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Utah Bright Spots in Special Education:
Highlighting Effective and Inclusive Schools

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Bridging Research, Policy, and Practice

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Executive Summary

In collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education, the UEPC identified and highlighted effective and inclusive schools as *Bright Spots in Special Education* in Utah. In this study, the *Bright Spots in Special Education Schools* are those that have created inclusive environments for students with disabilities and have been effective at producing positive outcomes for those students. This study permits us to generate a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of these schools, including their working conditions, leadership support, culture and climate, collaboration, and levels of satisfaction among teachers. Results from this study can be used to inform other local education agencies across Utah on how they can enhance their support of special education teachers and students to increase inclusion and achievement for students with disabilities.

This study uses a mixed-method approach to address each research question, including interviews with school leaders and teachers (both general education and special education) from each Bright Spot School and administering a survey about working conditions and job satisfaction to a group of teachers identified by leaders. The study investigates the following research questions:

1. What practices support inclusive and academically effective schools for students with disabilities?
2. What educator working conditions support inclusive and academically effective schools for students with disabilities?

Key Findings

Survey and interview data were analyzed to identify and elaborate factors contributing to the success of special education programs in five effective, inclusive elementary schools across Utah. Together, the analysis of these two data sources provides the basis for three primary themes, which are listed here with related findings.

Intentional Leadership Support and Investment:

- Leaders at Bright Spot Schools support special education through intentional efforts to be present and available and developing a sense of trust and respect among teachers.
- Leaders at Bright Spot Schools demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and a sense of responsibility for teachers and students in special education, including having personal or professional connections with special education.

Maintaining a Positive Culture and Climate to Support Inclusion of Students with Disabilities, Expectations, and Teacher Satisfaction

- Bright Spot Schools maintain a culture of inclusion and belonging for students with disabilities and a shared belief that "these are all our students."
- Bright Spot Schools maintain a culture of high expectations for all students, regularly monitoring both academic and behavioral progress.
- Teachers in Bright Spot Schools have positive perceptions of the demands of their job, satisfaction with their position, and sense of support from within and outside their school.

Collaborative Engagement

- Within Bright Spot Schools, teachers use formal and informal collaboration to monitor progress and address individual student needs across general and special education classrooms.
- Collaboration among teachers, aides, and other support staff plays an important role in instruction, as Bright Spot Schools implement small groups and differentiated learning strategies.

Considerations

Leadership Support is Imperative to Developing Effective and Inclusive Schools: The findings from this Bright Spot Schools study in conjunction with previous research suggests that additional development of special education knowledge, skills, and dispositions among leaders and their pathway to and in leadership positions may be beneficial. There are multiple ways to increase this professional preparation to lead inclusive and effective schools, including further review and attention to the content of preparation program coursework, clinical experiences, and professional learning in practice.

Create a Unified Vision that Maintains High Expectations and a Shared Commitment to Inclusion for Students with Disabilities: Teachers and administrators across Bright Spot Schools shared a vision and high expectations of students with their colleagues and school leaders. This unifying vision at the study schools created an environment of support, community, and encouragement that centered a shared commitment to inclusion.

Creating Opportunities for Collaboration: To further support inclusion and effective schooling for students in special education and educators, there are additional opportunities to expand collective professional learning experiences to promote shared commitment and practice. For instance, previous research describes learner-centered professional development as promoting classroom-embedded learning supported by coaching, and supportive of collective participation among teachers in ways that develop learning communities (Desimone, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). These characteristics align well with the types of inclusive and collaborative environments that we identified within Bright Spot Schools.

Introduction

Multiple factors impact the ability of a schools' special education program to serve its students and their needs. These factors may include leadership support, the availability and quality of the educator workforce, school culture, instructional practices, and other financial or material resources. In addition to their impact on the outcomes for students with disabilities, these factors may also influence educator satisfaction and persistence.

In collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education, the UEPC identified and highlighted effective and inclusive schools as *Bright Spots in Special Education* in Utah. In this study, the *Bright Spots in Special Education Schools* (hereafter referred to as Bright Spot Schools) are those that have created inclusive environments for students with disabilities and have been effective at producing positive student outcomes. This study permits us to generate a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of these schools, including their working conditions, leadership support, culture and climate, collaboration, and levels of satisfaction among teachers. Results from this study can be used to inform other local education agencies across Utah on how they can enhance their support of special education teachers and students to increase inclusion and achievement for students with disabilities.

This study is part of the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) research series aimed at understanding the educator pipeline and factors that may impact this pipeline and special education, (Auletto, Rorrer, & Ni, 2020; Ni et al., 2017a; Ni et al., 2017b; Ni & Rorrer, 2018; Rorrer et al., 2020). Previously, for instance, the UEPC has considered special education teachers' motivation, satisfaction, and persistence (Auletto, et al., 2020); the working conditions of special education teachers in Utah (Auletto et al., 2022c); early career pathways of special education teachers (Auletto et al., 2022a); and the special education workforce and career trajectories of Utah special education teachers (Auletto et al., 2022b). This study extends this line of inquiry.

This study uses a mixed-method approach to answer the following research questions.

1. What practices support inclusive and academically effective schools for students with disabilities?
2. What educator working conditions support inclusive and academically effective schools for students with disabilities?

Schools were selected for this study based on the academic achievement of students with disabilities, inclusion rates, and teacher retention rates. Following the identification of *Bright Spots in Special Education* and the agreement of five schools to participate in this study, UEPC conducted interviews with principals, special education teachers, and general education teachers in those schools to better understand the practices, culture, and climate that support effectiveness and inclusion for students with disabilities in each school. Additionally, UEPC conducted a survey of a sample of teachers in each school to gather perceptions of teacher working conditions, satisfaction, and practices that support the success of special education in these schools.

Relevant Literature

Creating an inclusive environment is both an expectation and demand for schools to effectively meet the needs of students. In fact, recent research recognizes that inclusion and school effectiveness are interconnected aims for school improvement, particularly improvement that supports the needs of students with disabilities (Choi et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). McLeskey and colleagues (2014) offer a definition of *effective inclusive schools* as "places where students with disabilities are valued and active participants and where they are provided supports needed to succeed in the academic, social, and extra-curricular activities of the school" (p. 4). While inclusion is often measured by the percentage of time

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students with disabilities spend in general education classrooms, this broader definition suggests that inclusion must become an integral part of the fabric of schools, including their everyday teaching and learning practices, their culture, and their beliefs about students and their potential.

Research on effective inclusive schools is limited. To date, recent studies have focused on single schools or groups of schools and yielded general categories of findings that describe the culture and practices in these successful settings (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). Some studies have highlighted leadership and organizational features in effective inclusive schools, such as shared decision-making, distributed leadership, and efficient and flexible use of resources (Farrell et al., 2007; McLeskey et al., 2014). Other studies have focused more on the role of leadership in these schools, finding that leaders contribute to establishing a unifying vision and commitment to educating all students, providing accountability while maintaining autonomy for teachers and embedding data-drive decision-making throughout the school (Billingsley et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Effective inclusive schools require quality instruction and student support. For instance, research suggests that these schools hold high expectations for all students, support students with disabilities as valued members of the school community alongside their peers, and align inclusion with instructional practices (Billingsley et al., 2018; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). Examples of high-quality instructional practices include *Response to Intervention* (e.g., a multi-tiered system of student supports), differentiated lessons, small-groups, and cooperative learning strategies (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014).

Positive working conditions for teachers are also cited in multiple studies as a characteristic of effective inclusive schools. For instance, a study conducted by UEPC found positive associations between special education teacher perceptions of their working conditions (i.e., teaching demands, school culture and climate, leadership support, collegial support and collaboration, and other support and resources) and their feelings of satisfaction as well as their plans to remain in their current teaching position (Auletto, Rorrer, & Ni, 2022). The UEPC studies are consistent with other research that also found links between working conditions and the likelihood that special education teachers will remain in their positions (Billingsley et al., 2018; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). According to Billingsley and colleagues (2020), special education teachers "who report their school has a culture of collective responsibility for students are more likely to intend to stay" (p. 11). The effect of school culture on teacher retention is important given the connection between retention and student outcomes. For instance, Johnson and colleagues (2012) found that positive working conditions are a predictor of student achievement when comparing schools with similar demographics.

Lastly, research suggests that, similar to other schools, personal and interpersonal factors are influential in effective inclusive schools. In fact, McLeskey and colleagues (2014) found that many of the instructional and leadership practices they identified in a case study of a highly effective and inclusive school were similar to other schools that didn't have high rates of inclusion, stating that "there is nothing that is particularly unusual about [the school]" (p. 69). They posit instead that the differentiating factor in effective inclusive schools may be the tenacity with which educators and leaders commit to and implement high-quality instruction and support for their students. They add that these schools are perhaps best characterized by teacher beliefs and a school-wide commitment to high expectations and achievement for all students.

Findings from this emerging body of research on effective inclusive schools lay the groundwork for our study of *Bright Spots in Special Education in Utah*. To contribute to the field's understanding of effective inclusive school practices and characteristics, the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) identified and gathered data from a sample of schools that demonstrated higher than expected achievement among students with disabilities, rates of inclusion, and retention among special education teachers. In the next section, we provide an overview of our methods for identifying and studying Bright Spot Schools.

Methods and Study Design

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to answer the following questions:

1. What practices support inclusive and academically effective schools for students with disabilities?
2. What educator working conditions support inclusive and academically effective schools for students with disabilities?

Consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative research, these research questions reflect a refinement of the initial study questions and a narrowed focus. To identify schools in Utah that have been most successful at providing effective and inclusive education for students with disabilities, the UEPC used three primary criteria: achievement scores of students with disabilities, school inclusion rates, and retention of special education teachers (See Figure 1). Ultimately, the goal of this study was to both identify schools where outcomes for students and teachers are exceeding expectations and identify practices that may be contributing to that success.

For this study, it was important to distinguish between schools with high levels of achievement and inclusion for students with disabilities and schools with *higher-than-expected* levels of achievement and inclusion. For instance, a school with higher test scores and also a student profile typically associated with higher achievement (e.g., a low percentage of students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL)) may limit what we can learn by studying that school. In contrast, high achievement in a school with a high percentage of students eligible for FRPL is a better candidate for study because its performance exceeds our expectations based on its student profile. One method that is commonly used to consider expectations is multiple regression, where a single outcome (such as a school's average score on an achievement test) is predicted by a combination of variables (such as the percentage of students eligible for FRPL). The result of multiple regression is a statistical model: a formula that allows one use the known values of predictor variables to compute the expected value of the outcome. This expected value becomes our "expectation" for a particular school—i.e., the value that we expect, given the characteristics that were considered by the model. Using this approach, we selected schools that exceeded their expected values for inclusion and achievement. This approach—rather than comparing raw inclusion rates or achievement test scores—allows for a more equitable comparison among schools. practices—norms, habits, beliefs, etc.—that may contribute to success.

Figure 1. Selection criteria for high-performing schools

High Teacher Retention

Schools must have greater than 50% special education teacher retention for 2019–20 and 2020–21.

High Achievement Scores

Schools must have significantly higher achievement scores above expectations in both 2019 and 2021.

High Inclusion Rates

Schools must have high rates of inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms.

Data were analyzed from all students recorded in the USBE SCRAM (Self-Contained Resource Attendance Management)[1] data who received special education services in school years ending in 2019 and 2021 and who also completed RISE achievement tests in that year (no students completed RISE achievement tests in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic)[2]. Preliminary analysis indicated that student scores on Language, Math, and Science subject areas were highly correlated ($r > 0.8$), so an average achievement score was computed for each student. The mean of each student-level variable, including achievement test score, was computed within school and year to produce school-level values for each of the outcomes and predictor variables.

Special education teacher retention was defined as the percentage of special education teachers in a school who worked as special education teachers in that same school in the subsequent year. Two school year spans were considered: 2018-19 to 2019-20 and 2019-20 to 2020-21, and the retention rates of special education teachers from each span were averaged together to create an overall retention rate for each school. Information about the number of full-time employees working in special education at a particular school was determined using a USBE table of job assignments which describes the school, role (including special education teaching), and percentage of time allocated for each teacher[3].

Criteria for determining Bright Spot Schools

Actual vs. Expected Levels of Inclusion and Achievement for Students with Disabilities

Again, multiple regression was used to generate expected levels of inclusion and achievement for each school. Separate models were used for inclusion and achievement, each with the following school-level predictor variables: the percentage of special education students at the school identified with the disabilities Autism, Emotional Disturbance, Speech/Language Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment, Multiple Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, the percentage of students at the school qualifying for FRPL, the percentage of students at the school who were English-language learners, the number of full-time teachers assigned to special education roles (only schools with greater than 0 FTE were included), the number of special education students enrolled, and the interaction between the latter two (to capture student-teacher ratio). Forward and backward stepwise selection using the Akaike Information Criterion was used to refine the regression models, removing predictors that did not

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[1] The SCRAM (Self-Contained Resource Attendance Management) table maintained by USBE records the special education services delivered to students and includes information about student disability labels (e.g., autism, intellectual disability) and the percentage of a student's school day spent in a regular (i.e., not exclusively special education) classroom, coded at three levels: 80%+, 40-79%, and less than 40%.

[2] Student data for this study were used in compliance with the Master Data-Sharing agreement between the UEPC and the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), including adherence to student data privacy use and reporting requirements. SCRAM data and student achievement test records for language, math, and science were utilized for the analyses. One group of special education students excluded from current consideration are those with severe cognitive impairment who qualify for a separate achievement test that is on a different scale. Scores on this separate test tend to be higher than the regular achievement test scores of special education students without severe cognitive impairment, and their inclusion would artificially inflate the mean score of any group in which they were over-represented.

[3] If a teacher worked in both the same school and a different school in the subsequent year, they were counted as working in the same school for the purpose of computing retention. School-level retention rates were calculated for each year by averaging the retention rate of all the teachers in the school in a given category (special education or not special education). Then, overall retention rates for special education and non-special-education teachers were computed for each school by averaging the retention rates for the two available years.

significantly contribute to predicting the outcome. The models fit the data well, explaining 29.5% of the variance in inclusion and 49.8% of the variance in achievement.

We used the regression models to generate expected values for achievement and inclusion for each school, given that school's characteristics. These expected values were compared to a school's actual values to determine whether a school was performing above or below expectation. By computing the difference between the actual value and the expected value, we obtain a value that is zero when a school's actual and expected value are equal, positive when the school is performing above expectations, and negative when the school is performing below expectations. If we divide that difference by the standard deviation of the achievement or inclusion value, we get a value that is in units of standard deviations. For example, a value of +0.5 would indicate that a school is performing 0.5 standard deviations above expectations, and a value of -1 would indicate that a school is performing one standard deviation below expectations. Using standard deviations as the units puts both achievement and inclusion onto the same scale, whereas previously they had been on a 1-4 and percentage scale, respectively. Standard deviation units also correspond to the *d* statistic of effect size, which is often used in social science research to place findings onto a common scale (Cohen, 1988; Kraft, 2020).

Selecting Schools

Here we provide information about how the study schools were selected for this instrumental case study (Yin, 2014). This instrumental case study helps us understand the role of inclusion in serving students identified with disabilities. The left panel of Figure 2 shows the distribution of all schools with greater than zero full-time-employee assignments in special education instruction and at least two values for special education inclusion and achievement test scores in both 2019 and 2021 ($n = 959$). The points are the average across 2019 and 2021 for each school, and each point is the difference between the actual and expected value, divided by its standard deviation. As the left panel indicates, schools are generally distributed around the point (0,0) because, on average, expected values tend to be close to actual values, producing differences near zero. When inclusion values are greater than zero (to the right of the vertical line), it indicates schools whose inclusion exceeds expectations. When achievement values are greater than zero (above the horizontal line), it indicates schools whose achievement exceeds expectations. In searching for Bright Spot Schools, we concentrated on schools in the upper right quadrant, who are above expectations on both inclusion and achievement. This quadrant is highlighted in the right panel, labeled "Above Expectations." The red arrow points to the origin point in each plot, illustrating the shift in focus from the left to the right side of the figure.

The red dots in the right panel of Figure 2 identify nine schools that were not only above-expectations on both inclusion and achievement but also passed two additional tests. First, they had one-year special education teacher retention values above 50% when averaging across 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021. Second, they had achievement scores that were not only above expectations but *significantly* ($p < .05$) above expectations in both 2019 and 2021. Other schools may have achievement scores that are higher than the schools indicated in red, but the combination of either a small number of students or more variability in the achievement scores (or both) prevented those schools from being significantly above expectations. We did not add the restriction that inclusion scores had to be *significantly* above expectations because there were not enough schools that satisfied that restriction. Given the high base rate for inclusion across schools (the average school reports 76% of special education students are in regular classrooms 80% or more of the time) and the maximum upper limit of 100%, it is more difficult for schools to exceed expectations for inclusion than it is for them to exceed expectations for achievement, which has a mean value of 1.6 across schools.

Figure 2. Degree to which schools' actual values differed from model-expected values.
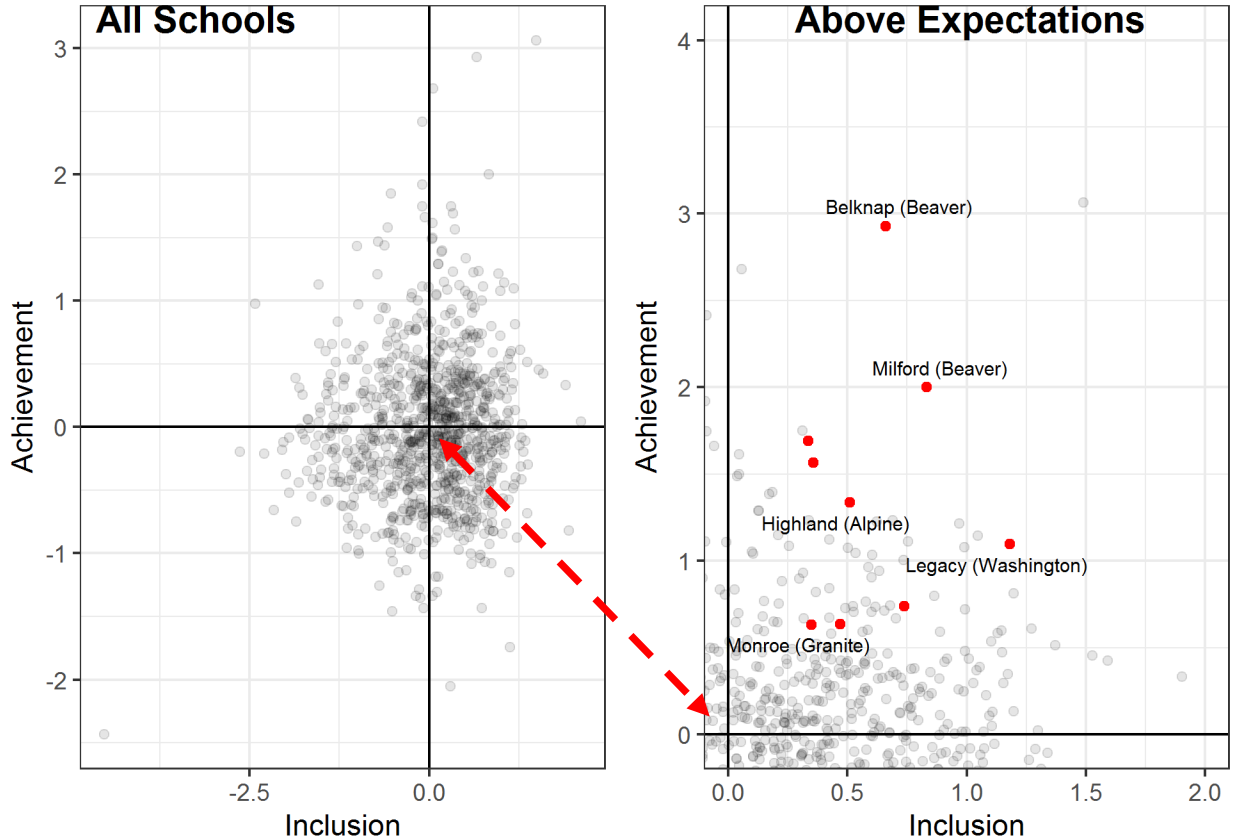
The nine schools identified by red dots in the right panel of Figure 2 were selected as the initial list of Bright Spot Schools. In collaboration with Dr. Leah Voorhies (Assistant Superintendent of Student Support and State Director of Special Education), the UEPC contacted leaders at each school and invited them to participate in this study. The five schools who agreed to participate are identified by name in the right panel of Figure 2. Table 1 provides additional information about each of the nine schools, including standard deviations above expectation for achievement and inclusion, as well as one-year special education teacher retention rates, averaged across 2019 to 2020 and 2020 to 2021.

Table 1. Initial list of Bright Spot Schools and their performance compared to expectations

School Name (District)	Grades served	Achievement	Inclusion	Retention
Belknap (Beaver)	K-6	2.95	0.66	100%
East High (Salt Lake)	9-12	0.71	0.74	67%
Highland (Alpine)	K-6	1.31	0.51	100%
Horizon (Washington)	K-5	1.55	0.36	60%
Legacy (Washington)	K-5	1.01	1.18	83%
Milford (Beaver)	K-6	1.99	0.83	100%
Monroe (Granite)	K-6	0.64	0.35	100%
West High (Salt Lake)	7-12	0.57	0.47	67%
Westfield (Alpine)	K-6	1.71	0.34	100%

*Note: Achievement and Inclusion values indicate the number of standard deviations that each school exceeded model-predicted expectations. Values above zero indicate above-average rates for achievement and inclusion.

Data Collection

Again, when the UEPC and USBE contacted all nine of the initial Bright Spot Schools, school leaders were asked to participate in an interview and provide contact information via a secure Qualtrics questionnaire for all special education teachers at the school as well as 3-5 general education teachers who could speak to the success of their special education programs. The research team shared with leaders that these teachers would be asked to participate in interviews and complete a survey. (Survey administration is described below). As is always the case, participation in the study by schools and school personnel is voluntary. Five schools—listed in Table 2—and their personnel chose to participate.

To address each research question, UEPC conducted interviews with school leaders and teachers (both general education and special education) from each Bright Spot School and administered a survey about working conditions and job satisfaction to the group of teachers identified by leaders. Data collection processes are described in detail below.

Table 2 shows school characteristic information for the five participating Bright Spot Schools. All are elementary schools, serving grades K-5 or K-6, with enrollments ranging from 240-828. The percentage of students identified with disabilities ranges from 13-21% across participating sites. Three schools (i.e., Belknap, Legacy, and Monroe) receive Title I funding. Table 3 provides demographic information. Students at all five schools are predominantly (84-98%) White. More than 15% of students at four of the five schools identify as Hispanic/Latino, including 64% at Monroe Elementary in Granite School District.

Table 2. Characteristics of Bright Spot Schools

School Name (District)	Grades served	Total Enrollment[4]	% of Students Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch	% of Students Identified with Disabilities	Special Education Teacher FTE
Belknap (Beaver)	K-6	492	50%	16%	2.6
Highland (Alpine)	K-6	828	12%	13%	4.5
Legacy (Washington)	K-5	657	74%	16%	3.0
Milford (Beaver)	K-6	240	51%	21%	1.4
Monroe (Granite)	K-6	724	85%	14%	2.0

Table 3. Bright Spot School demographic information

School Name (District)	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic/Latino	Native American	White
Belknap (Beaver)	1%	<1%	17%	1%	98%
Highland (Alpine)	4%	1%	3%	1%	96%
Legacy (Washington)	1%	3%	42%	5%	90%
Milford (Beaver)	1%	<1%	23%	2%	95%
Monroe (Granite)	4%	4%	64%	2%	84%

*Note: Records of student race/ethnicity permit multiple designations per student, so the sum of percentages within school can exceed 100%.

Teacher Working Conditions Survey

This study included a survey to gather teacher perceptions of their working conditions. Using information for special education and general education teachers provided by the site administrator, the UEPC reached out to school-based educators about the success of their special education programs. In total, 14 special education teachers and 20 general education teachers from across the five schools were invited to participate. Individual survey links were emailed to each teacher in February 2023, with weekly reminders sent to those who had not yet completed the survey. Final responses included eight special education teachers and 10 general education teachers for an overall response rate of 53%. All five schools were represented in survey responses, although we received no special education teacher responses from one school and no general education teacher responses from another school.

Schools who voluntary chose to participate in the study were administered a modified version of *UEPC's Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce Survey* (Auletto, Rorrer & Ni, 2022)

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[4] *Student data (enrollment, % eligible for FRPL, % disabilities) was available through a Master Data-Sharing Agreement between UEPC and USBE. FTE is available from the CACTUS (Comprehensive Administration of Credentials for Teachers in Utah Schools) database.

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(referred to from this point forward as the "*2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey*")[5]. The UEPC's 2022 Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce Survey was informed by Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) review of literature on special education teacher retention and supported by additional research on this topic (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017; Drame & Pugach, 2010; Jones & Youngs, 2012; Kaff, 2004; McCray et al., 2014). For this study, the Working Conditions Survey was further modified to gather data from both general education teachers as well as special education teachers (e.g., additional items related to teachers' role and revised wording related to collaboration with general education and/or special education teachers). Specifically, the modified *2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey* focuses on the following aspects of teachers' working conditions.

- Teaching demands
- School culture and climate
- Administrative/Leadership support
- Collegial support and collaboration
- Other supports and resources

The survey also measures special education teachers' outcomes in the following areas:

- Wellbeing
- Satisfaction
- Career intentions

For each of the five working conditions and three outcome areas noted above, participants were asked to respond to a series of Likert-style items. Given the limited sample size of the survey, we could not use inferential statistics to analyze the relationship between these factors, although such analysis does present an opportunity for additional inquiry in future studies with more robust survey data collection. Throughout the survey, respondents were also invited to provide open-ended feedback on the topics noted above. Open-ended responses were coded using an open coding strategy, using participants' language and experiences to inductively analyze data (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were then organized into themes and compared with findings from interview analysis. Illustrative quotes from these responses, organized by theme, are included throughout the report to illustrate and support key findings. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze close-ended survey items.

Interviews

The UEPC research team conducted interviews with general and special education teachers as well as school leaders across five Bright Spot Schools to better understand how special education teachers are supported and contribute to positive outcomes for students identified with disabilities. Principals from all five schools participated in interviews, and the same 34 teachers (14 special education and 20 general education) who were invited to complete the *2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey* were also asked to participate in interviews. The UEPC completed a total of 17 interviews, including five school principals, eight special education teachers (at least one from each school), and four general education teachers (representing three of the five schools).

Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview protocols for each participant group. This semi-structured approach created consistency across interviews, while at the same time providing flexibility to pursue nuances and differences in presenters' experiences (Merriam, 2009). All protocols

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[5] Findings from the Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce Survey can be accessed on with the UEPC reports on the UEPC website at www.uepc.utah.edu or directly via this link.

were aligned with our primary research questions and tailored to the specific role of each participant group (e.g., leaders, special education teachers, general education teachers). Interview topics included:

- General perceptions of special education (e.g., *What does your school do well in supporting students with disabilities? To what do you attribute your school's successes supporting students with disabilities?*),
- Special education approaches and practices (e.g., *What is your school's approach to inclusion? What instructional and classroom practices are you and/or other teachers engaging in that most support students with disabilities?*),
- Support and collaboration (e.g., *How does your school administration support special education? How and in what ways do you collaborate with other special education teachers at your school?*)
- School culture and climate (e.g., *How are expectations set and communicated for students with disabilities? What aspects of your school context contribute to successes or challenges in special education at your school?*)

The interviews ranged in duration from 30 minutes to one hour, were conducted virtually via Zoom, and were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were coded using an open coding strategy, using participants' language and experiences to inductively analyze data (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were then organized into themes, which are presented in the findings below.

Limitations

This study uses both qualitative and survey methods. Findings from qualitative research are not generalizable. Qualitative studies, however, may provide an understanding of how the conditions of a particular site can inform others. By triangulating information and providing a rich description of the Bright Spot Schools, the findings from this study may assist other sites in analyzing their own leadership practices, school culture, teacher working conditions, and collaboration. Findings for this study only reflect the participation of five of the nine identified Bright Spot Schools. Thus, there is certainly more to learn from other Bright Spot Schools as well as opportunities to learn how Bright Spot Schools differ in everyday practice from schools not identified for this study. The sampling approach included requesting contact information for those who could most inform the study. While this is a common practice, it may also limit the range of data received. In addition, participation in this study was voluntary. Not everyone who was contacted participated. For instance, only four general education teachers from three of the five Bright Spot schools participated in interviews. The limited participation results in findings being largely based on special education teacher experiences. Notably, since the pandemic, we have experienced continued limitations on the number of participants in qualitative and survey studies that are across sites.

Findings

Survey and interview data were analyzed to identify and elaborate factors contributing to the success of special education programs in five effective, inclusive elementary schools. Specifically, interviews with principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers were analyzed to identify practices (e.g., leadership, instructional, collaborative) in these schools, as well as features of their climate and culture that may contribute to their success. Educator survey responses about teachers' roles and demands, as well as their sense of wellbeing, support, and available resources were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Together, the analysis of these two data sources provides the basis for three primary themes, which include intentional leadership support and investment; maintaining a positive culture and climate to support inclusion for students with disabilities, expectations, and teacher satisfaction; and collaborative engagement. A description of key findings with supporting data are provided.

Intentional Leadership Support and Investment

We identified two key findings related to leadership support and investment in Bright Spot Schools:

- Leaders at Bright Spot Schools support special education through intentional efforts to be present and available and developing a sense of trust and respect among teachers.
- Leaders at Bright Spot Schools demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and a sense of responsibility for teachers and students in special education, including having personal or professional connections with special education.

Leaders at Bright Spot Schools support special education through intentional efforts to be present and available and developing a sense of trust and respect among teachers.

In interviews, principals at all Bright Spot Schools described efforts to make themselves available and to be present for special education teachers and students. When asked to describe their approach to supporting special education in their schools, leaders pointed to examples such as their regular attendance at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, their "open-door policy" for teachers and students, and efforts to be present in hallways, at recess, and in classrooms. Although all principals described availability and presence as important aspects of their approach, perspectives about the specific benefits of that approach varied. For example, one principal explained that his presence in the hallways better enabled him to quickly "put out fires before they start." Another principal also described efforts to make himself available for teachers with the intention to balance support and autonomy, suggesting that, "I really try to set conditions and offer support, but then get out of the way and let teachers and teams have flexibility and autonomy."

The following are examples of how school leaders below provide evidence of the commitment among principals in Bright Spot Schools to be present and available in support of special education teachers and students. These examples also capture differences in principal perspectives about the ways in which their approach supports special education teachers and students, including providing direct support in moments of need and setting conditions for support while granting teachers autonomy.

- *I just try to be out there. I try to get out of my office and be with the teachers and be with the students, with our SPED students. (Principal, Interview)*

- *As a leader, I feel like I need to be there for recess—I go out for every lunch recess. I attend those IEP meetings and really listen with intent…what I've noticed sometimes when I was a teacher is that sometimes if a principal would be in the IEP meetings, but they're on their laptop and emailing. I don't include my laptop. And if I can avoid not texting somebody unless it's an emergency, then I will put that aside and really dedicate that time. (Principal, Interview)*

- *It all goes back to my open-door policy. You can come and talk to me at any time if you have concerns or whatever else. And I'm constantly walking around. I constantly kind of know where the problems may arise throughout the day in different times. So, I try to place myself in a situation where we can rectify that problem before it happens. I think just being out and open, teachers constantly come up to me and say, 'hey, this is going on. What do you think*

about this?' And we try to put fires out before they start. [Is it] a specific program? No, not necessarily, but it's just being there when they need me. (Principal, Interview)

- *My style is one that I'm not an iron-fisted leader. Most people aren't. But I really try to set conditions and offer support, but then get out of the way and let teachers and teams have flexibility and autonomy…. Then, I see that as teams meet and as they work through things, every grade-level team has—if not all the teachers—at least a handful of teachers who are really strong advocates for kids with disabilities. That's just worked its way through our culture, I think. (Principal, Interview)*

- *The role of a principal is quite vast.… I like to be pretty well versed on what's going on with our school and specifically with our students, and then meeting with our teachers on IEPs and making sure that all those are in compliance and just making, doing the observations like we would with any teacher just to make sure that we are hitting the goals and instructional necessities for any of our special ed students. (Principal, Interview)*

Teacher interviews and survey responses provided additional evidence of leaders' availability and presence, suggesting that both general education and special education teachers were aware and appreciative of principals' efforts. As examples of these efforts, some teachers explained that school leaders were active listeners and provided input in IEP and planning meetings. Others noted feeling that the support they receive from leaders comes from a place of wanting students to succeed and an understanding of the stresses and demands of teaching. The quotes below reflect an acknowledgement of the intentional supports that leaders said they sought to offer, suggesting alignment between teachers and school leaders within Bright Spot Schools. Although the specifics of support varied across schools, general education and special education teachers in interviews and open-ended survey responses were nearly universal in their praise for leaders' availability and presence in support of special education.

- *[The administration is] always in attendance at our IEP meetings. They are in attendance at our weekly meetings where we can discuss things that are struggling or things that are happening that need improvement. They're constantly… They're available. They're seen. They're at recess with the students. We teach with our classroom doors open. They are constantly monitoring what's going on, but yet allowing us the autonomy to do what we know is best for the students. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *You have to start with the admin. We have phenomenal admin. I mean, they learn all the kids' names. They talk to them on a regular basis. Sometimes they meet us at the bus, just welcome the kids to school depending on what their schedule is. They are highly involved with supporting us and being there for any kind of situation that arises with parents, anything like that. They're just… Our admin is amazing. [Our principal is] basically the one who helped us set the groundwork for the program that we have. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *They're incredible. Our school principal has been to almost every IEP meeting… and he wants to see what we can do to put supports in place if they are eligible. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *They are always in on the meetings… they're always there asking questions, asking how they can support. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *From my perspective, they're just supportive. They are obviously at the IEPs… but they don't just sit and listen. They also provide input and share their opinions as well, which is appreciated. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *I've always felt comfortable going to them if I have a concern or if we have a situation or whatever, and they've always been really supportive. So I really, really appreciate the support and the attendance to the meetings, because I know some other schools have mentioned their administrators don't even come. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *[Leaders] have their weekly SpEd meetings where they go through all the different stuff that's going on with our SpEd kids, all the new updates, and what's working, what's not working. And I know that they do that almost every single week. And that meeting is very intense and extensive, and I feel like they support a lot, a lot, a lot—especially when it comes down to behavior. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *They are very big on the importance of having and building relationships. They are also great at communicating their vision, goals and the data that helps to drive decisions. Our principal seeks and gives our faculty specific feedback on how we as teachers and coaches play a role in our students' and school achievements. They place our students and their families in the forefront of our minds and at the root of our decisions. (General Education Teacher, Survey)*

The interview and open-ended survey data highlighted above suggest that in addition to recognizing school leaders' efforts to be present and available, teachers in Bright Spot Schools have positive perceptions of their school leaders and feel supported by them. Survey results (n=18) provide further evidence of these positive teacher perceptions of school leadership. As shown in Figure 3, teachers reported feeling that their leaders respected (100%) and trusted (88%) them and gave them autonomy (100%). Rates of agreement across survey items ranged from 88% to 100%, and no respondents indicated that they "strongly disagreed" with any survey items about their principal.

Figure 3. Teacher perceptions of respect and trust from their building leaders in Bright Spot Schools

My administrator....

respects me.	100%
communicates about schoolwide goals, initiatives, and events.	100%
gives me autonomy.	100%
gives me decision-making authority.	94%
and I trust each other.	88%
demonstrates appreciation for my work.	88%
acts in an empathetic manner.	88%

Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "agree" or "strongly agree."

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Leaders at Bright Spot Schools demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and a sense of responsibility for teachers and students in special education, including having personal or professional connections with special education.

As noted in the previous section, survey results (n=18) suggest that Bright Spot School teachers' perceptions of leadership support were overwhelmingly positive. Figure 4 shows responses related to teachers' perceptions of their school leaders' knowledge of special education and support for teachers' professional growth and collaboration. The figure shows that teachers felt that their leaders were knowledgeable about special education (100%)—many reported receiving instructional guidance or coaching from their administrator (82%). These survey results also show that teachers feel that their school leaders support professional growth (100%) and facilitate collaboration among special education and general education teachers (82%). Perceptions of leaders were positive across both special education and general education teachers and no respondents indicated that they "strongly disagreed" with any survey items about their principal.

Figure 4. Teacher perceptions of support from their building leaders in Bright Spot Schools

My administrator....

encourages opportunities for professional growth.	100%
provides opportunities or other resources for professional growth.	100%
is knowledgeable about special education.	100%
facilitates collaboration among special education and general education teachers.	82%
provides coaching and/or instructional guidance.	82%

Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "agree" or "strongly agree."

In interviews and open-ended survey responses, teachers were overwhelmingly complimentary of their leaders' ability to understand the role of teaching in special education and respond to the needs of special education teachers and students. As one special education teacher wrote in an open-ended survey response,

> The administration at my school has personal and professional experience with special education and is amazing. Both the principal and the assistant principal look for opportunities to include our small-group students and recognize them in ways that are similar to their peers.

Interviewees from three of the five Bright Spot Schools mentioned that at least one administrator at their school had personal (e.g., children or close relatives who receive special education services) or professional connections (e.g., previously worked as a special education teacher) to special education. Although school leaders provided few specific examples of how their past experiences informed current leadership practices, both teachers and principals suggested that those experiences contributed to a sense of familiarity and understanding between special education teachers and the school leaders. As one special education teacher stated in an interview,

> I think it's… administration who've had experience with special education and those who haven't. And I think that they're quicker to think about including us and to want to have us be part of the things that they're doing, where it wasn't as much that way before when we had administration that hadn't been in special ed. And we also have some [school leaders] who haven't been and still don't understand the whole thing of what we do.

As this teacher indicated, the existence of principals (and schools) who held knowledge and understanding of special education was not universal. In survey responses, some teachers expressed concerns about the challenges of the job and frustration with some aspects of school leadership. For instance, one teacher noted in a survey response that "it would be helpful to have a principal who has been in the classroom as a teacher." Another added that they hoped for "more consideration from some administration," and that they wanted to "be treated as a more integral part of the staff." These comments offer a contrast to the positive findings displayed in Figure 3, although they also provide further evidence of the values teachers hope for and expect from their school leaders.

Most leaders in the Bright Spot Schools reportedly demonstrated knowledge and understanding of special education, contributing to their attentiveness and ability to support special education teachers and students. Below we provide examples of school leaders' passion for special education and the responsibility they feel to support teachers and students in special education including one principal who described themselves as "the head of the special education team." Teachers also emphasize the value of leaders' knowledge and understanding related to special education, noting the benefit of personal and professional experience in special education.

- *A lot of that starts with me and my attitudes and personality… whether that's in a SpEd meeting, or interactions with parents, or minor corrections or adjustments.… I feel like all of that weight and responsibility falls on me. (Principal, Interview)*

- *At least the way I view it, we have our SPED teachers and we also have supporting personnel like our adaptive PE teachers and our speech pathologists, our school psychologists. Then I'm at the head of that special ed team as far as trying to help make determinations about our students receiving the right kind of interventions. Is a SPED discussion necessary or warranted, given the path that a student is taking on their intervention path? Trying to understand, are students requiring SPED services or not? Then within that realm, just kind of setting the tenor and the tone for what are we all about? (Principal, Interview)*

- *We've recently got a new principal, and our vice principal used to be a special education teacher. And so they understand a lot more of the challenges that we have and a lot more of the things that would make a special ed program work. And so it's been really nice to have them understand where we're coming from and they've done it before. So, that's been really helpful. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *[The principal] has been a teacher himself, so he's been there where he's taught students with disabilities, and so he really—he's been a huge support… They're always checking in and just, 'how's it going,' or 'what do you need from us as far as supports?' And I've always felt comfortable going to them if I have a concern or if we have a situation. They've always been really supportive. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *[School leaders] understand a lot more of the challenges that we have and a lot more of the things that would make a special ed program work. And so it's been really nice to have them where they understand where we're coming from and they've done it before. So, that's been really helpful. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *The administration is absolutely supportive of the students and want to see them succeed as much as I do. They also support their teachers and understand the stresses and frustrations that come along with this job. (Special Education Teacher, Survey)*

Maintaining a Positive Culture and Climate to Support of Students with Disabilities, Expectations, and Teacher Satisfaction

We identified three key findings about the climate and culture in Bright Spot Schools:

- Bright Spot Schools maintain a culture of inclusion and belonging for students with disabilities and a shared belief that "these are all our students."
- Bright Spot Schools maintain a culture of high expectations for all students, regularly monitoring both academic and behavioral progress.
- Teachers in Bright Spot Schools have positive perceptions of the demands of their job, satisfaction with their position, and sense of support from within and outside their school.

Bright Spot Schools maintain a culture of inclusion and belonging for students with disabilities and a shared belief that "these are all our students."

Data from the interviews with teachers and principals indicated that there exists a *culture* of inclusion and belonging for students with disabilities in these schools. This culture was described as a shared belief that all school personnel are responsible for educating *all students* within the school. As one principal stated,

> One thing that I can say about [this school] is that there is a culture of "these are our students." There can be sometimes in other schools where once a student is identified with special education, it's like there's a weird caveat of who's supposed to be making sure that the student grows. And because it's under the special education hat, I think teachers will sometimes take a step backwards and say, "Okay, well then you're taking care of that kid." … But at [this school], the classroom teachers are working just as hard as the special ed teachers to make sure that growth is happening.

We found that this belief in meaningful inclusion for students with disabilities was shared among nearly all teachers and principals we interviewed, although interviews and survey responses suggested differing approaches to fostering inclusion and degrees of buy-in across schools. For instance, in some schools, school leaders and veteran teachers "set the tone" and expectations for inclusion across the school. In others, teachers described how communication and trust amongst educators enabled inclusion to "just kind of happen naturally." In open-ended survey responses, several teachers also noted that while they felt that their school generally fostered inclusion for students with disabilities, levels of support and engagement within that culture varied among teachers.

Here we provide additional examples of the ways in which teachers and leaders at these schools have fostered inclusive cultures, including leaders setting expectations and support offered between teachers. As illustrated here, teachers and school leaders generally held positive perceptions about their school's inclusivity, describing inclusion for students with disabilities as a shared goal for educators within their school and a part of the culture and climate.

- *So, inclusion for me, I would say looks more like when I push-in to a classroom and then when I'm not there, those teachers making those accommodations for my kids—which, they're not really my kids, they're our kids. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *The teachers at our school are amazing. My small-group students are welcomed into their grade level regular ed classes for inclusion opportunities like PE, music, science, field trips and other celebrations. The environment at our school is positive and the teachers' support and inclusivity is a wonderful model that the students emulate. (Special Education Teacher, Survey)*

- *As far as with our SPED students, we want them to be included in everything that all the other grade level kids are included in. I know that sometimes in the past, we've done more of a push-in model, so they're really in the classroom instead of being pulled out all the time. And sometimes we're better than in other years. But I feel like we try to go for high inclusion. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *I feel like we are pretty good at just doing it, going with it. I think when [special education teachers] come in and give us an overview of what the year will be like with our inclusion student, I think that just automatically helps us set in our mind what the expectation will be…. And I don't feel like I need a ton of support with it either. I feel like it just kind of happens naturally, which is also really nice that it doesn't feel choppy all the time. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *Even if you don't have an inclusion student that year, you might still be getting some emails saying that it's going on. I wouldn't say that the administration really manages it. We kind of just do it on our own to take care of each other, but [school leaders] are aware that it's going on and that the inclusion is happening. And if there's anything they need to do to help, they always step right in. But since it's kind of classroom to classroom, it's not as much needed by them. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *We've had some shifts with our administration who have really pushed the inclusion. And so, from my experiences, like I said, the one [student] that I have this year, she's pulled for 30 minutes of language and 30 minutes of math instruction, but otherwise she spends the rest of her day with us. And so she's fully included with her peers. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *Inclusion was a thing that, when I first came here, it was kind of rocky with certain grades or teachers. So, I feel like the school in general, just running the inclusion program and pushing it into all the classrooms and giving every teacher an opportunity because it is so unique… I feel like the school does really well with that. And then just kind of communicating information in faculty meetings or leadership meetings so that we can support each other and the students. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *Really, I think there's a climate and culture to everything, I believe. I've been in six different schools in my career and in this school, the special ed teacher, the veteran teacher, he really pushes that kids are to be in the classroom as much as possible. And so he sets the tone and in his IEP meetings kind of sways people to go that way, if that makes sense. He's really proactive about offering those kids inclusion. (Principal, Interview)*

- *We do what every school tries to do in that we're trying to keep kids in their Tier 1 setting in general education and then pull them out for that additional specialized instruction without having to miss that Tier 1 instruction. Sometimes that works great, and sometimes it doesn't just based on the schedule, but in general, I know that's one of our teacher's philosophies is,*

"Let's give them the support that they need, but let's also find ways to try to stretch."
(Principal, Interview)

Additionally, interviews with teachers and school leaders suggested a shared understanding within Bright Spot Schools that success is rooted in belonging—i.e., that success for students starts with wanting to be at school and having good, positive relationships with their teachers and peers. A teacher described it as "an atmosphere of inclusion," adding that it is "the feeling here that kids are kids regardless of what their abilities are, and they just want to play and have fun and have friends and do the same things as their peers." Here we offer additional examples of how inclusion and belonging for students with disabilities was expressed by teachers as a vision of success, grounded in positive relationships and growth. As our evidence indicates the culture of inclusion in these schools is cultivated beyond teacher beliefs and attitudes, and also extends to many students as well.

- *Our kids are included in everything. They're included in the Halloween parties, they're included in the dance festivals at the end of the year. They do all of those things with the regular ed classes with support. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *We just have a lot of, I think, interaction between the SPED groups and the gen ed groups as far as staff goes, and a feeling among the students, too, that we're all part of this same team. I mean, you know what it's like, kids with learning disabilities, or other health impairments, they maybe don't stick out in the same way that a student with a wheelchair, or an intellectual disability might, but that feeling of, "We all belong," we really want to build on that. We really want that to be part of who we are and I do see that as one of the general themes that I think is a strength at this school. (Principal, Interview)*

- *We talk a lot about community and taking care of each other. My kids will always come in and say, I saw so-and-so at recess and I asked them to play. So it's more than just the teachers and the administration pushing it, but the kids really want to be their friend and they collaborate with other peers and things like that. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *So, again, we don't exclude any of our special ed students. They all have leadership positions, just like all the other students and are expected to fulfill those leadership positions both in the classroom, school wide. So that's really fostered some leadership, not only in the students, but also in the staff. I mean, the special education aides have leadership positions inside the school, and I think that adds to their feeling of belonging and investment into everything we do as a culture and climate. (Principal, Interview)*

- *Success? Well, belonging. And relationships. And just the growth that our students make. Are our SPED kids making growth every year? Are they happy to be here? Do they have relationships with their classroom teacher and their special ed teacher? Do they have good relationships, and do they feel like people here care about them and are behind them to get that growth? (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *I would say some of the signs that we look for are just relationships and how does the kid feel about coming to school every day? Are they happy to be here? Are they not happy? Do they feel like they have adults here in their corner caring about them, helping them learn? Right. Do they have people on their side and on their team? (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

Survey results provided further evidence of the shared sense of inclusion for students with disabilities among teachers in Bright Spot Schools. As shown in Figure 5, teachers expressed a sense that they and their colleagues worked together to create an inclusive learning environment (94%), took responsibility

for helping one another do well 94%), and shared a common vision for their school (100%). In analysis of these items, we did not find any notable differences among special education and general education teacher respondents, suggesting generally positive perceptions of school culture and climate among educators in Bright Spot Schools.

Figure 5. Perceptions of inclusion for students with disabilities and a shared vision among teachers in Bright Spot Schools

Staff members at my school...

Share a common vision or set of goals for our school.	100%
Work together to create an inclusive learning environment.	94%
Take responsibility for helping one another do well.	94%

Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "agree" or "strongly agree."

Bright Spot Schools maintain a culture of high expectations for all students, regularly monitoring both academic and behavioral progress.

Across all Bright Spot Schools, teachers and leaders reported that they held high expectations for all their students both in terms of academics and behavior. For most teachers and leaders, academic expectations were commonly conceptualized in terms of students' individual growth and progress. Schools generally set and monitored incremental goals rather than pursuing a standard benchmark (e.g., grade-level proficiency) for all students, although the principal and special education teachers at one school described setting goals for getting all students to perform at grade level.

Teachers and principals indicated that they implemented accommodations to support students in meeting these high expectations. As one principal stated,

> We have dedicated time throughout the week that the teachers can spend a little bit of time talking to the students about their goals and what's going on and how they can help. And we don't take the special ed students out of that. We're still setting goals with them and still having high expectations for them. And what's neat and fun about that is that once you start seeing a kid, whether they're in kindergarten or sixth grade, when you start seeing growth happening and they're like, 'oh, I've gotten better.' The excitement comes, there's this brightness in their eyes and it's so fun.

As illustrated by this principal, teachers and principals described the intentional time and effort given to progress monitoring and maintaining expectations for students. Most teachers and principals noted the importance of accommodations in supporting students to reach their goals, and almost all interviewees cited data and testing as a valuable tool for progress monitoring. For many teachers, testing data provides a way for them to not only track student progress but to gauge their own success and the collective efforts of their special education program. As one administrator said,

> It's almost as if we want to challenge ourselves. Even when a parent comes and is wanting their student to opt out of state testing, it really—it makes us mad. I don't know how else to put it. Because we just feel like we can show that they can do it.

Teachers and leaders also emphasized the importance of holding all students to the same high behavioral expectations. While many interviewees described academic goals as individualized for students with disabilities, behavioral standards were described more universally. Teachers referred to "one set of rules" for all students, and a set of shared expectations that could be upheld by special education and general education teachers. As one special education teacher put it,

> [General education teachers] know that we're not going to send our students for them to babysit. They know that if our students are there, they're there to be a part of the class and that they're expected to uphold the same rules and behaviors as the rest of the kids in the class.

Importantly, high expectations were described as part of the culture in these schools, as evidenced by their repeated mention among leaders, general education teachers, and special education teachers in interviews. As noted in the previous section (Intentional Leadership Support and Investment), strong leadership helped facilitate a culture of expectations, but collaboration and communication among general education and special education teachers was also a factor in building and maintaining high expectations—a point which we return to in a later section of these findings (Collaborative Engagement).

Here we provide additional examples of how teachers and leaders set and maintain high expectations for their students, emphasizing individualized goals for students, setting and monitoring academic and behavioral expectations for all students, and supporting progress toward goals through accommodations and modifications when necessary.
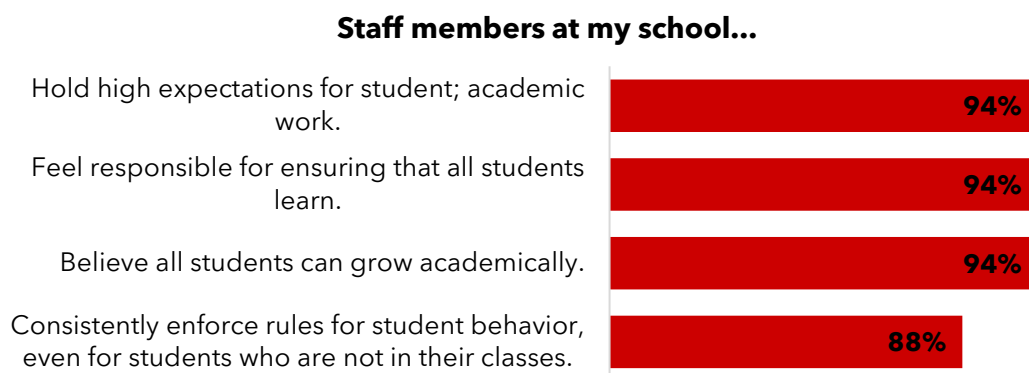
- *We don't look at our SPED kids as having to follow different expectations than our other kids. I think we hold all of them to high expectations, whether they're SPED or not. And we really focus on individualized growth and what growth means to them…. So whether it's Acadience reading or Acadience Math or RISE or whatever the big test we're preparing them for, [we] really get them to recognize their individualized growth rather than, 'oh, I am never going to be proficient.' So, we don't focus on that proficiency. We focus on growth, but we don't just do that with our SPED kids. We do that with all of our kids. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *I have super high [expectations]. I have, in the past, I feel like maybe I had too high of expectations. I have rules. We follow our rules and we have things that we have to do, and my students for the most part do them. It takes them a little while to get into the routine, but they realize what the expectations are and they know the consequences if they don't meet those expectations. And they, for the most part, are pretty good about meeting them. I feel like I have a fairly well-behaved class because I expect so much of them—because I know they can do it. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *We have high expectations for our kids. We do give the teachers an IEP summary at the beginning of the year and talk to them before school starts and let them know some of the things that they need to be aware of that will help the kids meet their goals. But they know what we're working on and like I said, we touch base very frequently, sometimes daily, depending on the student. Sometimes it might be a couple times a week, but even the classroom teacher expects them to do the stuff in class and they'll make accommodations if they need them. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *We have dedicated time throughout the week that the teachers can spend a little bit of time talking to the students about their goals and what's going on and how they can help. And we don't take the special ed students out of that. We're still setting goals with them and still having high expectations for them. And what's neat and fun about that is that once you start*

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seeing a kid, whether they're in kindergarten or sixth grade, when you start seeing growth happening and they're like, oh, I've gotten better. The excitement just comes that there's just this brightness in their eyes and it's just so fun. This time of year is magical that way because you just start to see those light bulbs connect that maybe hadn't been connected yet. (Principal, Interview)

- *Then we also have all of our data that's being shared out in each grade…. It's very visible— very visible for the whole school as to what we're doing and what our goals are. (Principal, Interview)*

- *I really think it's just having those high expectations and having those individual conversations with the students who are SPED and really trying to get them to be positive and focus on how much they can grow as a student, instead of focusing on how far away they are from proficiency. I feel like that has the most impact…. I say the relationships and the high expectations and the expectation of growth is probably the most impactful. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *A lot of times I inherit an IEP and they have maybe two or three goals, and that's not enough. These kids need to be challenged. They need to understand that they're coming to school to learn, and they love it. They love to come to school and learn. But they also have to know that they're in an environment that cares about them and loves them and is invested in their future. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

Teachers' high expectations were also evident in survey results. As shown in Figure 6, nearly all general education and special education teachers indicated that staff members at their school believe all students can grow academically (94%) and feel responsible for ensuring that all students learn (94%). These findings support interview and open-ended survey data portraying a shared commitment to and sense of responsibility for holding all students to high expectations. These survey data suggest that not only do the sample of teachers included in the survey hold these beliefs, but that they also feel that other teachers in their schools have similar attitudes and opinions.

Figure 6. Perceptions of school culture and climate among teachers in Bright Spot Schools

Staff members at my school…

Hold high expectations for student; academic work.	94%
Feel responsible for ensuring that all students learn.	94%
Believe all students can grow academically.	94%
Consistently enforce rules for student behavior, even for students who are not in their classes.	88%

Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "agree" or "strongly agree."

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Teachers in Bright Spot Schools have positive perceptions of the demands of their job, satisfaction with their position, and sense of support from within and outside their school.

Results from the 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey show that teachers in Bright Spot Schools generally have positive perceptions about the demands of their positions. Figure 7 provides the average among the 18 respondents. Most notably, 94% of respondents agreed that their duties and responsibilities are manageable (Figure 7). Responses were generally similar among special education and general education teacher respondents. Our analysis indicates, however, that although 90% of general education teachers agreed that administrative duties and paperwork did not interfere with their teaching, this was only the case for 50% of special education teacher respondents. In addition, a higher percentage of general education teachers (90%) agreed that their students' behavior was manageable, compared to special education teachers (75%).

Figure 7. Perceptions of teaching demands among in Bright Spot Schools
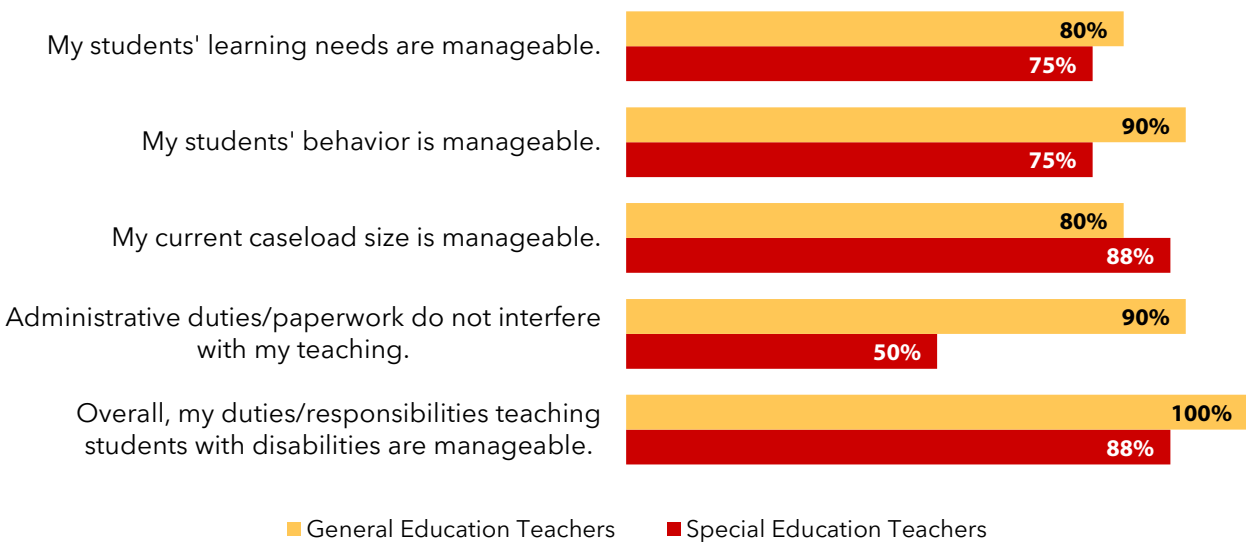
Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "agree" or "strongly agree."

In addition, well-being was generally high among teachers in Bright Spot Schools. Figure 8 provides a description of teachers' sense of connectedness, efficacy, stress, and ability to cope with stress. Responses were similar across special education and general education teachers in the study schools, although the number of respondents was small. Across participants (n=18), 76% indicated that their job was stressful "often" or "almost always" over the past year. Although stress levels were not directly addressed in interviews with teachers, this finding is in line with past UEPC research (Auletto et al., 2022c). In contrast, however, when special education teacher participants were asked about their satisfaction with their specific position as well as their decision more broadly to teach special education, responses were found to be very positive in Bright Spot Schools.

Figure 8. Well-being and satisfaction among teachers in Bright Spot Schools

Connectedness	• **94% of respondents reported high levels of connectedness with their colleagues.**
Efficacy	• **96% of respondents reported high levels of efficacy.**
Stress	• **76% of respondents reported that their job was stressful "often" or "almost always" during the past year.**
Coping	• **88% of respondents reported that they were coping "moderately well" or "very well" with the stress of their jobs.**

94%

of special education teacher respondents were satisfied with their position.

100%

of special education teacher respondents were satisfied with their decision to teach special education.

Teachers in Bright Spot Schools responded to a set of items related to their perceptions of trust, respect and empathy among their colleagues in their schools. Displayed in Figure 9, we found that these perceptions were high for the majority of respondents. Given the relatively small number of respondents (n=18), the range of agreement across these items (88% to 94%) suggests similar, positive views related to staff members' sense of empathy, respect, appreciation for each other's work, and sense of trust. These findings provide additional evidence to interviews and survey data already presented in this section.

Figure 9. Perceptions of trust and empathy among teachers in Bright Spot Schools

Staff members at my school...

Act in an empathetic manner toward one another.	94%
Respect each other.	94%
Demonstrate appreciation for each other's work.	88%
Trust each other.	88%

Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "agree" or "strongly agree."

In addition to survey results, teachers and principals also expressed a positive sense of their school culture and community in interviews. Three of the five Bright Spot Schools highlighted community

support as an important component of their success. Two schools (Belknap and Milford) described this support as rooted in a close-knit, small-town community that included high parent support. Teachers and leaders from these schools said that parent-teacher associations and school community councils were helpful in providing resources, parent attendance at IEP meetings was high, and there was strong communication between parents and the school. As one administrator explained,

> We come from a small community, and a lot of our teachers are, do I dare say, they're homegrown…. They went out and did their thing, and then they came back because the community that's here. So, when you talk about just the community in general… we've known their older siblings and younger siblings. We know their parents and so on and so forth. And we not only rub shoulders with those individuals here at school, but when I go to the basketball game on Friday nights or if I go to the football game on Friday nights or if I go to church or whatever else, I'm rubbing shoulders with them at the same time—we always have support no matter where we're at in [the city].

Teachers and leaders at one elementary school described parents as supportive and as advocates for the special education program. The school is unique in having two dedicated Life Skills classes (focused on teaching practical skills for students with intellectual disabilities) and parents have actively sought to keep this structure in place. Every interviewee from this school cited the Life Skills classes as an essential aspect of the school culture and a valued part of the broader school community. As one interviewee stated, building an inclusive culture "really is easier here because we have those two Life Skills units. That really has made a difference in that they've been so visible in different ways over the years and their teachers have become such great advocates for them." Although context and culture across these Bright Spot Schools vary, these examples (e.g., Life Skills units and close-knit, small communities) suggest that these schools have benefitted from incorporating special education teachers and students as valued members of their school and local communities.

Collaborative Engagement

We identified three key findings from Bright Spot Schools related to collaboration:

- Within Bright Spot Schools, teachers use formal and informal collaboration to monitor progress and address individual student needs across general and special education classrooms.
- Collaboration among teachers, aides, and other support staff plays an important role in instruction, as Bright Spot Schools implement small groups and differentiated learning strategies.

Within Bright Spot Schools, teachers use formal and informal collaboration to monitor progress and address individual student needs across general and special education classrooms.

When we asked about collaboration, teachers at Bright Spot Schools described a range of practices, including both formal (e.g., in meetings and professional learning communities (PLC)) and informal ways (e.g., check-ins between classes or during recess) of collaborating with their colleagues. In terms of formal collaboration, some special education teachers described regular meetings with other special education teachers within their schools, while others said they collaborate much more frequently with general education teachers. For instance, at one school, special education teachers divided their caseloads by grade levels, and met regularly in PLCs with those grade-level general education teachers. At another school, special education teachers described collaboration as more focused within special education and among specialists such as school psychologists, aides, and speech/language pathologists. As one special education teacher stated,

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The SpEd team—we meet together at least once a week to discuss things that come up and how we can better support students. And we collaborate… we collaborate daily, we can collaborate at recess. We can talk to each other and figure out how to problem solve different situations that arise, and that's huge.

As expressed by this special education teacher, teachers noted the importance of informal check-ins in the hallways and between classes as a way to provide updates about individual students. As one teacher put it, "the expectation is that you talk to everyone as needed as you pass them in the hallway and things like that, so that the communication is always happening." A general education teacher at a different school explained that "I often pop into [the special education teacher's] classroom and talk to her about my student and what she's observing in her class versus what I'm seeing…. We always talk to make sure we're on the same page and have the same ideas of goals."

Despite varying styles and modes of collaboration, we found similarities in the purpose and intent behind teachers' communication and collaboration. Teachers talked about individual students, including what strategies were working—both in terms of academics and behavior—and how support for each student can be adapted or improved. Teachers frequently described progress monitoring for students, reviewing data with other teachers, and ensuring that students were getting the support that they need. The following are examples of descriptions of both formal and informal collaboration, including a principal highlighting the value of teacher interactions in the hallways, general education teachers describing collaboration with special education teachers related to academic and behavioral supports, and special education teachers noting the collaborative culture they feel at their school.

- *I think we do awesome PLCs here at our school. We sit down and have a formative PLC on a regular basis, but I think the informal PLC—like when they're rotating or when they're out in the hall or just when teachers are talking back and forth—I think those are just as valuable, if not more valuable… When they're doing those rotations, they talk to the other teacher and say, 'hey, little Johnny's having a bad day. You may want to look for A, B, C, and D.' So, it gives the other teacher kind of a heads-up on what's going on with that student that day. And I think those conversations are invaluable. (Principal, Interview)*

- *I think it's just working together and collaborating. We had some kids go on a field trip earlier this year and it did not work well. And so those teachers were able to come to me and say, "Here's the situation. This is what we had trouble with. How can we problem solve this and make it so that the next field trip is more successful?" And we're able to work through those things. We spend time collaborating with all of the teachers in the school so that we can work through those issues when they arise. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *I think we do really well collaborating as teachers. We have a leadership team where someone from each grade is on that team, and we always talk about concerns for all classes. That helps us understand what's going on more in their classroom so that we can better support them. And then we have a bunch of programs that we use to teach phonics and math. And we will get together with them, the other teachers and they'll come and say, I have a student that's a second grader that needs help with blending words, for example. And then we'll pull what we have done for our kids, and they'll try it out with their kids. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *I would say that grade levels do collaborate really well with our SPED teachers…. Mainly it comes down to behavior, a little bit of the academics… a lot of our SpEd kids are on behavior contracts, which directly impacts the teacher. (General Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *The support that I feel from my Special Ed team is a huge part of why I feel successful. The collaboration I have with the other small group teacher is invaluable!... I am so grateful for their collaboration and willingness to problem solve situations as they arise. (Special Education Teacher, Survey)*

- *At our school, we have a very collaborative culture. I think teachers collaborate well with each other. And generally, if they're having struggles with their students either academically or behaviorally, they will come and ask me, say, "How can I help and support this student? What are some accommodations or modifications that I can do to help them be more successful?" And so I will give them suggestions on that, and they're usually very amenable to trying those suggestions. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

In addition to interview data, survey responses suggest high levels of collaboration and communication within Bright Spot Schools. Figure 10 shows that teachers in Bright Spot Schools experience high levels of cooperation across a range of individuals. Nearly all respondents (88-94%) felt "moderately" or "very well" supported by special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, parents/families, and related service providers. This finding was consistent among both special education and general education respondents.

One exception to this trend was that only 76% of respondents felt well supported by instructional coaches. Moreover, differences were found among special education and general education respondents. Only 63% of special education teachers felt supported by instructional coaches versus 89% of general education teachers.

Figure 10. Perceptions of support among teachers in Bright Spot Schools
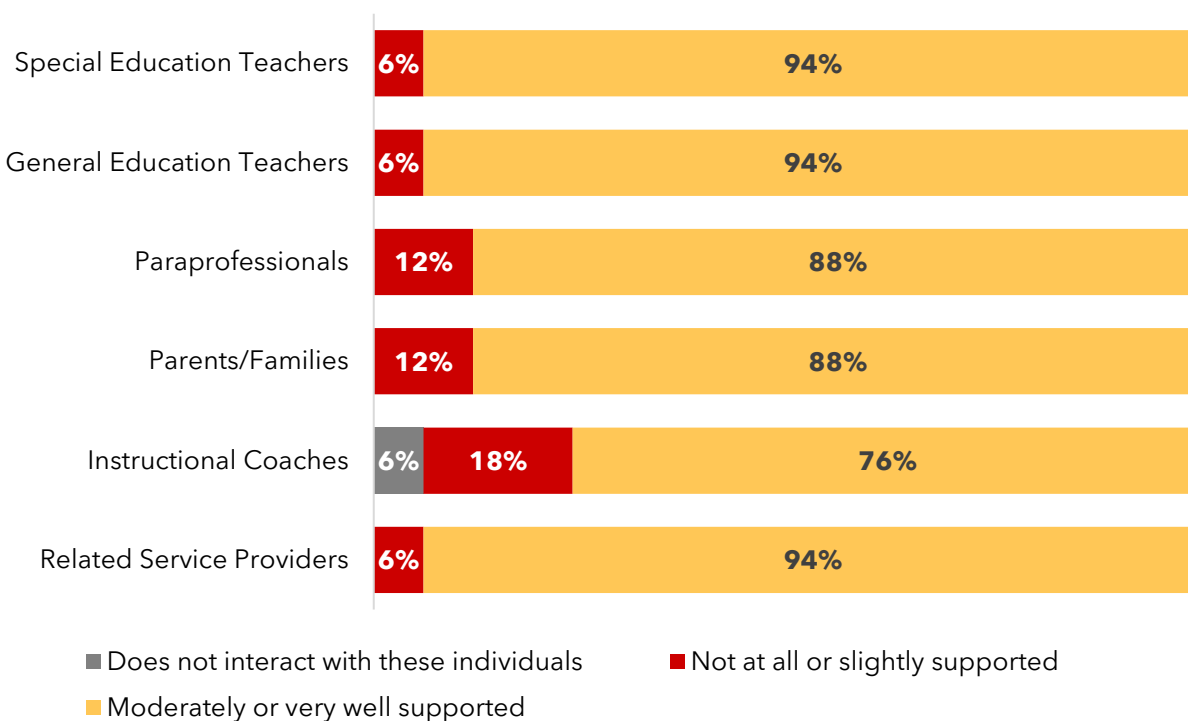
Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18).

Figure 11 depicts the proportion of educators in Bright Spot Schools who reported engaging in various collaborative activities at least "sometimes." Given notable differences in collaboration rates for some activities, we disaggregated special education and general education teacher responses. For example, although all special education teacher respondents reported observing another teacher's classroom to get ideas for their own instruction, only 44% of general education teachers did so.

Of the eight collaborative activities that teachers reported on, special education teachers more often engaged in four of them:

- Observe another teacher's classroom to get ideas for your own instruction
- Develop draft IEP goals and/or identify interventions with other teachers to support students
- Observe another teacher's classroom to share feedback on instruction
- Observe another teacher's classroom to observe specific students/collect data

General education teachers more often engaged in three collaborative activities:

- Work on instructional strategies with other teachers
- Work with other teachers to design lesson activities
- Co-teach with another teacher to support student learning

These differences in patterns of collaboration are likely due to the different roles and responsibilities of each group. For example, special education teachers are more likely to be involved in the development of IEP goals while general education teachers are more likely to be focused on broader instructional strategies.

Figure 11. Rates of Engagement in collaborative activities for special education and general education teachers in Bright Spot Schools
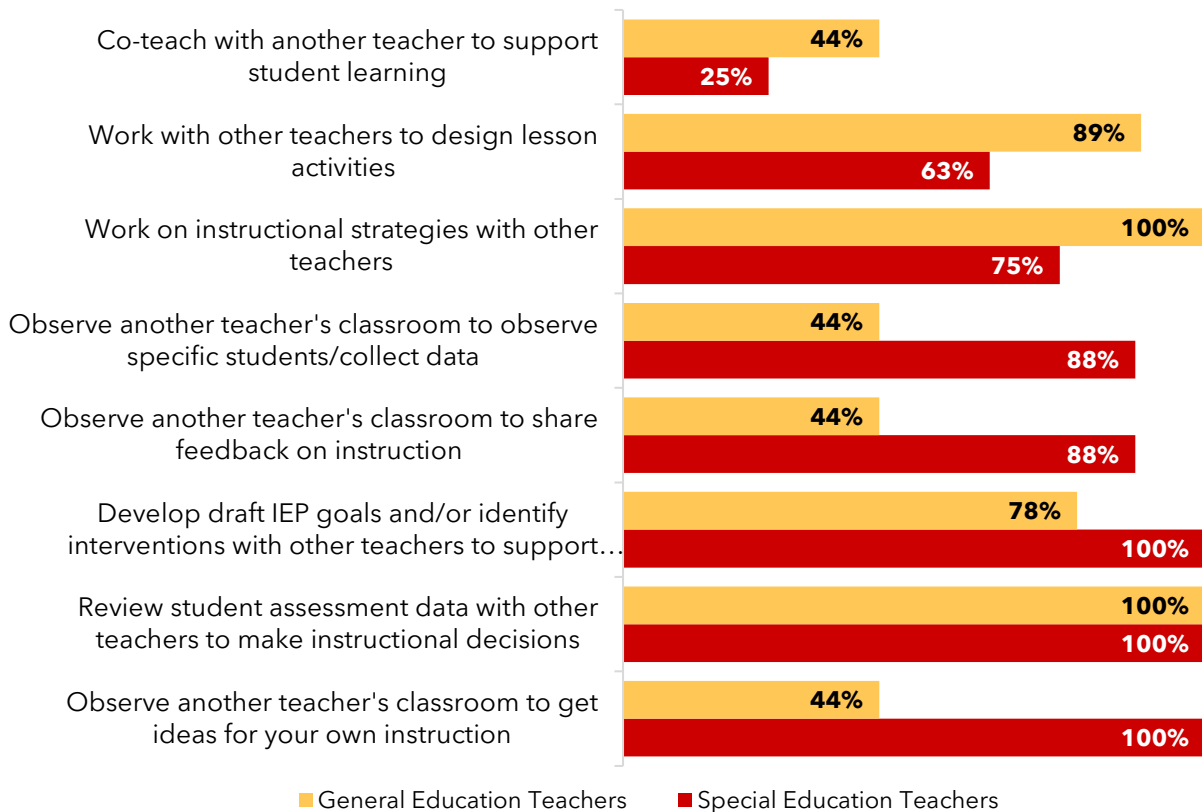
Source: 2023 UEPC Working Conditions Survey (n=18). Percentages indicate responses of "sometimes," "often," or "almost always."

Collaboration among teachers, aides, and other support staff plays an important role in instruction, as Bright Spot Schools implement small groups and differentiated learning strategies.

The value and benefit of small-group instruction for students with disabilities was mentioned by teachers and/or leaders in every Bright Spot School. While descriptions of specific curricula and practices varied between schools, teachers and leaders described small-group instruction as essential for differentiating lessons and meeting the individual needs and goals of their students. Small-group instruction was described as an inclusive practice—students with disabilities were grouped with their general education peers—and reliant on collaboration between teachers and support staff. As one special education teacher stated,

> I will tell you, we have, this year, a lot of aide support. That's making a lot of difference. We've always tried to get as much aide support in here and get our groups down as small as we possibly can, so we can address as many kids as we can.

Teachers at multiple schools cited small-group instruction as particularly valuable for reading and language arts. In one school, K-3 classes designate a 30-minute window every day for reading in small groups, with support from aides, paraprofessionals, and teachers. As the principal at that school described,

We support our teachers by giving paraprofessionals, putting them in situations where they can help students…. If we can get a student or a group of students 1:5 (one adult with five students) for 30 minutes or so, we can do a lot with that student and we can keep them focused because they're not one of 20 or 25… I think it's one of the reasons why [our school] does so well in all aspects is because of the reading aid program. For a 30-minute timeframe, we have 6, 7, 8 adults in a class of 20-25 students where they're getting all the different services they need.

Other teachers also noted the value of small-group instruction in math, suggesting that small groups allowed for closer monitoring of student progress and that teachers could meet regularly to move students between groups as their needs shifted. At one school a special education teacher said that teachers meet every five-to-six weeks to review student progress and reassign small groups. As she stated, "[we] collaborate and see what's working, what's not—which kids do we need to move with whom?... We just each give our input, what we feel like each student needs, and what our groups are needing."

Leaders, general education teachers, and special education teachers also all described the importance of consistently putting resources toward special education. The number of aides and paraprofessionals supporting special education was important, but teachers at multiple schools also noted the value of sustained relationships with support staff over multiple years. At one school, the principal said that, "the special education aides have leadership positions inside the school, and I think that adds to their feeling of belonging and investment into everything we do as a culture and climate." The following quotes further highlight these relationships between teachers and support staff, including special education teachers citing the integration and critical support that aides offer in their classroom and principals describing the investment they make in support staff and their training so that aides can work with multiple populations and groups of students.

- *I have two aides in my classroom, and without them we would not survive. They're wonderful and they help implement all of the programs that we do from inclusion to math and reading and things like that. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *Putting those supports in place with either aides or the special education teachers and including them into the classroom has been really helpful, because we can target the student's needs and see who's needing a little extra and who's needing some time, and really giving them some extra supports to help them. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *For example, [one special education teacher] has an aide that she's worked with for probably four or five years… and so the aide has an understanding… the aide is well-trained, the teacher's well-trained. They're really good at managing their time and their ability to work with kids. (Principal, Interview)*

- *So I think we're unique in that… as far as aides go, there's not a separation for the most part. We rotate our aides, we train them all. So they're trained in all the best practices with severe students as well as mild/moderate students. And we have felt that then they don't get as burned out. It keeps them motivated. Their schedule is changing enough for them that they enjoy their job, I believe. (Principal, Interview)*

- *One of the big things that [the administration has] really done is get the aides to allow us to do the small groups and really focused down on the individual kids. (Special Education Teacher, Interview)*

- *We try to make sure we hire the best paras, and then our SpEd teachers are really good at pushing in and supporting in the classroom as well as if a student needs to be pulled out or if*

they need a different learning environment for the way that they're learning or for just that moment. They're really good at looking at those situations and putting the students where they need to be so they can best learn at that time. (Principal, Interview)

- *We call them our special reading blocks… we bring all of our reading aids that we've provided here through the school. We also bring our special ed teachers in, so when our kindergarten through third grade teachers are giving reading instruction, we've got lots of hands on deck in that classroom…. So, when you go into those classrooms for the reading block for about that 30-minute time, we've got anywhere or upwards from six to eight adults in a classroom with those younger-grade teachers getting just special services on the things that they need at that point in time. And I think that has paid a lot of dividends just because every day we know that every student's being listened to as they read and going through and going over reading skills and strategies with them. (Principal, Interview)*

Conclusion and Considerations

The findings from this study highlight schools that have outperformed expectations in terms of achievement for students with disabilities and rates of school inclusion while retaining the majority of their special education teachers from year-to-year. Findings suggest that these schools exhibit many of the expected characteristics of effective and inclusive education, including supportive administration and leadership, positive school cultures and climates, collaboration among school personnel, and high levels of teacher satisfaction. The current study informs practice by identifying many of qualities that may lead to success for schools serving students in special education and the teachers who serve them. Here our considerations focus on practices that emerged and may support changing conditions in other schools.

Leadership Support Is Imperative to Developing Effective and Inclusive Schools.

The findings from this study suggest the importance of leadership support in developing effective inclusive education. We found that administrators in Bright Spot Schools played a key role in a) making special education teachers and students feel like a valued part of the school community, b) developing a shared vision for inclusion across the school, and c) setting high expectations for all students. These findings are well-aligned with previous research on effective inclusive schools (McLeskey et al., 2014; Billingsley et al., 2020). While there are many factors that contribute to effective administrative support, this study highlights the role of personal and/or professional connections to special education by administrators. Principals in this study had personal and/or professional connections either from working as a special education teacher or by having children or other close relatives who are served by special education services. These connections seem to support the leaders' understanding of both the conditions necessary for the success of students and educators alike as well as their ability to communicate the value of special education across the school.

Research has shown that new principals often lack the knowledge and skills to effectively lead inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2018). In part, studies continue to suggest that principal preparation programs often provide an overview of special education law and management but give limited attention to ensuring appropriate supports for educators and supports for teaching and learning that can meet the needs of students with disabilities, including limited clinical experiences in this area (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Hess & Kelly, 2007). As Billingsley and colleagues (2018) note in a review of research on principal preparation programs, "few principals have meaningful special education experience prior to their tenure, and thus new principals quickly learn about special education beginning a job that is already difficult and complex" (p. 72).

The findings from this Bright Spot Schools study in conjunction with previous research suggests that additional development of special education knowledge, skills, and dispositions among leaders and their pathway to and in leadership positions may be beneficial. There are multiple ways to increase this professional preparation to lead inclusive and effective schools, including further review and attention to the content of preparation program coursework, clinical experiences, and professional learning in practice. Further attention throughout the preparation pipeline, including integrating the Council for Exceptional Children Administrator Standards[6] for the professional preparation of all

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[6] See the Council for Exception Children Administrator Standards at https://exceptionalchildren.org/standards/advanced-administrator-special-education-professional-leadership-standards. The eight standards include: Vision, Mission, and Direction Setting; Implementation of Policy, Legal, and

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educational leaders, will support the growth and development of school leaders' expertise and competence to create and maintain highly inclusive and effective schools for students in special education programs and educators.

Create A Unified Vision that Maintains High Expectations and A Shared Commitment to Inclusion for Students with Disabilities.

Findings from this study align with previous research in identifying the importance of school climate and culture in the development of inclusive and effective schools. Teachers and administrators across Bright Spot Schools shared a vision and high expectations of students with their colleagues and school leaders. For instance, teachers and leaders across Bright Spot Schools highlighted their collaborative environment among special education and general education teachers who described feeling that "these are all our students." Hoppey and McLeskey (2014) called this a "unifying vision" (p. 20). This unifying vision at the study schools created an environment of support, community, and encouragement that centered a shared commitment to inclusion for students with disabilities.

Creating opportunities for collaboration.

In this study, participants indicated that there were numerous opportunities for collaboration, including opportunities to share expertise and resources. Collaboration came in many forms and included both formal (e.g., planning meetings, coordination with other specialists, PLCs) and informal (hallway) opportunities. The collaboration described by participants was also highly dependent on frequent and meaningful communication, including information sharing and idea generation, and intentional coordination. This study did not highlight formal shared professional learning opportunities (e.g., in-service training), although it did identify informal (e.g., peer-to-peer sharing) professional learning opportunities. McLeskey and colleagues (2014), who studied effective and inclusive schools, found that "teachers were immersed in high-quality professional development opportunities" (p. 65). To further support meaningful inclusion and effective schooling for students in special education and educators, there are additional opportunities to expand collective professional learning experiences to promote shared commitment and practice. For instance, previous research describes learner-centered professional development as promoting classroom-embedded learning supported by coaching, and supportive of collective participation among teachers in ways that develop learning communities (Desimone, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). These characteristics align well with the types of inclusive and collaborative environments that we identified within Bright Spot Schools.

Ethical Practices for Special Education Programs and Services; Organizational Leadership and Management for Special Education; Program Oversight, Improvement, and Instructional Leadership for Special Education; Human and Fiscal Resource Management of Special Education Programs and Services; Collaboration and Communication with Special Education Stakeholders; Equity and Cultural Responsiveness; and Field and Clinical Experience.

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