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How Public School Districts Can Support 2e Learners

👤 Callie Turk 🕒 April 17, 2020 📁 Teaching & Learning

Heads or tails? The odds of meeting the educational needs of twice-

 Teacher with kids in anatomy lesson

exceptional (2e) children can feel like a coin toss. A recent online poll of 2e parents about school choices for their 2e kids split almost evenly between those saying public school failed them and those responding that public school has been great.

To ensure more 2e children have the chance to thrive in school, we've coalesced the top tips from educational leaders in public school organizations with established programs for twice-exceptional students: Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, and Aurora Public Schools in Colorado. We also sought perspectives from officials at the Colorado Department of Education, whose guidebooks for working with 2e students are broadly used.

Public schools that support 2e learners shine as beacons of hope for 2e families. They mobilize and encourage their teachers to be their best. They spark their students' strengths and give them something to reach for. They live and breathe equity.

Build a strong foundation

All of the school districts we interviewed have programmatic foundations for supporting twice-exceptional students: defined processes and programs, district staff dedicated to 2e students, websites with extensive resources, online and in-person professional development for educators, school-based support, and detailed handbooks outlining strategies for identifying and working 2e learners.

The handbooks in particular give their organizations a common language and understanding. The Fairfax County handbook “provides awareness that our district has a philosophy and belief system about supporting 2e students,” said Kirsten Maloney, K–12 coordinator of advanced academic programs for the county. “It’s a touchstone for parents, teachers, and administrators — a common language and way to think about high expectations for students, our beliefs about what 2e students can do, and how we help each student maximize their potential to be prepared for their future.”

Go deep and broad with professional learning

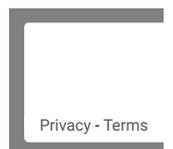
These organizations don’t just offer “one-and-done” professional development; they focus on multiple options to fit teachers’ needs. Flexibility is key, according to Dr. Cynthia Rundquist, coordinator of the twice-exceptional project for the Colorado Department of Education. “Ground your system in flexibility to provide right-place, right-time professional development to support the needs of individuals,” she said.

But Colorado faces geographical challenges, making it difficult to schedule in-person workshops. “Creating online workshops opens opportunity for participation — without educators having to drive or impacting time with students,” Rundquist said. “Plus, the educators are appreciative that they can get credit or recertification hours.” In addition, Colorado leaders encourage flexible participation in 2e professional development, including whole school teams and small teams within a school. “Collaboration among different professionals — classroom teachers, gifted ed teachers, special education professionals, psychologists, counselors, and administrators — is crucial to support these learners,” she said.

Beth Baldwin, middle school specialist in the advanced academic office from Fairfax County, designed the district’s Understanding and Supporting Twice Exceptional Learners course, which she co-teaches with a special education colleague. The district offers gifted education courses and a professional endorsement. Her team “weaves 2e content into as many professional learning opportunities as possible,” she said, “so not just the 2e-specific professional development but all of the district’s gifted courses as well.”

The Fairfax County central office team also conducts classroom observations, individual consultations with teachers, and job-embedded coaching, so that teachers experience in the moment support and modeling of best practices.

Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate



Every leader emphasized the importance of collaboration between the special education and advanced academic programs departments. This partnership covers everything from identifying 2e students to co-teaching staff development and providing role models for site-based teamwork. Carol Dallas, Aurora Public Schools gifted and talented coordinator, argues that the best information for identifying 2e learners is very often in special education records.

“We really made headway when we collaborated,” she said. “Their records were loaded with indicators of giftedness. We could see from test results that there was something to look for and then could compare the notes with the gifted traits and behaviors list; teachers would see something like being argumentative as a behavioral issue, but combining that information showed twice-exceptional learners. If you don’t have that collaboration, I don’t think you really have a chance.”

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Mike Bloom, Fairfax County director of special education instruction, said a key to their success has been the close collaboration between his office and the Office of Advanced Academic Programs; they act together to provide professional development, consultations with school teams, and job-embedded coaching. “Doing this together has really made a difference in the teachers’ ability to have a greater understanding of the needs of our twice-exceptional learners,” he said. His colleague Maloney emphasized the potential of these partnerships, “We’re hopeful our professional development shows how such a partnership can and should be replicated at the school level and that teachers embrace a collaborative approach,” she said.

Engage with parents

Across the board, districts who support teachers in their work with 2e learners actively welcome parent involvement. Bloom pointed to this collaboration as being a key to success, highlighting aspects such as “transparency, open communication, listening to the stories that parents share about their children’s needs, and being responsive to develop a collaborative plan.

“Parents also help get the word out and build the trust of the community,” she said. “The biggest win-win is collaboration and partnership with the families.” Montgomery County’s Kurshan, who supervises the Accelerated and Enriched Instruction division, described this collaborat

important piece of the puzzle. “We’re fortunate to have strong parent advocacy in our school system that helps us to elevate this message and conversation,” she said.

Provide resources for universal, localized screening

With increasing demands, it isn’t realistic for teachers alone to identify, understand, and respond to the complexity of strengths and struggles they encounter in each child. Districts who support teachers in their work with 2e learners provide resources to develop a more “whole child” view to cover a much broader body of evidence.

Sarah Jackson, an instructional specialist in the accelerated and enriched instruction division in Montgomery County, works with schools to observe classrooms and partner with teachers.

“The first thing is to identify kids appropriately. It can’t just be advocacy of parents or teachers; it needs to be more grounded,” she said. “We are a large county with pockets of diversity across different schools. Make sure you’re looking at your schools themselves and not the blanket of the whole county or district to be sure there is equitable identification of students.

“In our district, identification is not based on teacher recommendation but universal screening; we look at our students holistically.”

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Aurora initiated a pilot program to move beyond national norms in identifying children with high potential. The initiative addresses underrepresentation of the district’s diverse populations, including ethnic minorities, students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, and others. “When you identify the top five percent in every single school, those are the kids who are being under-challenged,” said Dallas, the school system’s G&T coordinator. “Through this process, we closed all kinds of equity gaps — more girls, more second language learners, and more twice-exceptional children. We had gifted children out there who we just weren’t capturing. It was frustrating for us and our teachers.”

Focus on strengths

All leaders note the importance of helping teachers lead with the child’s strengths while also supporting challenges. “You need a strength-based approach,” Dean said. “There has been a lot of deficit thinking around our 2e children — not about what they can do, moreso what they can’t.”

Dallas concurred. “The default was to go to the disability,” she said. “Now we use our process to help teachers run with the strength, to see how far these students can go. We have to support the need and program for the strength. When you have those programs and services in balance, that’s when a child is really going to thrive.”

Fairfax County’s Baldwin emphasized the importance of building teachers’ understanding of and belief in the kids’ abilities. “The biggest takeaway from our 2e course is the need for strengths-based instruction and building strong relationships with 2e students,” she said. “We want teachers to allow students to use their exceptional strengths while providing necessary accommodations for their areas of challenge. Some of these kids can be quirky; we want teachers to remember the importance of appreciating and celebrating what these students can bring to the learning community.”

Keep at it — it’s all about equity

With so many states and districts dismantling gifted programs, what really drives these dedicated professionals? Equity.

“This is as much an equity issue as any equity issue in the country,” Dallas said. “This is where I get emotional. This is what hurts my heart. Twice-exceptional students in particular can slip through the cracks and be the ones that don’t want to go to school, don’t graduate. It can be disastrous.

“Yet those are the students who are going to cure cancer or move tech forward. Twice-exceptional children have real intensities. We have to identify and provide services for those strengths. Otherwise, we’re just leaving a diamond stuck in the ground. That’s the future of humanity. Mine it. And the way you mine is you program for it.”



Fairfax County leaders put a huge lens on equity in their advanced academic programs because they fear the loss of talent if public schools don't recognize that every student has their own unique profile.

“One of the greatest areas of impact is on the social emotional well-being of our 2e learners,” Fairfax’s Bloom said. “Without the proper supports that help our students with disabilities to access a rigorous curriculum, there are greater instances of anxiety, a higher level of frustration in the classroom, which potentially leads to increased behavioral challenges, a decrease in motivation, and lower expectations of our students with disabilities.”

Bloom said that providing curriculum at the student’s academic level while also offering proper supports and accommodations raises expectations.

“It shows our students that they have a voice in their learning,” he said. “They know that they have a team of educators that are on their side, interested in their strengths and abilities, committed to providing instruction at an advanced level that will motivate and help them to reach their potential.”

Montgomery County’s Dean and Jackson echoed this sentiment.

“If we don’t build on their abilities at a young age, they’re not going to grow like other students,” they said. “We have to educate based on what the twice-exceptional profile looks like. People get trapped in rigid, biased beliefs. They see learning difficulties and behavior challenges, and then some of these children are impacted by poverty on top of learning challenges. So we find ourselves being warriors around equity when we talk about twice-exceptional.”

And the hard work pays off. Colorado’s state data shows an increase in the identification of 2e learners as well as achievement since their project started. According to Rundquist, the percentages of 2e students who scored in the exceeded expectations range has gone up four percent in math and five percent in English language arts. “Just like any special population, 2e learners need accommodations and modifications to develop their talents,” she said.

Spread the wisdom

In this era where equity is so pressing, it’s important that these insights aren’t limited to just a handful of schools. “When teachers come to my trainings, I tell them, ‘Now that you have this knowledge, advocacy becomes part of your job,’” Jackson said.

It's incumbent on all of us to disseminate these lessons broadly so that more 2e learners land on the better side of the coin.

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About Callie Turk

Callie Turk co-founded and leads REEL (Resilience and Engagement for Every Learner), an advocacy group building bridges between twice-exceptional learners, their parents, and educators in Silicon Valley. In this work, she draws on her 15-plus year career working with ed tech companies and school districts at the cutting edge of educator and professional learning. Callie received her MBA from Stanford University and BS from Miami University (Ohio). She can be reached at callie@reelpaloalto.org.

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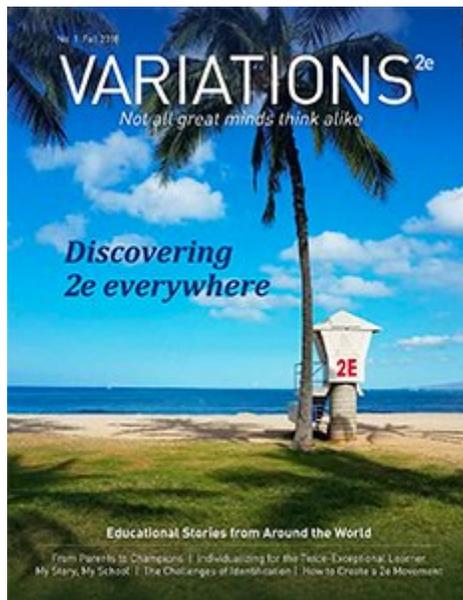
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