timeline <small>When will you complete each action item/ strategies?</small>	Responsibilities <small>Who will be responsible for completing this element? The Fellow? Others?</small>	Equity <small>In what ways might this action item support all educators (e.g. special education, ELL, highly capable)?</small>	Resources <small>May include teacher release time, meeting space, differentiated materials for all educators and their focus, facilitation materials, etc.</small>	How Will We Monitor and Evaluate? <small>What will be the evidence of impact of the Fellows' work? What will you see teachers and students doing differently?</small>

Please make more copies, if needed.

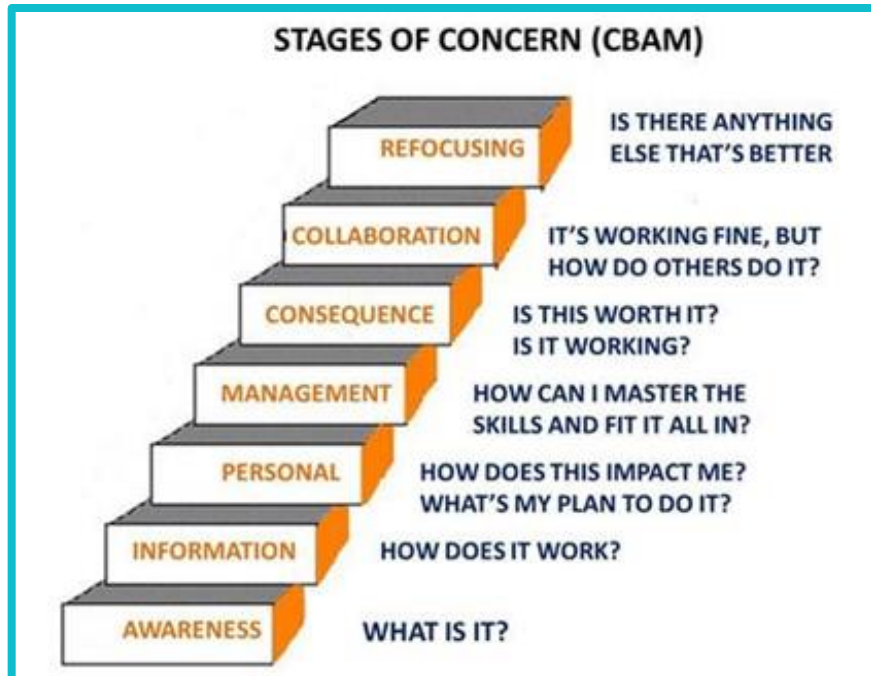
An example Fellows Action Plan framework used to build successful systems, programs, and curricula

Participants frequently mentioned that the design of the Fellows’ Network was the number one reason they grew and successfully achieved their Action Plan goals. For example, one Fellow described the Fellows’ Network’s accessible experts. In the Fellows Convenings, she collaborated with the instructional leaders (e.g., Regional Coordinators) in a safe, supportive space. The Fellow shared:

One of the things I really like about the Fellows, especially with the social justice, is that we are a safe place, so we have those uneasy conversations that need to be had about race and equity. There's no judgment... so I really appreciate that we have a place we're able to share information, share stories.

The Network’s Effect on Professional Practice

Like the majority of the GenEd Fellows who participated in the 2018-19 evaluation, the SPED teachers in the focus group strongly identify as professional Fellows. They shared the same goal of learning how to best support their students and their students’ families. They also discussed the joyful benefits of this work. A Fellow shared, *“One of my greatest joys is when a child comes to me on their third birthday, and through their hard work, through the dedication of the early childhood team and the support from their family, is that they move on into a general education setting with minimal support.”*



The CBAM model used to support Fellows in their trainings

The Fellows felt the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM)² studied in the Fellows Convenings contributed to their successful engagement with their GenEd peers. They were able to navigate GenEd teachers’ Stages of Concern and receptiveness to improving pedagogical ideas. They also found CBAM useful to better understand students, families, paraprofessionals, and instructional leaders across learning settings.

Networking with program administrators helped broaden the Fellows’ awareness of how systems work together (e.g. private and public education agencies) to best meet student and families’ needs. Further, the Fellows’ Convenings provided the opportunity for SPED and GenED teachers in the Fellows’ Network to address their concerns and biases. Both groups learned about each other’s priorities, interests, and goals, and they recognized each other’s valuable contributions, expertise, and knowledge.

² Visit <http://www.sedl.org/cbam/> to learn more about CBAM.

The Fellows' in the focus group reported increased confidence to facilitate discussions on equity. This confidence demonstrates their strengthened leadership skills gained from the Fellows' Network. One Fellow described their method of approaching GenEd instructors to maximize the possibility of a successful accommodation. The Fellow shared:

I think it would be best to say, "Here's this lesson that you would teach to your class. Here's the ways you can make this more accessible. This graphic organizer would work here. This type of focused note taking would work here. In this modified assignment, you have a sentence framed." I think the teachers would be willing to do it if they understood what they were being asked to do. It's kind of like showing them examples of what it is.

Lastly, the Fellows' Network reinforced the importance of family engagement. Fellows shared that learning about their students and their families, cultures, and experiences guided their approaches and the resources they use to teach their students. A Fellow shared: *"One of the things that the Fellows group helped me understand [is] we're not just educating a child, but educating a family while educating ourselves in that process."*

Collaboration between SPED and GenEd Teachers

The SPED teachers interviewed unanimously agreed that the Fellows' Network taught them skills to work across the education landscape (e.g., with other preschool providers, community providers, and GenEd teachers). For example, they typically collaborate with the GenEd teachers on what methods, strategies, and resources will result in effective learning experiences for students in SPED. A Fellow shared, *"There's a [SPED] staff member in the [Gen Ed] classes to support modifying and accommodating... Then I bridge that gap between the general ed teacher and... work closely with the general ed teachers to... allow them to access the curriculum."*

The Fellows in the focus group said this collaboration has been particularly rich for math and science content. The in-depth standards they learned from the Fellows Convenings fostered more effective collaboration with math and science GenEd teachers. They said they now feel more confident discussing pedagogical approaches and strategies to make math and science content more accessible, which promotes a shared responsibility between SPED and GenEd teachers. The Fellow shared:

I felt that there needed to be support in transitioning into Next Generation Science Standards. We're adopting new curriculum this year in our building, and we're making sure that we don't go back and think, "Oh, now we have to plug in accommodations and modifications." [Instead] in reality, we can make small adjustments through your [science] teaching, and then it feels like it's more fluid than rather trying to, "Oh I have to do these type[s] of [accommodations]."

Another Fellow explained how small adjustments in a GenEd history class made the content and assessments accessible for students in SPED. The Fellow shared:

Last year, special education and history general education teachers collaborated, and applied the inclusion model to co-construct content and curriculum. For example, instead of 25 end-of-the-unit questions, a modified packet of questions [was developed]. And history and general education teachers were able to supplement the learning content by providing access to digital, web-based study materials and web-based textbooks.

The SPED teachers who are also Early Learning Fellows explained that they liberally share their expertise, such as their pedagogical strategies, with GenEd teachers to meet their students' needs before recommending the student for SPED services. An Early Learning Fellow shared, "*In my other preschool cohort, we created a PowerPoint on what to do before special education. Looking at it, here's some things that you can try before you recommend a child for special education.*"

Challenges for SPED and GenEd Teachers

Participants in the focus groups shared some of the most common challenges they face when collaborating with GenEd teachers. They noted that many teachers and staff inaccurately perceive the abilities of students with disabilities and have low expectations for the students' academic achievement. In addition, some GenEd teachers need additional support to adjust their teaching strategies for students with disabilities. The Fellows interviewed said they routinely work with their GenEd peers to change mindsets and offer ideas. Other barriers included a fear of doing the wrong thing when teaching students with disabilities. This fear stems from their unfamiliarity with SPED vocabulary and jargon and little understanding of IDEA.

The SPED teachers interviewed said they approach collaboration with the GenEd teachers with diplomacy and respect, as many of the teachers have a Master of Science degree and decades of experience. However, GenEd teachers' extensive experience in their content areas does not always include substantial SPED experience. The Fellows said they learned that a surprising number of GenEd teachers have experienced significant challenges working with students with disabilities. A Fellow shared:

Essentially, the [GenEd teachers] have a bad taste in their mouth of working with special education teachers or having to make accommodations and modifications... they just feel like... "I'm not really sure what you're asking me to do, because I tried it one time and it wasn't what they wanted, and I got in trouble, because I wasn't doing it right."

Lastly, the Fellows said that many of their GenEd peers are not familiar with federal laws for students with disabilities and do not understand the requirements of IDEA. A Fellow explained how this lack of understanding can potentially create a communication barrier when trying to collaborate with a GenEd teacher. The Fellow explained, "*When you go and talk to a general ed teacher, and they have 30 kids in their room, [they] ask you, 'How is it fair that I can do this for this [SPED] student, but not another student?' I can't just say, 'Because it's the law.'"*

SPED Teachers' Perspectives on Equity

During the focus groups and interviews, the Fellows were asked how the Fellows' Network helped them lead with equity and improve their equity practices. They described scenarios where they had led with equity, advocating for students with physical, sensory, intellectual, processing, or emotional disorders. One Fellow explained that equity begins with an awareness of personal assumptions, and biases. The Fellow shared, *"Looking at that equity awareness of yourself. Are there any biases that you are unaware of that you may have? And then... looking at what you're using and presenting and how it might impact a student who may not have those [same] background experiences."*

Fellows felt that SPED departments are treated differently than other school departments. For example, the SPED department may be excluded from communication and school events. Fellows felt that equity includes being invited to join these conversations and events. A Fellow shared:

We just didn't really feel like part of the school... maybe my kids can't sit through a 30-minute assembly, but it's sure nice to be invited, to be thought about in saying, "Hey, we're having this really cool assembly where the mascot for the Thunderbirds is gonna come and would your kids like to be able to come?"

The Fellows described ways they provide accessible instruction for students with disabilities. This instructional time may occur when teachers are also trying to address students' behavioral needs. Two Fellows shared how they lead with equity when mitigating students' behavior:

We've been talking about the equity of instruction for those kids that have some pretty severe social and emotional needs and how do we provide equitable teaching to those students when we're also working on their behaviors....

Equity is constantly on my mind that everybody gets [treated equitably]. It [doesn't mean that] they all get the same [but rather] they get what they need at that moment in time. And, if at that moment in time, the behavior piece is the biggest because learning can't happen if the brain is overstimulated, [then] I'm still managing to get both needs met.

Educators often think of equity as access to academic instruction; however, the focus group participants provided an expanded view. For example, an interviewee described how equity also includes teaching students basic tasks so they feel self-reliant and confident, *"[The idea of equity] helps us have conversations with kindergarten teachers and ask, 'What kind of things would you want a kid coming in with?' And it's... not always the academics... they want them to be able to open their Ziplock bags [in their lunch]."*

Overall, the special education teachers in the focus group expressed ideas about equity primarily around inclusion. However, some also discussed equity in the context of engaging families from different cultures, languages, socio-economic status, etc. They said a strong focus on engagement with all families ensures that all families feel welcome and supported. *"Not all parents are going to be able to go out to buy the things that they need to support their kids... I try to level that by*

sending materials home with families so they can work on specific things... and help them to understand what we're working on day to day." Like all Fellows, the SPED teachers who join the Fellows' Network also advocate to their school administrators to provide communication in plain language and include familiar cultural artifacts in the school to create a welcoming environment.

Success Stories

The Fellows described many success stories as a result of their participation in the Fellows' Network. These stories addressed a range of topics, including successful collaboration with GenEd teachers, strong support of administrators, development of learning communities, and student growth. One such success story was shared by the SPED teacher who is also an ELA Fellow. She works with students in grades 9 through 12; however, most of her students are at a third-grade level for reading, math, and writing. She shared a success story about a student in grade 11:

Well, I have a student who uses every moment of her day to complete her school work. She is the perfect student... She doesn't want us to shorten assignments... She works at home constantly. I'm on the phone with her parents all the time. But then when you look at what she's produced... if it's a 10-point assignment, she might get 1 of those points.

But... she thinks she's got it. She's getting low grades but she tried so hard... She found the answers that she thought were the answers because we haven't scaffolded and modified [the instruction] appropriately... She's a junior, so she reads text books that are you know... really high level content [for her].

The Fellow said that her student did not understand why she received a D on an assignment that took her two hours to complete. This assignment would have taken a non-SPED student approximately 15 minutes to complete. The Fellow stated, *"That's equity... where she has put in way more... energy and frustration into one assignment, but she just got a D. So, what did we really teach her about what working hard and putting your time in actually means?"*

The Fellow continued to collaborate with the GenEd science teacher. The Fellow shared:

It's not that [the student] doesn't understand [the content]. She can't read it. Then [the science teacher and I] worked at getting the level text, so she can actually access the curriculum, because the level text is about an eighth-grade level, so she can start reading.

Their successful collaboration resulted in a student who is excited to learn. Additionally, the student's other GenEd teachers now understand how to adjust their assignments, and they willingly pre-check the student's assignments to provide her with feedback. She started out with a D- in history but is now earning a C+.

Recommendations

Five recommendations emerged from the interview and focus groups regarding ways to expand the knowledge, skills, and abilities of all Fellows (GenEd teachers, administrators, district leadership, etc.) to improve the experience of students with disabilities.

1. Actively recruit SPED teachers from the four content areas into the Fellows' Network by reaching out to school administrators and communicating the benefits of participation in the Fellows' Network.
2. Supplement the Fellows' Network with face-to-face and virtual professional development opportunities to gain a more expansive knowledge of SPED.
3. The SPED teachers raised concerns about the limited knowledge of their GenEd colleagues regarding disabilities and suggested to train GenEd teachers on anti-bias in SPED as well as basic SPED terminology.
4. Provide opportunities for SPED and GenEd teachers to collaborate to vertically align their curricula across grade levels.
5. Provide opportunities during Fellows' Convenings to highlight exemplary practices of collaboration among GenEd and SPED teachers.
- 6.