

Accountability and Results for Students with  
Disabilities in High-Poverty  
Academically High-Performing  
High Schools

U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services  
Funded Research Project

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**Research Abstract**

The national school reform movement has been fueled by a concern that all children achieve successful transitions to career opportunities and further education-outcomes that have been unfulfilled for many students with disabilities. Over the past decade, school-level assessment and student performance improvement programs have emerged as integral components of academically high-performing high schools. Unfortunately, very little is known about the participation of students with disabilities in academically high performing high schools as related to the delivery of special education services, how students with disabilities are attaining their goals in the general education curriculum, or how special education and regular education programs have coordinated educational services for students with disabilities. This research project addresses this deficiency.

***Identifying Potential Research Sites.*** To build a sample pool of academically high-performing high schools – schools with at least three successive years of student achievement on norm referenced tests (such as, state achievement tests, SAT, ACT) that were at or above the state average – several strategies were used to identify potential research sites. A search of internet-based state accountability reporting systems identified nineteen states in the winter of 2003 that provided data-based profiles of high schools based on: (a) enrollment of youth with disabilities, (b) academic performance of students with and without disabilities, and (c) attendance and graduation data for students with and without disabilities. The school membership rosters of school reform networks (i.e., High Schools That Work, Coalition of Essential Schools, The Education Alliance) were used to identify names of schools that were matched with the GreatSchools.net website data profiles to identify academically high-performing high schools. All schools in the Education Trust’s report of academically high achieving, high-poverty, high schools – *Dispelling the Myth . . . Over Time* – were also examined to identify potential high schools for inclusion in the sample pool. In addition, all state superintendents of public instruction, all state directors of special education, and all OSERS funded parent resource centers were mailed formal requests for nominations of academically high-performing high schools. The initial sample pool consisted of 1523 high schools.

The sample pool of academically high-performing high schools was examined to identify schools that met the following additional specifications. First, at least 40% of the student population was eligible to receive a free or reduced price lunch. Second, the student population was ethnically diverse (or balanced as in some schools where only two ethnic groups are enrolled). Third, at least 7% of the 9-12 grade student population received special education services. Fourth, at least 80% of the students with disabilities were enrolled in regular education classes for at least 70% or more of the school day. Fifth, all categories of students with disabilities were enrolled in the school and received special education services within the school facilities. This set of qualifications reduced the sample pool to 28 schools.

***Selecting Research Sites.*** Detailed descriptive profiles for the pool of 28 high schools were assembled from existing state data, school/district/community websites, recent evaluation and school accreditation reports, and when necessary an initial telephone inquiry with a potential school's director of special education further refined information about student populations, student performance, and assessment data. From this set of information, the researchers selected 12 schools from presentation to the Technical Advisory Panel.

In a video conference with the Technical Advisory Panel, six high schools and two alternates were selected for in-depth case study. A subsequent visit by the Principal Investigator and Lead Researcher to each of the eight sites resulted in two schools deciding to not be part of the study.

***Research Questions.*** A multi-site, embedded case study design was used to examine each of the schools, as well as their external and internal contexts, to address three major questions:

1. What policies and practices are in place within these high-poverty, academically high-performing, high schools that involve parents, students, special and regular educators, professional staff, and school administrators to ensure that students with disabilities attain their goals in the general education curriculum?
2. What approaches are used within the general education curriculum of these high-poverty, academically high performing high schools to ensure that students with disabilities attain school-level assessment and performance improvement goals?
3. How do professionals responsible for special education and regular education programs in these high-poverty, academically high performing high schools coordinate educational services to ensure positive results for students with disabilities?

***Data Collection.*** During two separate visits to each of the six research sites, individual and group stakeholder interviews were audio recorded with 526 educators, parents, consumers, and students.