

Exploring the Landscape of Inclusion: Profiles of Inclusive versus Segregated School Districts in the United States

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Abstract

Although inclusive education has been increasing in frequency for students with disabilities in the United States, for many students, the opportunity to be educated with their peers without disabilities continues to be out of reach despite decades of efforts by those promoting the vision of inclusion. This exploratory case study used interviews with administrators, teachers, and parents representing inclusive and segregated school districts in one state to explore potential reasons for differences in districts that had high percentages of students with disabilities in inclusive versus segregated educational settings. The importance of administrative leadership and parent selective mobility were found to influence the extent to which a district implemented inclusive versus segregated placements for students with disabilities.

Exploring the Landscape of Inclusion: Profiles of Inclusive versus Segregated School Districts in the United States

Inclusive education in the United States is becoming more common, with states reporting that more students with disabilities are being educated in general education settings each year (Handler, 2003; The Right IDEA, 2011). Furthermore, research over several decades has documented that inclusive education is associated with beneficial outcomes such as comparable or improved cognitive and academic outcomes (Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), positive social skills and peer acceptance (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007), increased adaptive behavior skills (Dessementet, Bless, & Morin, 2012), and improved self-determination skills (Hughes, Agran, Cosgriff, & Washington, 2013). Internationally, inclusive education has also gained increasing support as a civil rights issue for promoting equitable educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Armstrong, 1999; Cardona, 2009; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). The United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 24* (<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>) is a further reflection of an increased international focus on the importance of inclusive education for ensuring equal access and opportunities.

Despite growing evidence and international support for inclusive education, researchers have documented a number of factors that often impact the provision of inclusive education for students with disabilities. One key factor that has been identified is the interplay between how school personnel view inclusion and subsequent implementation of inclusive practices (Avradmidis & Norwich, 2002; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). For example, Avradmidis and Norwich noted that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were found to be strongly influenced by (a) child variables such as the severity and nature of the child's disability, (b) educational variables such as the availability of both physical and personnel support, and (c) teacher variables such as gender, grade level taught, experience, training, beliefs and teaching style, and socio-political views. These attitudes, as well as those of district leadership and

school culture, often influence the inclusion of students with disabilities (Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999).

Another body of research has documented the influence of parent and community perceptions of inclusion (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Tissot's (2011) survey of parents in the United Kingdom found that parents' decision to place their child in an inclusive or specialized setting is often fraught with tensions around competing goals and complicated considerations for determining what is best for their child. Elkins, van Kraayenoord, and Jobling (2003) investigated the attitudes of 354 Australian parents of children with disabilities and found that parents were supportive of inclusion if their children were well supported and proper resources were in place within the educational placement. Similarly, Moreno, Aguilera, and Saldana (2008) found that parent perception of teacher training was an important predictor of parent placement preferences. Lastly, Ajuwon and Oylinade (2008) found two variables with greatest predictive value for parents placing their children with visual impairments in either public schools or residential settings: preferred classroom size and attending school with a sibling. These studies indicate that how parents perceive the ways in which inclusion is implemented influences whether they will support a district's efforts to implement inclusion for students with disabilities.

In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) has promoted the view of inclusive education by requiring schools to provide educational services in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and to report their progress based on percentages of students receiving educational services in general education classrooms. The LRE concept has continued to create strong debate among educators and researchers, resulting in a lack of consensus on how the LRE should be defined (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). In our experience, translating the policies envisioned in initiatives such as the CRPD and the IDEA can be elusive, even though they can often be passionately articulated in principle. We believe that exploring school and district stories can help to highlight some of the ongoing challenges as we attempt to gain greater understanding of how schools create inclusive schools.

Research Questions

In order to understand how views of the least restrictive environment influenced the provision of inclusive education for students with disabilities, the current study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do respondents in segregated and inclusive districts define the least restrictive environment (LRE) and what it means for inclusion of students with disabilities?
2. How was the LRE implemented in these districts and what factors influenced greater inclusive placements or greater segregated placements?

Methods

This exploratory study involved use of the case study method (Yin, 2009) in order to explore participant views of inclusion that distinguished inclusive versus segregated districts. Yin (2009) recommends that examination of a phenomenon using a case study method be based on a theoretical framework that can serve to explain the phenomenon through pattern matching across cases. The overall design of this investigation was to examine how the phenomenon of inclusive education, or the LRE, is implemented in select school districts. Because there is wide variation in LRE data among states, it can be helpful to examine variability of LRE placements within a single state. Districts within a state would be operating under the same policies, which would eliminate some potential conflicting variables. Consequently, the primary focus of this study was one state: Arizona. This article is based on data that was collected during the 2007-2008 school year. This time period marked the mid-point when districts in the state were attempting to meet the state's 2010 target for LRE placements as defined in the Arizona FFY 2005-2010 State Performance Plan for Special Education (Arizona Department of Education, 2005). Such performance plans were mandated by the U.S. Department of Education as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004).

Sample Selection

Our experience working with districts led us to note that an important district feature influencing placement in inclusive versus segregated settings is often district size. Larger districts appear to have lower percentages of students with disabilities spending most of their day in general education settings. For this reason, sample selection involved purposive sampling for maximum variation (Patton, 2002), first based on district size, and secondly, on pattern of LRE placements.

District-level placement data for 2007 were collected from the Arizona Department of Education. Districts were grouped according to large (at least 2,000 students with Individualized Education Plans, (IEPs)), mid-sized (between 900-1,999 students with IEPs), small (between 300-899 students with IEPs), and tiny (less than 300 students with IEPs). Within each of these groupings, one district was selected from each group according to high percentages of students receiving special education services in general education settings for at least 80% of the school day and low percentages of students receiving special education services in general education settings for less than 40% of the school day (these districts were coded as “inclusive”). One district was selected from each group according to low percentages of students receiving special education services in general education settings for at least 80% of the school day and high percentages of students receiving special education services in general education settings for less than 40% of the school day (these districts were coded as “segregated”). The purpose was to include districts that were similar in size, but different in LRE patterns so that differences could be explored. The final sample included three district dyads: one for large, one for mid-sized, and one for small districts.

Data Sources

Data collection involved collecting information from a variety of data sources. Data from diverse sources allowed for triangulation of data in order to construct district profiles from a variety of

perspectives (Jupp, 2006). When examining concepts such as inclusion, such triangulation can be important for making sense of how different individuals interpret its meaning.

Focused interviews. The first author conducted initial interviews with each district's special education director either in person or by phone. School personnel and parents were interviewed based on recommendations of the district special education director. The interview questions followed a focused interview format (Seidman, 1991) and are included in Appendix A and B. If the district special education director mentioned any consultants and university faculty with whom they collaborated regarding implementation of the LRE, those consultants and university faculty were also interviewed. Interviews with school personnel and parents were either completed by phone or during the school site visit. Personnel included special and general education teachers and paraprofessionals.

As the interviews were conducted, notes were taken for each of the interview questions. As much as possible, verbatim quotes were documented. Data from each interview were inserted into an excel file to create a data display for each interview question for each district. These data were then used to construct narrative district profiles.

Site visits. The purpose of the site visits was to provide additional information to elaborate upon the information gathered during the interviews with school principals and special education directors. School site visits were arranged with the special education directors and completed by the first author. For the larger districts the site visits spanned two days; for the smaller districts the site visits were completed within one day. The site visits were an opportunity to observe how each site implemented the LRE and to talk informally with school personnel and parents. Some of these participants were also asked to complete a semi-structured interview. Following each site visit, a summary of main points related to the LRE was noted in jotted field notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

A district profile was constructed for each district that included interviews and site visit field notes. Data analysis involved the following steps as outlined by Patton (2002): 1) Assemble raw case data (e.g., interviews, field notes); 2) Construct a case record through condensation of raw data (e.g., organizing, classifying, and editing); and 3) Develop the case study narrative through "a holistic portrayal" (p. 388). These steps resulted in the construction of individual "profiles" (Seidman, 1991) for each participating district. These profiles were examined for common themes and comparisons for each district dyad.

Results

In this section, we present findings for each district dyad for the purpose of contrasting inclusive and segregated districts. Themes for each dyad are presented as a way to organize the primary distinctions between the inclusive and the segregated districts.

Large District Dyad: New Directions versus Traditional Views of Special Education Services

At the time of this study, the large inclusive district had 57.5% of its special education students in inclusive placement and 10.6% in segregated placements. The large segregated district had 35.1% in inclusive placements and 28.9% in segregated placements. Although these two districts were located right next to each other, implementation of special education services were very different. The inclusive district could be characterized as undergoing a dramatic change, while the segregated district could be characterized as maintaining its long-standing traditional model.

The large inclusive district was in its third year of change to their special education service delivery, with a primary goal being to return students to their neighborhood schools in an effort to implement a district-wide inclusive model. This change was initiated by a new special education director who had proposed a five-year plan that would involve a greater number of students with disabilities

attending general education classes. In contrast, the large segregated district appeared to be maintaining its traditional model of special education service delivery.

There were significant differences in how the two special education directors described the LRE and how it influenced their view of inclusion for students with disabilities. For the special education director of the inclusive district, the LRE was defined as when students start in the general education classroom, “no ifs, ands, or buts,” and are then pulled out as needed. In other words, students would “earn their way up the continuum” towards more intensive services as needed. The special education director of the segregated district noted that the IDEA does not mandate inclusion, and if it did, “we would be required to provide an individualized inclusion program (IIP), not an IEP [Individualized Education Program].” Furthermore, if the federal government really wanted inclusion, they would be more explicit in this mandate. Instead, the law requires a “continuum of placements.” A principal from this same district stressed the importance of focusing on the needs of the individual student: “we’re going to make a program to fit the student.” Consequently, according to this principal, the LRE may not be best for a student because the student may need more support and the general education setting may not be beneficial.

School personnel also tended to share the view of the special education directors. For example, one of the inclusive district’s “intervention specialists” defined the LRE as meaning “students would be placed in the environment as close to the general education population as if they did not have a disability.” This would mean that the student would start in the general education setting, and then be pulled back depending on the student’s needs. School personnel mentioned that the definition of LRE came from the special education director who was described as speaking passionately about this move towards an inclusive district model.

In the large inclusive district, moving students to their neighborhood schools resulted in a movement away from center-based (or “cluster”) programs where students would be bused to different

schools depending on a disability-specific program. Instead, schools were now expected to provide services to a wide range of students. One special education department chair noted, “We used to have tons of parents coming to see a ‘program.’” However, “we don’t have programs anymore.” Instead, special education services were to be determined through a process whereby necessary supports and services for each student would be identified. Special education services were to be viewed as a “broad spectrum of services.” The new model included use of “learning centers” where students would receive small group instruction as needed as opposed to spending most of the day in a self-contained special education classroom.

In contrast, the large segregated district was organized around a variety of center-based or “cluster” programs. For example, students with moderate intellectual disabilities, autism, or emotional/behavioral disorders typically go to a school where a program designed for this student population is located. However, the special education director also noted that two-thirds of the students with IEPs attend their home schools. One teacher indicated that her program focuses on “functional skills” which uses a combination of general education materials and specialized materials. These programs were described as involving some degree of mainstreaming, where students with disabilities might go to a general education class for an activity or class period, or students without disabilities might go to the special education classroom (referred to as “reverse mainstreaming”). Students with more high incidence (or mild) disabilities such as learning disabilities typically attend their neighborhood school where there are either self-contained or resource programs depending on the social and academic skills of the student. For example, whether the “student can handle the academics.”

One of the schools in the segregated district has a “side-by-side” program, where two special education classes per grade level are connected to two general education classrooms of the same grade level. Students in the two special education classes for each grade level are assigned based on their “cognitive functioning level.” The goal of the side-by-side programs was to facilitate mainstreaming,

and the principal stated that all students in the “higher cognitive level” classroom go to science and social studies in general education, and students in the “lower cognitive level” will go to physical education (PE) in general education. However, observations revealed that mainstreaming is rarely done except in the kindergarten and first grades. Instead, the special education teacher stated that her students visit the general education counterpart for approximately ninety minutes a week, for special activities. The principal also noted several advantages of this type of center-based program: benefits for teachers to do professional development and opportunities for staff to meet and talk with other professionals. She noted that as a result, there was very low teacher turnover.

Each of these large districts faced unique challenges. The inclusive district faced teacher turnover issues and families leaving the district, while the segregated district faced an increasing demand for special segregated programs. As one principal in the segregated district noted, their district tends to have more self-contained, or segregated programs, and that it is a “real Catch-22,” or dilemma, because the district “is so well-known for services so people move into the district for the program, so this could result in a disproportionate” number of students with IEPs. One administrator stated that because of their reputation for having specialized programs, parents are attracted to their district. She summarized this with the phrase, “build it and they will come.” In fact, the parents who were interviewed stated that they appreciated the specialized programs. The special education director further noted that there are challenges to providing center-based programs, such as increased transportation costs and issues with schools not meeting adequate yearly progress testing targets (AYP) as required by the state. Nevertheless, the director stated parents appear to be satisfied because overall, complaints by parents are fairly low compared to the size of the district.

Both special education directors noted that the shift in service delivery in the inclusive district resulted in some special education teachers leaving to work in the segregated district. And, some special educators in the inclusive district were uncomfortable with being told that they no longer had a special

education classroom (the special education director stated that during the first year of the district changes, close to 49% of the special education teachers left). Special educators were also expected to co-teach with general education teachers, which was a “huge shift.” A high school special educator who is a proponent of inclusion and had specifically applied to this district because of the focus on inclusion, spoke about how implementing an inclusive program has been challenging and that not all personnel were on the same page regarding what it would look like despite everyone talking about it in a similar way. Principals mentioned that the most significant challenge continues to be changing the mindset of teachers along with the need for training and resources to support the changes the district is undergoing. In the third year of the district changes, the special education director noted that they now have a waiting list for hiring special education teachers.

Both special education directors mentioned how the changes in the inclusive district also influenced parents. As one school special education department chair from the inclusive district noted, some parents were opposed to the changes because of “possible negative experiences, such as students being teased, being left in the back of the classroom, and losing their special connection with the special education teacher.” The special education director of the inclusive district also noted that they have the most complaints from parents in the state. There are still some parents wanting a self-contained program, especially parents of students with autism and emotional/behavioral disorders. He also expressed that there has been no leadership from the state level and most special education directors do not want to take on the degree of change that he has initiated.

Mid-sized District Dyad: Culture of Inclusion versus Incremental Inclusion

At the time of this study, the mid-sized inclusive district had 77.4% of its special education students in inclusive placements and 5.2% in segregated placements. The mid-sized segregated district had 41.3% in inclusive placements and 16.9% segregated placements. The inclusive district could be

characterized as maintaining a traditional practice of inclusion, while the segregated district could be characterized as beginning an effort towards increasing inclusive placements.

The inclusive district has a long-standing reputation for being one of the most inclusive districts in the state. The special education director has been with the district since 1989 when she was hired as a teacher. She has been the special education director for the past five years. The special education director of the segregated district had been in her current position for 29 years and expressed that she had always wanted “to do inclusion.”

As with the previous district dyad, these special education directors spoke about the meaning of the LRE and how it related to inclusion in different ways. The special education director for the inclusive district stated that “inclusion is a verb, not a noun.” She further noted that her district has “always been an inclusive district.” A principal at one of the schools stated that the LRE is “placing kids where they can maximize their ability to learn.” He also noted that this can be difficult in the mainstream, and it is important to look at every individual student. Similar to the director of special education, this principal noted that inclusion is “always the way we have done things,” and “there are no self-contained classrooms at this school.” When asked about the meaning of the LRE, the special education director for the segregated district mentioned the importance of students who take the alternate assessment meeting the standards and that this would mean they “need instruction in a special education classroom.” However, she also believed that these same students could participate for social purposes in extracurricular and lunch activities. Similar to the large segregated district, the mid-sized segregated district maintained specialized programs: one school had a program for students with autism, and one school had a self-contained class for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and a self-contained class for students with emotional/behavioral disorders.

The segregated district appeared to be on the verge of implementing some changes in order to increase LRE placement percentages. The special education director conveyed that at a recent statewide

conference, their district data was reviewed and they were below state benchmarks for inclusive placements. They have since taken action on this, especially for students with high incidence disabilities who were too often being pulled out of general education. The special education director noted that research indicates that students with learning disabilities in general education classes perform better than those in resource rooms. She stressed that special education is a “support, not a place.” Through a response to intervention (RTI) program, the goal of the district is to have every student remain in the core general curriculum. To facilitate this process, she had met with district personnel from a nearby district and the district had implemented the use of instructional coaches to facilitate monthly meetings and speakers. However, for students with significant disabilities, she felt there would continue to be a need for special self-contained programs.

The inclusive district appeared to have developed a culture of inclusion over time. For example, one of the principals stated that they have maintained their inclusive philosophy through their hiring process: “our philosophy is that we believe we don’t hire teachers/instructors; we hire people. We can’t train character. We have lengthy, lengthy interviews. And, we hire subs if necessary.” He stressed that the person who is eventually hired must share their philosophy. Many of the graduates from a nearby university come to work for this district because the university program also has an emphasis on inclusive practices. The university faculty member, as well as the faculty member who began working with this district when it began its inclusion model back in the 1990’s, noted that this district has come a long way and now has a cadre of teachers who have been trained on and understand how to implement inclusion for students with disabilities.

The special education director for the inclusive district noted that parent support for their inclusion model has been very strong. This view was echoed by a parent who noted that she had moved to the district because she specifically sought a school that provided an inclusion program for her

daughter because she feared that her child would pick up on the behaviors of other students if she was placed in a self-contained setting with other students who had behavioral issues.

Small District Dyad: Dismantling versus Maintaining Special Separate Programs

At the time of this study, the small inclusive district had 88.6% of its special education students in inclusive placements and 3.1% in segregated placements. The small segregated district had 45.6% in inclusive placements and 18.7% in segregated placements. The inclusive district could be characterized as undergoing dramatic changes, while the segregated district could be characterized as maintaining its traditional model.

As with the previous district dyads, there were differences in how the special education administrators spoke about the meaning of the LRE and inclusion. When asked about the meaning of the LRE, the former superintendent of the inclusive district noted that their district is progressive. They pushed for “full inclusion, whereas, other districts do this in degrees.” She noted that it was important to push this first, and then look at individuals, resources and other options that are needed to make it work. This view of the LRE was similar to the view of a special education teacher who stated that her view of the LRE means “the provision of a fully inclusive program for all students.” The current special education director was in her first year at this inclusive district and mentioned that the state department program monitor had told her that the LRE is not always the general education setting. She had been told to look at the continuum of services, such as resource rooms, indicating that the LRE is a resource room first followed by slowly integrating students, which was in conflict with how things were being done in this district. This view of the LRE was similar to views shared by personnel from the segregated district. One teacher described the LRE as being “the place where it’s closest to the regular ed[ucation] placement that provides the support needed by the student...[t]he environment in which they [students] can function.” She went on to elaborate that in some situations, the LRE could be a self-contained setting, depending on the needs of the student. Another teacher noted that the LRE needs to be defined

as the “appropriate” setting to meet the student’s needs. A principal stated this same belief regarding the LRE: “that the students have the opportunity to work with the general education population as much as possible.”

The small inclusive district was in “transition” with a new administrative group. The former superintendent had retired the previous year and the former special education director had been on a consulting contract for two years. At the time of this study, there was a new superintendent and a new special education director. Moreover, this district had experienced a significant change to their special education program over the past several years. Two years before this study, a segregated school was closed in order to have students attend the school for their grade level. This self-contained school had been the placement for students with moderate to severe disabilities, and most students attended this school from elementary school through age twenty-two. As the previous superintendent and special education director noted, the school was a “big babysitting center” and “there was not a lot of academics, children were sitting in front of videos.” Furthermore, there were questions about whether these students had been diagnosed properly.

Through the initiation of the superintendent and interim special education director, one of the special education teachers was recruited to facilitate the closing of the segregated campus. This special education teacher was a graduate student at a nearby university that supported inclusive practices and had been teaching in this district for six years. As the special education teacher noted, “[name of special education director] cleared the way as I drove the truck.” The segregated school had been a part of the community for twenty years and the process of “dismantling” it was challenging.

When the segregated school was closed, all of those students were “folded into existing caseloads . . . meaning all student are now more than 80% of the time in general education settings.” As the previous special education director noted, the philosophy of the LRE has changed since the closing of the segregated school to one in which “slowly, but surely, children belong at their home school with

services brought to their school.” The only self-contained classroom in the district was at the high school.

Similar to the large and mid-sized segregated districts, the small segregated district provided special programs at specific campuses. For example, the special education director noted that there is a program for students with autism at one school. The new teacher who teaches in a resource program described that most of her students receive services under the disability categories of Learning Disability and Other Health Impairments (mostly Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder). She said that she usually works with her students for reading, writing, and math. None of her students remain in the resource room for the whole day, and most of the students receive instruction in the resource room for two hours per day. Students requiring a full-time resource room setting go to a different school.

Discussion

Findings from these Arizona school districts reflect that there remains no unified view of LRE as related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. However, one striking similarity across interviewees was the way in which they talked about the LRE. They all emphasized the importance of the LRE being “individualized” and “appropriate.” Yet, individuals in segregated districts tended to focus more on the ability of the students for determining placement options while those in inclusive districts tended to focus more on determining how to provide supports the general education setting. For example, school personnel in inclusive districts tended to emphasize that students would “move up the continuum” towards more restrictive settings if the general education setting was unable to meet the student’s needs; whereas school personnel in segregated districts tended to emphasize that students would “move down the continuum” towards more inclusive settings as the student acquired more skills. Yet, the LRE provision in the IDEA states a clear preference for students with disabilities being educated in general education settings with removal from that setting only when the needs of that

student cannot be satisfactorily met in the general education setting. This provision actually reflects more closely the view of the LRE shared by the interviewees from the inclusive districts.

According to the most recent placement data, all the districts in this study had increased their inclusive placements since 2008, except for the large segregated district, which went from 35.1% to 34.5% in inclusive placements. The small and mid-sized segregated districts increased their inclusive placements by 8.9% and 13.7%, respectively. However, their overall inclusive placements remained substantially lower than their counterpart inclusive districts by approximately 30-40%. This would indicate that over time, districts tended to remain either inclusive or segregated despite the state's plans to increase inclusive placements.

The role of district leadership. Most interviewees noted the importance of district leadership in determining the meaning of the LRE and how it is implemented in schools. This is consistent with others who have noted the important impact district and school leaders play in improving outcomes for students receiving special education services (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). In particular, how the special education director interpreted the policy and the philosophy of the district was of significance. These interpretations and philosophies were informed by the special education director's past experiences. For example, the special education directors from segregated school districts mentioned their past experiences with creating special programs, such as an "autism program." These efforts were mentioned as successes and as favorable indicators of support for special education. On the other hand, special education directors from the inclusive districts had either had previous experiences with inclusion or assumed leadership in a district that had already been implementing inclusion for some time. These special education directors shared a strong preference for inclusion and were willing to address opposition in order to make inclusion a reality rather than retreating from resistance from parents and teachers. These views and experiences are important because directors of special education

have been found instrumental in “providing and selling a vision” of inclusion while responding to resistance (Mayrowetz, & Weinstein, 1999, p. 431).

District leadership to support inclusion was also depicted in their hiring practices. For example, administrators with an inclusive orientation tended to hire teachers who shared this philosophy. Conversely, administrators with preferences for and pride in creating special programs tended to hire teachers who had the skills needed to build these special programs. Interestingly, teachers also tended to relocate to districts that shared their preferences for either an inclusive or more segregated program in which to work.

Presence of specialized programs. A notable difference between the inclusive and segregated districts was the presence of specialized programs. The segregated districts tended to describe “center-based” programs: programs that are located throughout the district to serve specific populations of students. For example, one principal mentioned that students with more severe disabilities would attend a different school and that one of the schools had a program for students with autism. There was also a different school that had a program for children with emotional/behavioral disorders. Parents and personnel from districts with these types of segregated programs appeared to associate them as indicators of a strong special education program. Perhaps this notion that separate settings are more specialized is not surprising, given the historical presumption that separate settings provide highly specialized instruction and care (Winzer, 2007). While these assumptions persist, they have failed to find support in empirical research. For example, Causton-Theoharis and colleagues (2011) found that separate special education programs failed to deliver on their promises of delivering specialized instruction, behavioral supports, and distraction-free learning environments.

The influence of parents. School personnel in the large districts identified the role of parents in determining whether a student would be placed in a more inclusive or a more segregated program. They noted that parents who are educated about the law, who are actively involved, and who will advocate for

a specific type of placement can come from “both ends” of the LRE spectrum. For example, there has been an increased demand for self-contained programs from parents of students with autism. Additionally, parents who had the means tended to move into districts that provided the type of program placement that matched their preferences. However, in both the mid-sized and small district dyads, parental views were not mentioned. It is possible that in smaller districts that the views of district leadership have a stronger influence than parent preferences for inclusive versus segregated placements.

Implications

As highlighted in the results, issues such as parent selective mobility, district’s historical reputation, district leadership, and lack of pressure from the state may play a role in whether a district chooses to implement inclusion. Other issues may include a broader tension between establishing a program versus creating a set of services. In other words, districts that invest in special segregated programs may be less able to provide services in the LRE, making programs overall less flexible in meeting the needs of a broader range of student placements. Further, once programs are built, there is likely a pressure from parents and teachers to continue those programs, making it difficult to dismantle these programs should a district attempt to move towards greater inclusion of students with disabilities. On the other hand, if a district does not provide segregated programs and parents desire one, they might relocate to a district that has these types of programs. It would appear that parent perceptions in combination with district leadership play a central role in whether a district implements greater inclusion or greater segregation. Understanding how perceptions of district leadership and parents interact is an important area for future investigation. Furthermore, we believe that policymakers pushing for more inclusion of students with disabilities into general education settings will need to have greater understanding of the views and experiences of special education directors and district leadership in order to determine what types of challenges they are willing to undertake.

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Appendix A. District Personnel Interview Questions

1. Please describe your connection to this school and district (your role, how long have you been connected with this school and/or district).
 - a. Have you had any experiences with other schools within this district? If so, please describe.
 - b. Have you had any experiences with other districts in Arizona? If so, please describe.
 - c. Have you had any experiences with schools/districts in other states? If so, please describe.
2. Federal and state policies related to the educational placement of students who receive special education services have used the term “least restrictive environment.” In your view, what does this term mean? In what ways does your school implement this policy? Is this the same or different from other schools in your district? Is this the same or different from other districts in the state?
3. In your opinion, what would you say are your district’s and/or school’s policies related to educational placement of students who have moderate to severe disabilities? What seems to be working well? What would you like to see done differently?
4. Please describe your experiences related to students with moderate to severe disabilities receiving their education in general education settings? (If no experiences, please describe your views on having students with moderate to severe disabilities receiving their education in general education settings.)
5. If federal and/or state policies were to require that all students with disabilities receive their educational services in general education settings for at least 80% of the school day, what do you believe would be the greatest challenges for your district? What about your district would make this less difficult?
6. As you may know, educational placement varies from district to district. For example, some districts have very high numbers of students who spend most of their day in general education classrooms, while others have very low numbers of students. In your opinion, what do you believe accounts for these differences?
7. In your opinion, would you like to see greater numbers of students with disabilities in general education settings, or would you like to see fewer numbers of students with disabilities in general education settings?

Appendix B. Parent Interview Questions

1. Please describe your connection to this school (role, how long have you been connected with this school).
2. Have you had any experiences with other schools within this district? If so, please describe.
3. Have you had any experiences with other districts in Arizona? If so, please describe.
4. How would you describe the IDEA policy regarding the least restrictive environment? What does it mean to you?
5. In what ways does your school implement this policy? Is this the same or different from other schools in your district? Is this the same or different from other schools in the state?
6. How do you feel about the provision of the LRE for children who have more significant disabilities? How about for those who have more mild disabilities?
7. Are you satisfied with how things are regarding placements in your school? In your district?
8. As you know, schools and districts vary as far as how they provide the LRE for students with disabilities. For example, some districts have very high numbers of students who spend most of their day in general education classrooms, while others have very low numbers of students. Why do you think this is the case?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about special education services within your school or your district?