

# Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education

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## **Abstract**

Through a rigorous selection process based on special education performance over four years, we identified eight unified districts that showed unusually strong academic performance for their special education population compared to similar districts in California. We conducted interviews with these districts' special education directors to identify the policies and practices they credited for their success. Ultimately, we selected four districts for quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The main themes that emerged across the four districts are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices leading to improved student achievement for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts); collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts); continuous assessment and use of Response to Intervention (RtI) (three districts); and targeted professional development (three districts). We believe that these findings, and the districts themselves, can serve as models for other districts that are struggling to improve the performance of students in special education in their districts.

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## Introduction

Improved academic outcomes have been an important emphasis for special education policy over the past decade. For example, the 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), specifies that schools be held accountable for the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of all students. It also specifically requires the disaggregation and reporting of data for specific subgroups, including students with disabilities. Failure to show AYP for students in special education can result in an entire school or school district being placed in “In Need of Improvement” status.

More recently, the newly released federal *Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) states that the Administration’s ESEA reauthorization proposal will increase support for “improved outcomes of students with disabilities” (p. 20). In California, 84 percent of school districts with sufficient students with disabilities to count for accountability purposes failed to make AYP for 2009-2010 specifically due, at least in part, to the academic performance of their students in special education.

The purpose of this study is to identify districts that beat these daunting odds. For example, Sanger Unified, which we profile below, enrolls students in poverty at a much higher rate than the state average (76 versus 50 percent) and actively attempts to serve students outside special education when appropriate, classifying only 8 percent of its students in special education compared to the statewide average of 10 percent (13 percent nationally). Yet Sanger’s students in special education show much higher academic proficiency on statewide tests than similar districts and than the state average, and Sanger continues to make AYP. Given the challenges faced by 84 percent of California districts in making AYP, it is important to identify districts like Sanger from across the state, to analyze what they are doing, and to consider whether their strategies might work for students in special education statewide.

To identify such districts, we used a rigorous selection process based on special education academic performance from the 2005-06 to 2008-09 school year. We selected a four-year span for these analyses to identify districts whose exceptional performance had been sustained over time.

These analyses resulted in the identification of a number of districts statewide showing higher-than-predicted academic success for their students in special education. To further explore these results, we conducted in-depth phone interviews with the special education directors in eight of these districts to learn about the policies and practices they had put in place that they attributed their success to. From these eight, we selected four districts with clear, well-articulated strategies to feature in this report.

We believe this information will contribute to district, county, and state-level consideration of strategies for improving special education performance by providing specific examples of what has worked. We also consider it important to highlight districts with considerably higher than average success with this important sub-population of students to recognize their impressive achievement, and to enable other districts to learn from them. Because we focus on higher poverty districts in this report, these findings may be of particular assistance to other “high need” districts in California and across the country.

## Study Background

In 2001, in *Education Finance in the New Millennium*, Chaikind and Fowler (2001) predicted that the future of special education would focus on questions regarding the “best outcomes for students with disabilities.” However, while the 1997 IDEA amendments required states to establish performance goals for students with disabilities, some critics have argued that these changes did not go far enough in fully establishing a results-oriented process (Wolf & Hassal, 2001).

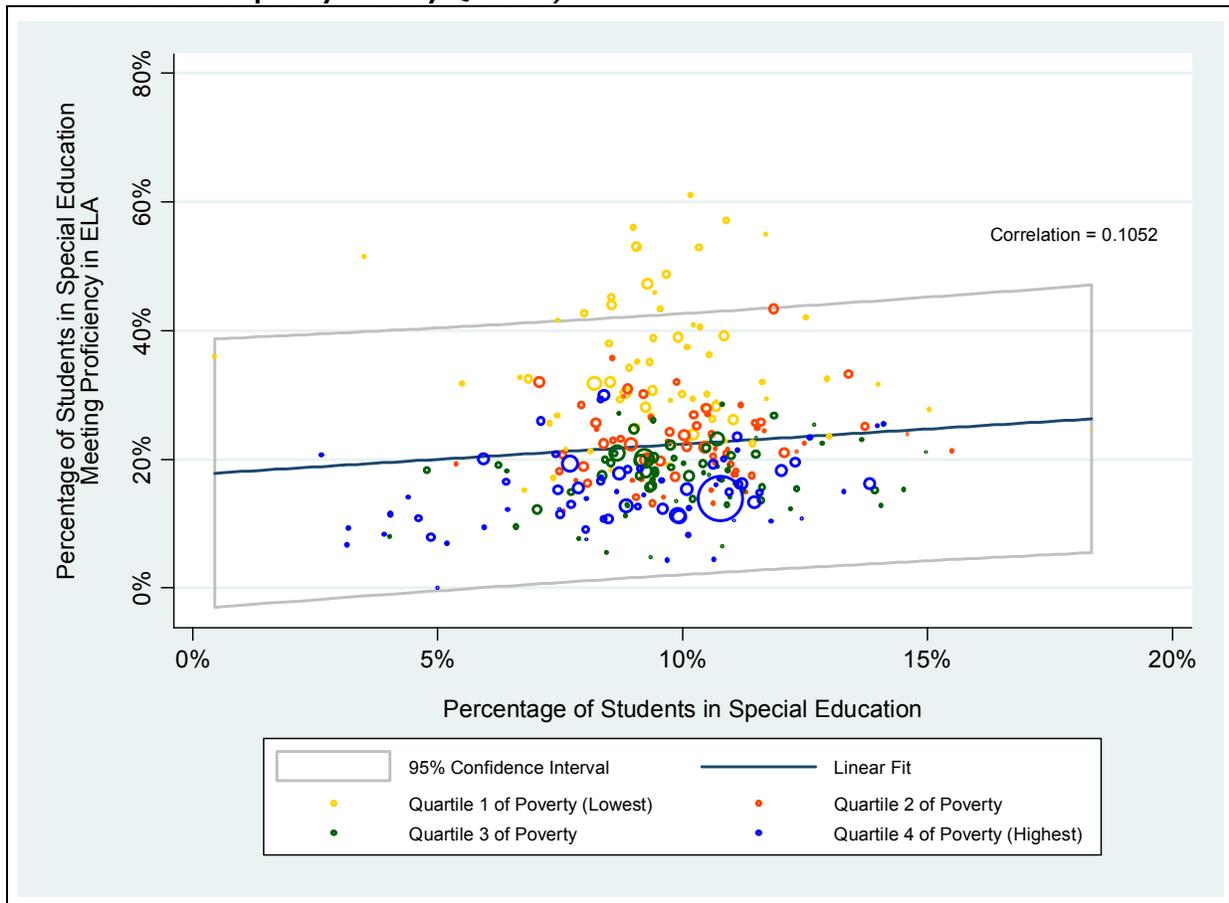
In 2002, the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education recommended that special education focus on the outcomes achieved by each child and not on “process, litigation, regulation and confrontation” (p. 8). The preamble to this report states, “The ultimate test of the value of special education is that, once identified, children close the achievement gap with their peers” (President’s Commission, 2002:4).

The intended purpose of the NCLB legislation of 2001, as described above, is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB, 2001, § 1001). These provisions emphasize that the expected educational outcomes for students with disabilities, or for any other subgroup, are the same high expectations held for all students. Given the challenges that students in special education face, some may believe that low performance is inevitable. However, at least one study by Hanushek et al. (2002) shows value added in regard to academic performance from special education services—so improvement is possible. They report that, “The average special education program boosts mathematics and reading achievement of special education students, particularly those classified as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed, while not detracting from regular education students” (p. 584).

Analyses of key student and district characteristics and academic achievement of students identified for special education in California show that while some districts are achieving relatively impressive outcomes, many are not. For example, large variation is found across districts in the percentage of students with disabilities scoring proficient in English language arts (ELA)—from 0 to 60 percent across California districts (2006-07). The high end of this range shows that low performance for students in special education need not be a given.

This variation is illustrated in Exhibit I. Each district in California is represented by a circle; the circle’s size is based on district enrollment. The exhibit maps the percentage of students in special education scoring proficient and above against the percentage of students identified as being in special education by district. Although a slight positive correlation between performance and percentage of enrollment identified as special education, there is relatively high variation in performance across the range of percentages of students identified.

**Exhibit I: Percentage of Students in Special Education in Unified School Districts Meeting Proficiency in English Language Arts as a Function of the Percentage of Students Identified for Special Education in These Districts, 2006-07 (Each District Is Represented by a Circle Proportional to Its Size and Grouped by Poverty Quartile)**

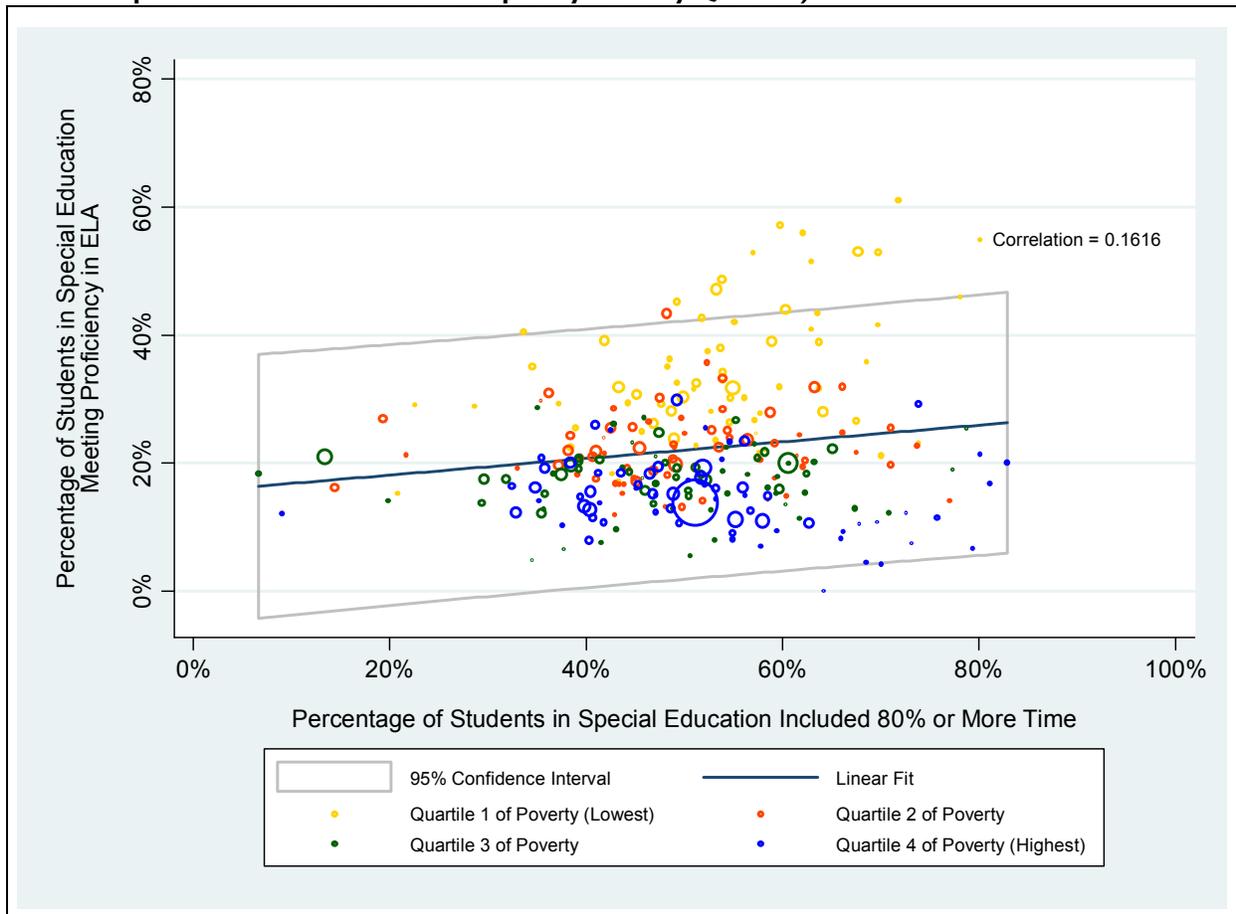


Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

Some of the variation shown above is negatively related to district poverty (defined as the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch), as indicated by the number of high-poverty districts (in blue) in the lower ranges of performance. However, relatively high performers are also found among these high-poverty districts.

This illustrates that while the poverty of its students is beyond district control, other factors are not. For example, Exhibit 2 provides information similar to that shown in Exhibit I above, but plots ELA proficiency against the percentage of students in special education spending 80 percent or more time in general education classrooms. Overall a positive correlation is observed; however, there is a great deal of variation. These data suggest that when students in special education are included in general education classes with appropriate supports, they appear to do better than predicted, but that increased general education placements may also lead to poorer than predicted performance when such placements are not well implemented.

**Exhibit 2: Percentage of Students in Special Education in Unified School Districts Meeting Proficiency in English Language Arts as a Function of the Percentage of These Students Served 80 Percent or More Time in General Education Classrooms, 2006-07 (Each District Is Represented by a Circle Proportional to Its Size and Grouped by Poverty Quartile)**



Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program and California Special Education Management Information System (CASEMIS) data.

In addition, regression analyses that include variables measuring the percentage of time served in regular education classes, student poverty, special education spending, and variations in the mix of categories of disability enrolled also show a strong, statistically significant relationship between regular class placements and district-level special education performance. Increased special education spending also shows a positive, statistically significant relationship with student outcomes, but the magnitude of the relationship is small.

The current study seeks to better understand the policies and practices implemented by districts that have special education performance that is substantially higher than predicted. It grows out of prior work done we have done through the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) identifying high-performing, high-need schools and districts.<sup>1</sup> The study also draws upon previous research that examines effective practices leading to improved student achievement for students in special education (e.g., Cortiella & Burnette, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 1997).

<sup>1</sup> Examples of high-performing, high-need school profiles from this prior work can be found at: <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/print/htdocs/smu/ideas/schools.htm>.

A study by the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts (2004) is especially relevant to the current study. The purpose of the *Study of MCAS Achievement and Promising Practices in Urban Special Education* was to identify district- and school-level practices supporting achievement among elementary and middle school students with special needs in urban public schools. Achievement data were used to identify urban districts with promising ELA and mathematics achievement among students with special needs. The research team visited 10 schools in five districts and interviewed over 140 school personnel. A small number of parents of students with special needs were also interviewed at each school. From these data collection efforts, the researchers identified 11 practices that supported success with students in special education (UMass Donahue Institute, 2004):

- An emphasis on curriculum alignment with curriculum frameworks
- Effective systems to support curriculum alignment
- Emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum
- Culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement
- A well-disciplined academic and social environment
- Use of student assessment data to inform decision-making
- Unified practice supported by targeted professional development
- Access to resources to support key initiatives
- Effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment
- Flexible leaders and staff that work effectively in a dynamic environment
- Effective leadership

It is interesting to note that all of these practices, with the exception of “emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum” (#3), are similar to the practices emphasized in the effective schools literature for general education (see for example Fuller et al., 2007; Perez et al., 2007; Parrish et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Levine & Lezotte, 1990). This suggests that to improve academic results for students in special education, practices similar to those implemented for general education students, with an additional emphasis on inclusionary practices, may be effective.

In the Donahue study, all of the case study districts were committed to inclusion and noted various ways in which they implemented this practice. A common strategy was the use of flexible groupings that integrated special needs students into general education classrooms throughout the school day. No two districts implemented the same inclusion strategies, with practices ranging from full inclusion of all students identified for special education with dual certification of all regular and special education teachers, to a more modest level of inclusion in which resource teachers supported students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

## **District Selection for the Current Study**

Districts were selected based on higher-than-predicted achievement for students with disabilities on statewide performance measures. Publicly available data from the Academic Performance Index (API), AYP, California Standards Tests (CST), and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) databases as well as district demographic data for ethnicity, poverty, the share of English learners, and the share of

students with disability status were included in these analyses, which included data from 2005-06 through 2008-09.<sup>2</sup>

We first ran regression analyses on standardized CST and CAHSEE mathematics and ELA mean scale scores for the students-with-disabilities subgroup population, controlling for the district's percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch; percentage of African American, Asian, and Hispanic students; percentage of English learners (ELs); percentage of students with disabilities; and percentage of students within the various disability classifications (e.g., mental retardation, autism).

We averaged the difference between the actual and the predicted standardized CST and CAHSEE mathematics and ELA scale scores for students with disabilities to produce district-level measures by year from 2005-06 through 2008-09. We then averaged these measures across the four years to obtain a single academic performance measure for students with disabilities that would reflect sustained performance. We were seeking districts where the students in special education performed considerably better than predicted and did so consistently over time.

Because this was a comparative analysis, it was important to control for the grade range of students served. Thus, we limited our analysis to unified school districts, which serve over 70 percent of California's students.

In zeroing in on the districts to interview, we screened out small districts (those at or below the 30th percentile in terms of unified district enrollment) to ensure that the selected districts would not simply reflect circumstances associated with unusually small size. In addition, we only selected districts serving a percentage of students with disabilities within one standard deviation of the state average for unified districts. Last, we only selected districts that were above the state average percent proficiency on CST ELA and mathematics for students with disabilities and above the predicted academic performance for students with disabilities as estimated by our regression analysis.

After applying these criteria, we ranked the remaining districts based on their above-predicted performance as described above. Ultimately, we selected 8 districts from the top 20 to interview. Because of our interest in interviewing districts with high levels of poverty, we first selected the 4 districts in the top 20 whose percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch exceeded the state average, which is 50 percent. To also gain an understanding of how the practices reported by higher poverty districts might compare with those with lower poverty, we selected the remaining four districts from among those that had 10 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

## **District Interviews and Analysis**

Between May and July 2010, we interviewed the special education directors from the eight selected districts to obtain descriptions of the policies and practices they considered most effective in improving and sustaining special education achievement in their districts. During a one-hour phone interview, we discussed instructional and management practices associated with their high performance for students with disabilities.

To guide the discussion, we developed an interview protocol that included questions related to the effective practices described above. However, discussion was not limited to these practices—we asked

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<sup>2</sup> Only CST scores were included in the study. Scores on the California Modified Assessment (CMA) or the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) were not considered as the majority of students in special education take the CST with or without accommodations.

respondents to initially describe the three most important factors that they attributed to special education performance in their districts without any suggestion of the literature cited above.

We analyzed these interview data seeking instances where well-articulated strategies had been developed and implemented by the district for the explicit purpose of improving the education outcomes of its students in special education. Conversely, we sought to avoid instances where it appeared that external factors were affecting the observed high performance. Through this process, we narrowed the initial eight districts to four sites whose strategies seemed fully developed and could be clearly described (and would therefore be of strong potential interest to other districts). We excluded sites with issues such as not meeting special education proficiency targets as well as those with possible issues with the types of students being identified for special education. Once initial profiles were created for the remaining four districts, the respondents provided comments regarding completeness and accuracy.

## District Backgrounds

Listed alphabetically, the districts featured in this report are Kerman, Sanger, Upland, and Val Verde. As shown in Table 1, they are located in either the southern part of the state (Upland and Val Verde) or in the Central Valley (Kerman and Sanger), and range in size from about 4,400 to 19,200 students. They have diverse student populations. Three of the four districts (Kerman, Sanger, and Val Verde) have above-state-average student poverty while Upland is slightly below the state average. Similarly, three districts have percentages of English learners above the state average, with one below. Finally, three districts have a state-average percentage of students in special education (10 percent), while Sanger is below average at 8 percent.

**Table 1: District Demographics, 2008-09**

District name	Region	Enrollment	Percent special education	Percent poverty	Percent English learners
Kerman	Central	4,398	10	78	30
Sanger	Central	10,368	8	76	22
Upland	South	14,307	10	40	14
Val Verde	South	19,183	10	74	26
State average	N/A	13,094	10	50	20

Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

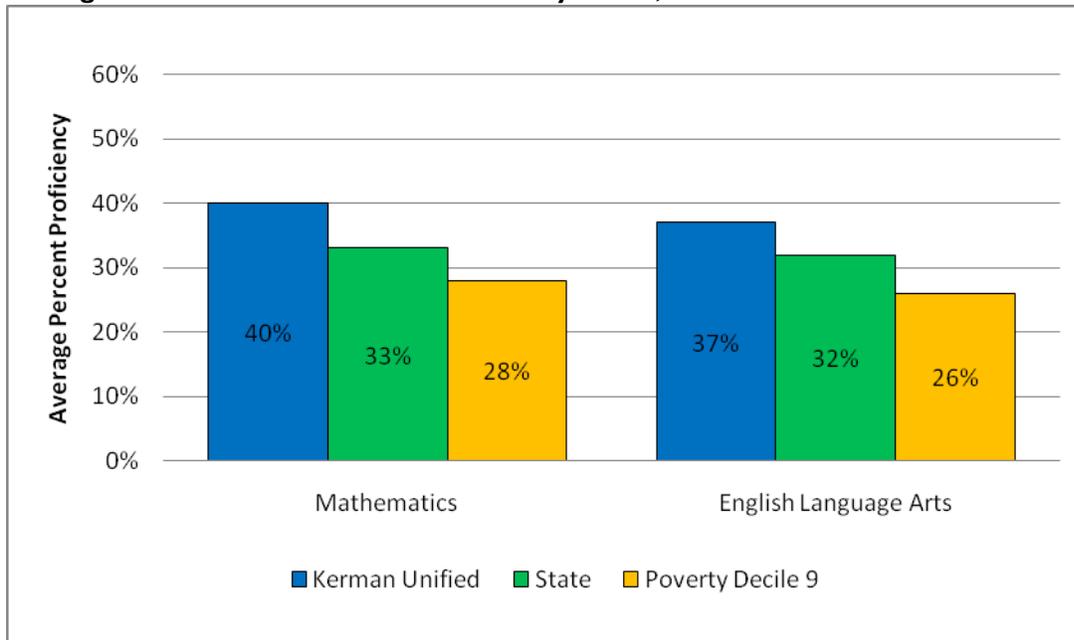
## District Profiles

Below, we provide brief profiles of these districts, including their demographics, special education performance, and the strategies identified by their special education directors as contributing to their success. It should be noted that these descriptions are based on one-hour interviews conducted with each special education director. These district respondents have read, sometimes added additional information to, and confirmed the accuracy of the summaries in this report. Our attempt is to provide brief and summative information, rather than detailed descriptions of their special education programs. The broader concepts they describe may be of interest, and readers may wish to follow up with these districts to pursue more detailed questions regarding specific strategies of interest. After the profiles, we summarize the overarching strategies across the four districts.

**District Profile 1: Kerman Unified School District**

In Fresno County, Kerman Unified enrolls approximately 4,400 students. Over three-quarters (78 percent) of its students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and almost one-third (30 percent) are English learners. In 2008-09, 40 percent of Kerman’s students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored proficient or above in mathematics and 37 percent in English Language Arts, compared with 33 percent and 32 percent for students in special education statewide, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable levels of students in poverty (see Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3: Average Special Education Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Kerman Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09**



Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

In June 2010, we interviewed Robert Postler, who had been Kerman’s coordinator of special education for two years, to learn about the factors he credited for the district’s success. He noted three main factors:

- An inclusion philosophy with support from resource teachers;
- Use of Read 180; Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) supported by professional development; and Response to Intervention (Rtl) strategies; and
- Emphasis on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with collaboration between general and special education teachers.

Mr. Postler described Kerman’s inclusion philosophy as follows: “It is my belief and the district’s belief that special education is considered not to be a separate entity; they are all one and have the same right and privileges as general education kids.” At the elementary and middle schools, they strive for full inclusion; most students identified for special education are fully integrated with support from resource teachers. At the high school, students in special education receive support from four resource teachers within or outside general education classrooms depending on student needs.

The district uses Read 180, a comprehensive intervention for students below grade level, with a large number of students with disabilities at the elementary and middle school levels. Postler cited the intervention as resulting in significant success. Specific teachers are trained in the program and work 90 minutes per day with students, who rotate among three stations: small group work with the teacher, computer work at the student's level, and individual reading.

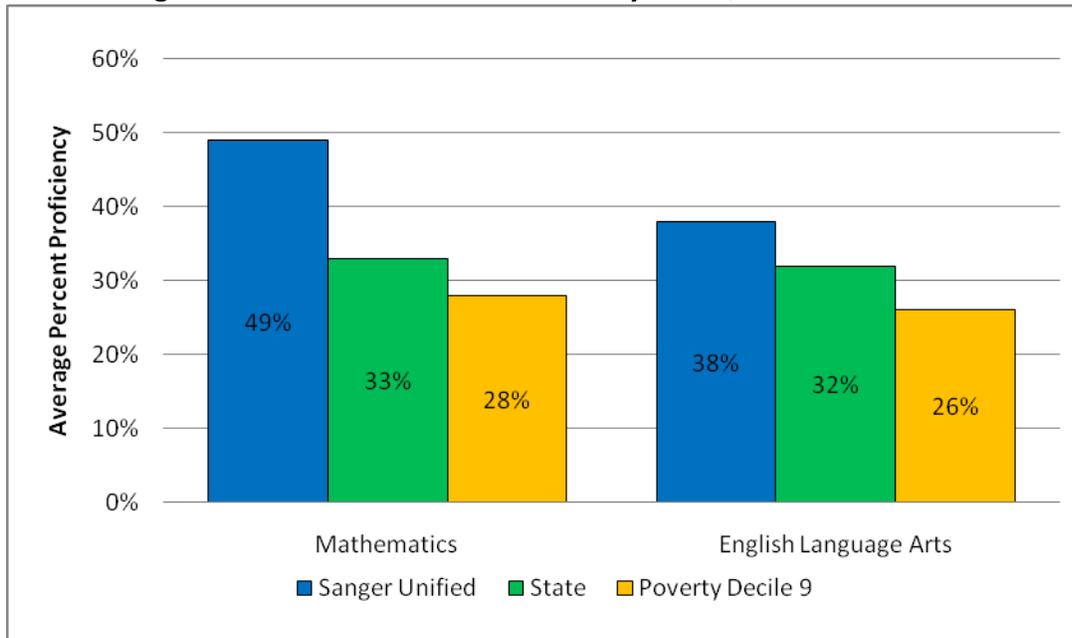
In addition, Kerman has utilized Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) for the past four years, supported by ongoing staff development. EDI focuses on the use of (a) instructional grouping (using flexible skill grouping as opposed to "tracking"); (b) instructional time (increasing academic learning time—the time students are successfully engaged); and (c) continuous assessment (providing ongoing in-program assessments to inform instructional practice). EDI is used especially at the K-8 level, with weekly monitoring by school and district administrators to ensure consistent implementation.

Over the past year, the district special education director reported having worked with the support of the superintendent to formally implement RtI through a district-relevant implementation plan and staff training. The district has also recently purchased Read Well, a reading intervention program for K-3, as well as DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) Online, an assessment program that measures students' early literacy skills in five areas: phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Finally, Kerman has emphasized PLCs for several years, which specifically includes collaboration between general and special education teachers. Mr. Postler attributes their efforts to fully incorporate students with disabilities into the core curriculum as well as the programs and strategies described above as the keys to their impressive academic success.

### ***District Profile 2: Sanger Unified School District***

Sanger Unified, which is also in Fresno County, enrolls approximately 10,400 students. Over three-quarters (76 percent) of its students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and more than one-fifth (22 percent) are English learners (see Exhibit 2). In 2008-09, 49 percent of Sanger's students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored proficient or above in mathematics and 38 percent did so in English Language Arts, compared to 33 and 32 percent for students in special education statewide, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable levels of students in poverty (see Exhibit 4).

**Exhibit 4: Average Special Education Percent Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Sanger Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09**



Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

These results are especially impressive given the relatively low percentage of students served in special education in the district. In 2008-09, Sanger identified 8 percent of their students for special education compared to the statewide average of 10 percent and over 13 percent nationally. Despite this more concentrated population of students in special education, which district staff describe as being primarily focused on students with the most severe needs, the special education population in Sanger performs substantially better than other districts statewide.

In June 2010, we interviewed Sanger’s special education director, Matt Navo. He attributed three primary factors to Sanger’s success:

- Full inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms;
- Use of Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) with continuous assessment; and the use of Response to Intervention (Rtl); and
- Implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where general and special education teachers as well as school psychologists collaborate.

Mr. Navo described full inclusion as the district’s vision for special education—i.e., to fully include as many children as possible in a regular education setting, along with full support to meet their needs. An important underlying rationale is the strong belief that all students can achieve.

Mr. Navo described the second factor, EDI, as “a way to provide a structured lesson delivery on new concepts while gain real time information about how a student is responding to that instruction.”<sup>3</sup> The teacher can then immediately intervene with those students who do not understand the lesson. In addition, through the use of Rtl, Sanger attempts to meet students’ exceptional learning needs outside of

<sup>3</sup> See the Kerman Unified profile for a description of EDI.

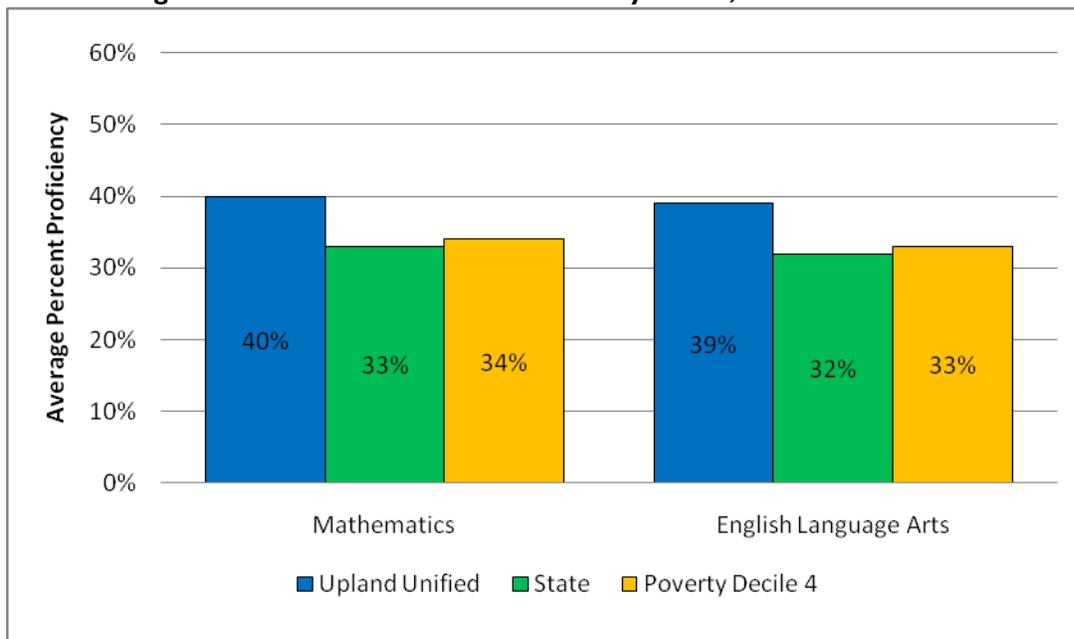
special education when appropriate. Only when other interventions have not worked are students referred to special education. Thus, he described the successful implementation of Rtl as contributing to the district’s substantially lower-than-average rate of special education identification.

As the third factor, Mr. Navo noted that Sanger has had PLCs for the past six years. The PLCs allow general and special education teachers to collaboratively discuss evidence regarding the degree of student learning taking place and to use their Rtl system to respond to student needs. School psychologists are part of the PLCs as well. Sanger uses psychologists differently from most districts. While school psychologists are often used almost exclusively to conduct special education assessments (to determine if students qualify for service), in Sanger they function as “quasi-vice principals,” serving on leadership teams, conducting walk throughs, dealing with student behavior issues, and serving as the backbone of the Rtl process.

**District Profile 3: Upland Unified School District**

Upland Unified in San Bernardino County enrolls 14,300 students, with 40 percent eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and 14 percent English learners (slightly below the statewide averages of 50 percent and 20 percent). In 2008-09, Upland’s students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored above average in mathematics (40 versus 33 percent) and English language arts (39 versus 32) compared with the state as a whole, and also scored higher than in districts with comparable percentages of students in poverty. (See Exhibit 5.)

**Exhibit 5: Average Special Education Percent Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Upland Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09**



Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

In June 2010, we interviewed Upland’s director of student services, Lori Thompson, who cited three primary factors that have contributed to the district’s success with its special education population:

- A blended program through curriculum mapping and common assessments;
- Collaboration and co-teaching; and
- Professional development (e.g., Guided Language Acquisition Design [GLAD] strategies).

Special education in Upland continues to evolve, and is moving toward a blended program in which students and teachers associated with special education are integrated into general education—particularly at the junior high and high school levels. Five years ago, the district started “de-tracking” its high school. To allow all students to be on the same academic track, general and special education teachers developed common curriculum and assessments in all departments. All students now take college prep courses in mathematics, English, social science, and other subjects. Instead of being in a separate class, students identified for special education take college prep classes and receive specialized academic instruction from special education teachers when needed. At the middle school level, students in special education get access to the core curriculum in classes where general and special education teachers work collaboratively.

At the elementary level, while the district still has resource and special day class teachers, the district is implementing more blended instruction—particularly in social studies and science, because these subjects are easier to blend than mathematics and English language arts. Upland used to cluster special day classes at just a few schools with a lot of bussing. However, given the cost of bussing and the goal to have students attend their neighborhood schools they have distributed their special day classes more evenly across the district. This makes blended instruction more viable because students in special education are no longer concentrated at a few school sites.

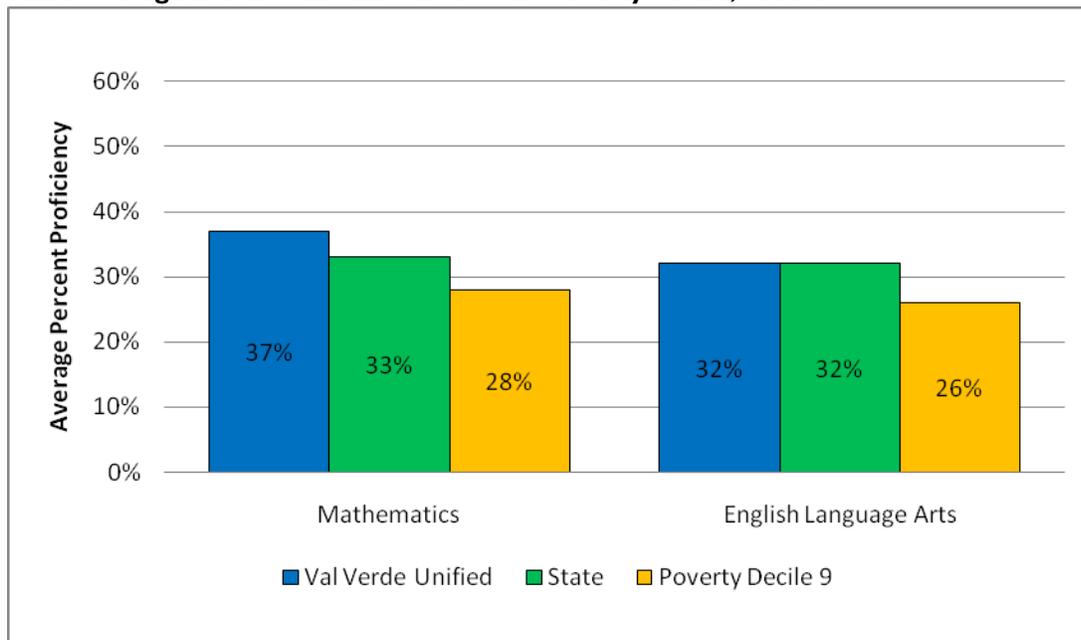
In addition to collaborating and co-teaching when blending instruction, teachers engage in formalized transition planning for students in special education moving into junior high and high school. Sending and receiving teachers meet to discuss the students with disabilities making these transitions. The goal is to maximize the degree to which they can be in blended classes and fully exposed to the core curriculum, with the levels of support needed to make them successful.

Upland has emphasized professional development for teachers in meeting the needs of all learners. Ms. Thompson described the adoption of GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design) strategies, which focus on literacy and visual strategies for learning, as very useful for students in special education.

#### ***District Profile 4: Val Verde Unified District***

Val Verde Unified, in Riverside County, is a relatively large district, with an enrollment of approximately 19,000 students. About three-quarters (74 percent) of the district’s students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and more than one-quarter (26 percent) are English language learners. In 2008-09, Val Verde’s students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored at or above average in mathematics (37 versus 33 percent) and English language arts (32 versus 32 percent), compared to students in special education statewide. Compared with districts with comparable percentages of students in poverty, Val Verde’s students with disabilities scored higher in both mathematics (37 versus 28 percent) and English language arts (32 versus 26 percent). (See Exhibit 6.)

**Exhibit 6: Average Special Education Percent Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Val Verde Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09**



Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

In May 2010, we interviewed Val Verde’s special education director, Vicki Butler, along with the middle and high school program specialist, Christine Counts, and the elementary school instructional coach, Jeff Mossa, to learn about the factors they credited for Val Verde’s strong performance with its students in special education. Ms. Butler explained that the students in special education are performing well partly because the general education students are performing well. The philosophy in the district is that special education is not separate from general education; it is treated as part of the whole. Also, special education is deliberately located in the curriculum and instruction department as opposed to under student services to avoid silos and bridge the gap between general and special education. In addition to this philosophy, the team cited three primary factors that have contributed to the success of their students identified for special education:

- Equitable access to the core curriculum and assessments;
- Professional development for special education teachers; and
- Collaborative teaching and teamwork.

Val Verde uses a “flexible model” for students in special education; students are integrated into general education as much as possible but also receive specialized academic instruction depending on their needs and IEP goals. As Ms. Butler pointed out, “These models are better than the old model that we used to have where we separated kids out and isolated them. These are more entwined with the regular education program.” The team also noted that through the use of RtI strategies, they have been able to identify and provide services for at-risk students to keep their special education population at 10 percent.

Another important factor identified by the Val Verde team is their professional development for special education teachers. Two years ago, the district received a Special Education Teacher Professional Development Grant as part of the Reading First project. Special education teachers were trained in the

English language arts core curriculum, Houghton Mifflin, which is usually only offered to general education teachers. This training allowed special education teachers to better understand and use the core curriculum's different components and supplements. Teachers were also given Step Up to Writing training related to their writing program, as well as training on GLAD strategies (described in the previous profile), co-teaching, and data analysis.

At the elementary level, Val Verde emphasizes collaborative teaching and teamwork through learning centers. The learning center is a place where students can be taught through small group or targeted individualized instruction in a general education setting. Also, there is a special education teacher on each elementary school leadership team to ensure that special education is fully integrated with general education. In addition, each elementary school has an instructional coach who facilitates data meetings.

At the middle and high school levels, there is a special education team that works with grade-level teams. Students with disabilities are fully included in general education classes with either instructional assistant or special education teacher assistance in their classes. There are also Basic Classes, which are smaller and designed for students with more intensive needs. Next year, the district will add instructional coaches to its secondary programs as well. According to Mr. Mossa, "We have built the capacity of our special education teachers to have them bring value to the general education classroom for the special and general education students."

## Overall District Themes

Examining themes across the four districts, the following strategies emerged in support of special education performance:

- Inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts)
- Collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts)
- Continuous assessment and use of Rtl (three districts)
- Targeted professional development (three districts)
- Use of Explicit Direct Instruction (two districts)

Inclusion and access to the core curriculum was the strategy most emphasized by all four district administrators as having contributed to special education performance in their districts. However, as in the Donahue Institute study, inclusion efforts take different forms across these districts. In Kerman and Sanger, the strategy is to fully integrate as many students identified for special education as possible, with proper support from resource teachers depending on student needs. Upland, on the other hand, is moving toward a blended program, which started with the "de-tracking" of its high school, providing students in special education more access to college prep courses at the high school level and to the core curriculum at the middle and elementary levels. Similarly, Val Verde Unified uses a "flexible model" in which students with disabilities are integrated into general education as much as possible but also receive specialized academic instruction when needed.

All four districts indicated that for inclusion to work, general and special education teachers need to collaborate. This strategy was consistently mentioned as a way to improve special education performance as well. In two of the districts (Kerman and Sanger), the collaboration takes place through PLCs, where special and general education teachers discuss student needs and plan instruction together. In Sanger, school psychologists are also part of the PLCs. In Upland and Val Verde, collaboration takes the form of blended instruction, transition planning, use of learning centers, and special education teacher participation on leadership teams to ensure integration of general and special education.

Kerman, Sanger, and Val Verde cited continuous use of student assessment data and RtI strategies as a way to respond to student needs and limit the number of students referred to special education. Kerman, Upland, and Val Verde provide targeted professional development to meet the needs of all learners, emphasizing particular strategies (e.g., EDI, GLAD) or training special education teachers to better understand and use the core curriculum. Finally, Kerman and Sanger both use EDI as a way to structure lesson content and increase student engagement through the use of flexible groupings and ongoing assessments.

## Study Implications

It is important for education researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to give greater consideration to the substantial variation observed in the academic results for students with disabilities in school districts across the state. Some districts are producing educational outcomes for their students in special education that are much better than those of other districts. Given the magnitude of spending on special education services and all that is at stake for these children, it is important that we gain a better understanding of what these districts are doing that might inform others.

This study begins this process. Through a rigorous selection process, we found a number of districts that substantially and consistently outperformed similar districts on state performance measures. Subsequently, we conducted in-depth interviews with the special education directors in eight of these districts to learn about the strategies they had put in place to improve special education performance. Finally, we selected four districts for further analysis and to feature in this report.

The main themes that emerged across these districts are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts); collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts); continuous assessment and use of RtI (three districts); and targeted professional development (three districts).

All four districts were very clear about the need for students in special education to gain full access to the curriculum, that this will only occur through strong general and special education collaboration, and about the importance of creating a learning community unified in the belief that all children can learn. Aside from this overall philosophy, though, each district reported developing specific strategies that were somewhat unique.

We believe these districts, and others like them, can serve as “lighthouses” for other districts struggling to fully incorporate their special education population and to give them the best possible chance to succeed academically. Next steps could be to extend this exploration of what is working in California and to form networks to share this success with others. For example, more could be done to identify high-performing districts in California, which may serve as models to others. Further exploration could occur through site visits to districts and schools in order to document through interviews and observations how successful special education outcomes are produced at different sites.

In addition, the California Department of Education, the County Offices of Education, and the California Comprehensive Center might work collaboratively to facilitate sharing of these best practices. Some of

this is occurring already through school partnerships in five California Counties<sup>4</sup> and through webinars with principals<sup>5</sup> and special education directors<sup>6</sup> facilitated by the California Comprehensive Center.

Last, this study only examined performance on the California Standards Test (CST), which is the statewide examination given to the vast majority of students in special education in the state. However, it also would be important to study the performance of students taking the California Modified Assessment (CMA) and the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) to understand best practices for the students in special education taking these assessments.

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<sup>4</sup> For a description of these partnerships, an interim report can be requested from Mette Huberman (mhuberman@air.org).

<sup>5</sup> For an example of a webinar with a high-performing, high-need middle schools, see: <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/4333>

<sup>6</sup> For a webinar with the special education director in Sanger Unified, see: <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/4860>

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