



# PUTTING THE “I” IN IEP

*How a high school took the best of traditional models for students with disabilities while eschewing their limitations to create something entirely new*

**Brockton High School**  
Brockton, Massachusetts

## ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

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Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association, have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

## INTRODUCTION

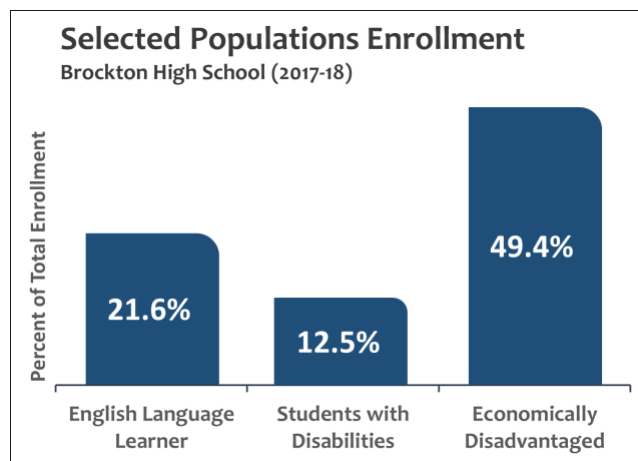
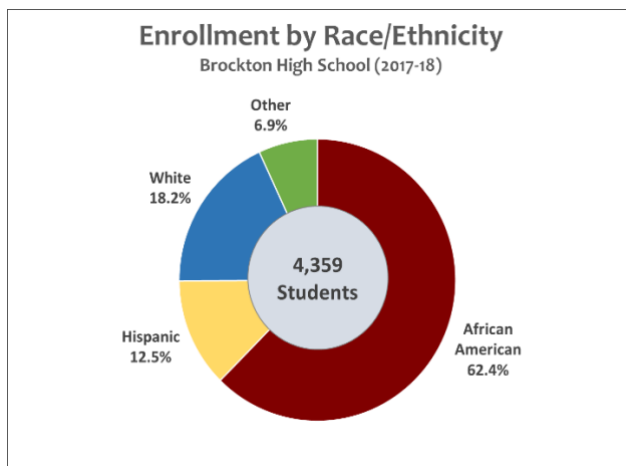
Brockton High School in Massachusetts is a large, inner city, high-poverty school of 4,359 students known for a dramatic turnaround last decade. The school implemented a school-wide literacy initiative to boost achievement. The plan saw enormous success and pulled the school up from the bottom of state rankings of urban high school to among the top. However, six years ago, the initiative began to show cracks in efficacy for their 400 students with disabilities who receive direct services via an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Yet giving up or placing blame is not the Brockton way. Instead, its team rolled up their sleeves and got back to work—hard work. They eschewed the traditional thinking about educating special education students and instead created a new plan—a hub model that took only the best of traditional approaches and layered them with innovation. The result is a special education system that puts the unique needs and goals of students with disabilities first at every turn and is reaching each of them on their terms.

## THE CHALLENGE

The turnaround story of Brockton High School is the stuff of lore. So successful and dramatic was their evolution from one of the lowest performing urban high schools in Massachusetts to one of its highest performing that educators across the country have studied how they did it. They did it by a fierce, school-wide commitment to literacy for all.

Of Brockton High School's 4,359 students, 62.4% are African American, 12.5% are Latino, 21.6% are English Language Learners, 12.5% are students with disabilities, and 49.4% come from impoverished homes. In 1998, Massachusetts adopted the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a high-stakes exam required for graduation. This first year, 75% of Brockton students failed the math test and 44% failed the English language arts test. Even worse, 98% of students with disabilities failed the math test, and 78% of students with disabilities failed the English language arts test.



Evidence of progress was noted within three years. Commissioner David P. Driscoll visited Brockton High School in 2001 to announce that the school had made more progress in MCAS scores than any other

high school in Massachusetts. Over the next decade, Brockton transformed from a largely dispirited campus under state threat of withheld diplomas for all students who did not pass the MCAS to a place that energizes both its students and staff. Today, Brockton continues to perform at levels best in the state, and its students derive enormous pride from calling themselves Brockton High School students.

Notably, Brockton turned their school around without firing teachers, without banishing the union, without implementing pay incentives, and without bringing in costly consultants. Instead, the school created a leadership committee comprised of administrators and teachers from all content areas. Its charge was finding a viable way to improve academic achievement for all students. After analyzing school-wide data, the committee decided to focus on school-wide literacy in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning. All staff—including teachers, guidance counselors, nurses, school administrators, etc.—were trained in newly developed literacy strategies and were required to incorporate them into their instruction. Literacy showed up everywhere possible and as often as possible.

The school saw improvements across the board. Two decades later, Brockton High School remains focused on school-wide literacy that yields strong achievement results for students. The sustained improvements and success of Brockton students are evidence that the foundation of literacy instruction is timeless and effective.

Thanks to the school-wide emphasis on literacy, students with disabilities also showed marked improvements on MCAS. However, grades and anecdotal reports from parents highlighted that these students were struggling; they needed to be supported to do more than just pass the MCAS. At Brockton High School, the work is never done and there is no complacency. So, six years ago, when data showed that the improvements made amongst students with disabilities began to stall, the special education director and Brockton leadership knew it was once again time to roll up their sleeves and do new work.

## **THE INNOVATION**

In 2012, data revealed that approximately 25% of Brockton's students with disabilities were lagging academically and were more likely to struggle with discipline issues. The problem was obvious—collectively, Brockton High School was failing to sufficiently meet the disparate, unique needs of this cohort of students. The solution was less obvious. They had for years tried a model where students with mild to moderate disabilities were educated in substantially separate classes without access to highly qualified content teachers. Not only did this exacerbate one of the causes of this group's poor performance on the MCAS in the first place; it also proved to be an equity issue. Then they moved to full inclusion model where teachers from the substantially separate model were reallocated as co-teachers in the general education setting. However, students who had low-incidence disabilities—such as autism, emotional impairments, and severe learning disabilities—found themselves thrust into the general education setting without adequate supports.

Brockton High School's leadership and special education department set out to apply the same determination to seeking solutions for special education students that they did to the entire school over the decade prior. As they did, three attitudes and beliefs shaped their approach to overhauling and improving their special education delivery model.

### *Break Beyond Traditional Approaches to Break Out of Traditional Thinking*

Brockton's focus on school-wide literacy did boost MCAS scores among students with disabilities. However, as years passed, more and more parents of these students and stakeholders voiced concern that their grades weren't strong enough and that they lacked sufficient emotional support. In 2012, Brockton High School's special education department began a self-assessment of their existing model. All stakeholders agreed that students with disabilities require access to general education curriculum taught by highly qualified content teachers with support from special education teachers. The special education teachers were reallocated to co-teachers, and the students moved to a full inclusion model. MCAS scores immediately went up, but so too did parent concerns about placement and access to services.

It was at this point, later in 2012, that the special educators realized that the full inclusion model had many benefits in terms of student achievement on state testing, but had missed the mark for meeting students' individualized needs. They had to break themselves out of traditional thinking, which meant breaking themselves out of the traditional models used to educate students with disabilities.

Through many conversations and much collaboration, the team decided to try a new approach: a hub model that took the best aspects of both the self-contained and inclusion models while also mitigating their deficits. They piloted the hub model first with the freshmen students with autism, and the program remains in place today.

Each of these students begins their days reporting to a hub classroom staffed by a special education teacher and support staff. Students check-in for the day and receive direct instruction in social skills. If a student's anxiety is such that they cannot yet attend classes, they may remain in the hub until they are ready to move on with their day. They then move onto traditional classrooms, all the while reporting back for a hub period two to three times a day.

All told, the students spend about half of their days in traditional classes and half of their days in their hub classroom to get one-on-one and totally customized support and guidance. As students move through grade levels, the focus is on increasing independence and decreasing supports. A freshman may report to the hub three times per day, while a senior may report only once every other day or not at all.

The co-teachers (who are distinct from the hub teachers) are dedicated to co-planning and co-delivering content with a content area teacher in classrooms with students with disabilities. The two teachers work closely and have managed to achieve the gold standard of inclusion instruction: if you walk into a co-taught class at Brockton High School, you would struggle to discern which teacher is which. They seamlessly trade off instruction throughout the class. Thanks to guidance from the special education teachers, the content teachers are skilled in strategies to reach special education students, as well.

The co-teachers and hub teachers function as the direct link to their students' parents. This has opened up lines of communication between special education teachers and parents, which has been further enhanced through the adoption of student information software. This student information system allows special education teachers to monitor all of their students' progress daily. Real-time data informs their

collaboration with hub and co-teachers, shows when an intervention is needed, and drives personalized instruction and intervention. They can also see where and how a student is progressing on all assignments. The software provides actionable and improvement data that is regularly shared with all stakeholders, including students and parents.

Taking the best from the self-contained model, the hub model still leaves room for all students to receive a variety of ancillary services as needed. Because all special education students will start out reporting to their hub classrooms at least twice a day, they have at least two opportunities a day for the kind of support they need, when they need it. Such ancillary supports include: therapeutic counseling, academic success monitoring, emotional success monitoring, and life skills learning.

The power of the hub model is that special education students are not relegated to an isolated learning experience. Every day, they integrate and interact with their classmates in traditional classes. They are all encouraged to join clubs and organizations that appeal to their interests, academic needs, and emotional growth. Such activities offer yet one more way these students can engage with the rest of the school population and feel as much a part of the school's rich history and proud spirit as the rest. Yet, thanks to the hub model, every day they each still access customized supports on a nearly on-demand basis, and they get to do this without feeling ostracized.

The hub model creates opportunities for students to practice and enhance self-advocacy. To optimize the potential of the model, included in student support time are exercises on how to identify their needs, articulate them, and vocalize them to get heard. In general, Brockton High School's students with disabilities have developed a great comfort with self-advocacy, discussing their disability, and boundary setting.

Brockton High School saw such success with the hub model pilot for freshmen with autism that they have since expanded the model to include students with emotional impairment disabilities and specific learning disabilities. Currently, a team is preparing to implement the model focused on freshmen with mild to moderate learning disabilities. They have identified this cohort of students as having challenges transitioning to high school due, in general, to a lack of confidence, academic skills, and motivation. As they implement the hub model for this segment of entering freshmen next year, supports will aim to address these issues specifically to ease each student's social and academic transition into Brockton High School.

*Everyone Has Potential. It's Our Job to Find a Way to Help Them Reach It.*

The first hub model pilot was necessarily slow and steady. It's a high resource program, which means growth is dependent not only upon careful and thoughtful planning, but also on finding appropriate and sufficient resources. Yet, given their commitment to all students' achievement, Brockton would not settle for ignoring special education students not in the pilot program. So they continued to develop and hone other creative ways to reach them.

One of those was the life skills model for all of Brockton's students with significant cognitive disabilities. The point of this model is to provide for these students opportunities to learn the career and life skills that will help them specifically develop into individuals capable of contributing to the community and providing

for themselves. Students in this program learn and practice life and career skills both in the classroom and in the field; each is set up with a job at a local business. They will spend 20 of their school hours per week working at establishments such as Home Depot, supermarkets, and other community work sites. While in school, they participate in courses of daily living skills, personal/social skills, and occupational guidance and preparation, which they can then apply directly to their post-secondary goals for work and living. Brockton High School and these students take great pride in reporting that many students in this program continue to work at their jobs well after graduation.

Boxer Buddies is another program created to focus on Brockton's special education students' emotional wellbeing and transitions into and throughout high school. Peer mentors apply to become a "buddy" to a student with significant cognitive disabilities. The buddies are partnered for support, mentorship, and friendship. The program has a long history and is known for offering a rewarding and character building experience for everyone involved.

### *Start from a Realistic Place—and Give Up on No One*

As a baseline, the department is dedicated to preparing each student for independence, self-sufficiency, and all the confidence needed to get there. The net effect is a department that feels more like a caring community than one comprised of individual teachers. Its entire team feels united in existing to help their students grow emotionally and socially.

Teachers found that the way IEPs had historically been used were not in the best interests of their students. They were creating too many academic goals for the students, which was overwhelming to them, in some cases unrealistic, not personalized to each individual's needs, and was taking too much time from focusing on targeted improvements. In short, IEPs had not shaped up to meaningful documents used to individualize learning for students. Instead, they moved their focus to the assurance that goals, services, and accommodations were matched to the students' disability rather than a laundry list of interventions.

In another bold move, the teachers decided to pare down the accommodations in each IEP to no more than five. The result are IEPs that are clearer to understand, actually expediting students' academic achievement (as they are meeting all students where they are and delivering more targeted instruction and interventions), and alleviating frustrations that had been weighing down teachers, students, and parents. Improved achievement results are also boosting student confidence across the board.

## **THE IMPACT**

Recently, a senior named Rafael (name changed), who is served in the Autism Spectrum Disorder Hub, approached the Department Head of Special Education to share some news.

"Do you know that I just had my very last IEP meeting?" Rafael said. "Do you know that it turns out I do not need an IEP but a 504 plan?"

The Department Head asked, "Oh, really? So, you no longer have autism?"

Rafael responded, “Oh, no. I will always have autism. Autism is who I am and it will never go away. But I have learned how to manage my autism and how to live with it, so I won’t be needing the IEP anymore. I am a success story here at Brockton High School, and I will be ok to advocate for myself at college.”

Rafael is a success story indeed—and one of many that exemplify similar kinds of growth through the hub model at Brockton. Time and time again, the hub model has done its job to help students understand their disabilities, manage their disabilities, and advocate for themselves. The result is scores of students maturing their relationships with their disabilities and themselves and growing in self-reliance. Once established as responsible and appropriate, their teachers and support teams scale down the level of support and hand more self responsibility over to students—multiplying their already expanding confidence that much more.

Rafael will go onto a community college with the goal of transitioning to a four-year college. This plan has been carefully constructed and pursued since he began his career at Brockton High.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Are we truly reaching all of our students with disabilities and IEP students? Is our special education department and instructional model organized in a way that can individualize instruction and supports to every last student?
2. In terms of devising an effective model for our students with disabilities, is our thinking too rigid? If so, why? Where does it need to be more flexible and open?
3. Are our goals for our students with disabilities realistic? Are they too stringent or rigorous such that they have become counterproductive? Where can changing them make them more productive and appropriate to students?
4. Have we given up on any of our students with disabilities? Why? How can we change our attitudes to believe in all of them and meet all of their needs? Do our goals need to change so that every student is given a fair shot at success in meeting them?



