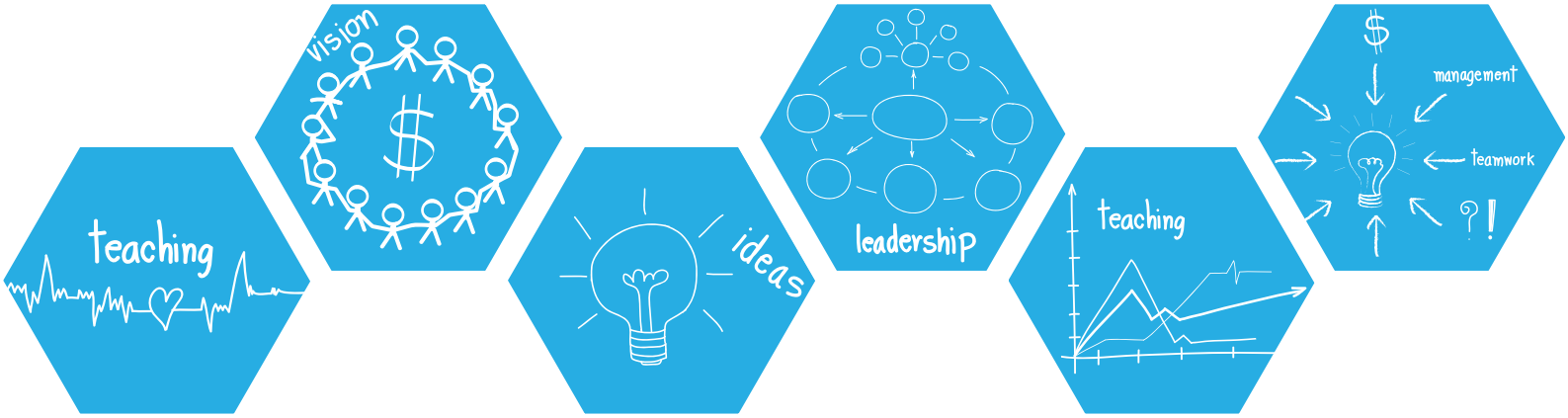

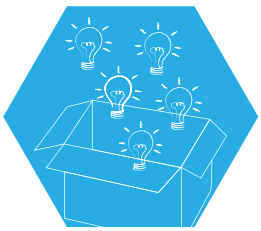

Transforming Special Education in a Challenging Fiscal Environment

Practical strategies around staffing, service delivery options and budgeting that can help district leaders lead meaningful change

PresenceLearning
Live Online Special Education Services

Executive Summary

While 13% of US students receive special education services, districts spend 20-30% of their budgets delivering these services. Despite this sizable spending, significant evidence suggests that special education often falls short of stakeholders' expectations. How can superintendents get more engaged and lead transformation in this often-confounding area rather than just continuing "business as usual?" This whitepaper will present practical strategies around staffing, service delivery options and budgeting that can help district leaders lead meaningful change.

Material for this document was drawn from a webinar featuring Peter Bittel, the co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Futures HealthCore, a company providing special education, clinical services and management and Dr. Nicholas Young, Superintendent of South Hadley Public Schools in South Hadley, MA. Prior to that, Dr. Young was the Superintendent of Schools in neighboring Hadley, MA.

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Special education has become a highly complex challenge.

The State of Special Education Programming

Meeting the needs of students with learning challenges and disabilities—the entire topic of special education—is becoming an increasingly hot discussion among school administrators. Superintendents and other district leaders are actively engaged in strategies to make special education more efficient and effective. Special education has become a highly complex challenge. There is increased accountability on superintendents to transform special education programs at the same time as schools have experienced significant budget cuts. The combination of increased accountability from federal mandates, the growing need in the student population, plus budget cuts has created the perfect storm of SPED challenges for district leaders.

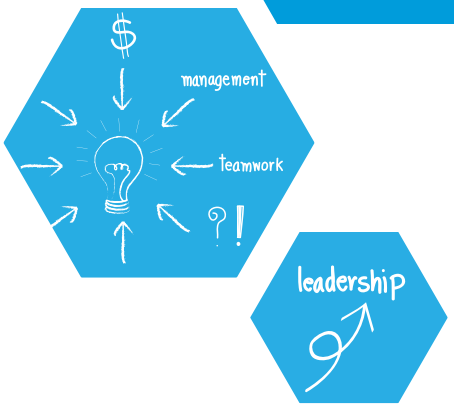
In fact, the cost of special education is huge. I think district leaders know this, but the big picture of what we are spending to meet our commitment to educate all students is alarming to many people. We are spending over 100 billon dollars annually for special education. Districts spend 20-30% of their total budget on SPED. And because of mandates, policies and demands from all sorts of agencies, growth in the cost for special education is at the expense of investments in general education.

With all this investment, the question is, are we really getting the desired results in student success? Statistics aren't promising. 40% of SPED students don't graduate. 49% of emotionally disabled students drop out of school before completing their education. And a very alarming point, more than 1 in 4 SPED students never hold a job or enroll in any college program after leaving school.

With this backdrop, every educator recognizes there is a need for change and many experts believe that this change must come from the top. Superintendents can lead change in our schools when it comes to special education and they can do so with a range of strategies. They can seek advice. They can shift programs currently in their schools. They have the option of taking some new fiscal approaches, and by all means, school administrators don't need to do it alone. They can, and should, consider engaging parents and stakeholders.

Wrangling the SPED budget in our new fiscal reality means tackling three key strategies, a three-legged stool of leadership, human resource policies, and data utilization. Leaving out one leg can cause budget instability or even collapse. It is a real challenge. Some might even call it a conundrum.

While a district special education director is typically considered the SPED leader, in today's environment, this role increasingly needs to be part of the district CEO's job.



The Superintendent as SPED Leader

District superintendents are facing a conundrum. They are trying to manage programs and create an environment in which SPED decisions maximize the use of district resources while meeting the needs of all students. While a district special education director is typically considered the SPED leader, in today's environment, this role increasingly needs to be part of the district CEO's job.

The CEO's job has changed significantly. Superintendents find themselves in a balancing act between providing high quality services to students and ensuring that it's done in a fiscally responsible way. Superintendents answer to a diverse public with varied and sometimes competing agendas. What is important is creating a collaborative culture. We understand that having this conversation is challenging, but we need to balance the needs of all the stakeholders in order to address the important needs of the students. So really focusing on this collaborative culture is critical. We appreciate that collaboration does not come naturally or easily, and that the challenges facing superintendents in the oversight of special education programs are many.

The general education staff must understand the needs of special education students. Promoting the collaborative spirit between regular and special education is an essential part of our overall success as we try and meet the needs of students. So we understand that we need to build staff appreciation of special education services, that they are provided on a temporary basis with very specific goals. The idea is to transition students back to regular education as soon as possible. In order to do that, we have to make some changes to our pedagogy and our instructional approaches so that our goals can be very realistic in special education and very attainable and quantifiable. Overall we want to create a valid system of accountability that goes beyond assessment and that strengthens the partnership between regular and special education.

It is necessary to begin to make forward progress in this area. We have learned from working with over 300 school districts that the more special education is separate from general education, the more expensive it is and the less effective it is. Everybody is responsible for the education of all the children. Special education is not a place; it is a service for the general curriculum. It is important for regular and special education to work together, and that conceptually, people are on board. But as you begin to develop programs that really require close-knit collaboration, people really have to put their shoulder to the wheel at times and that begins to break down some of those collaborations.

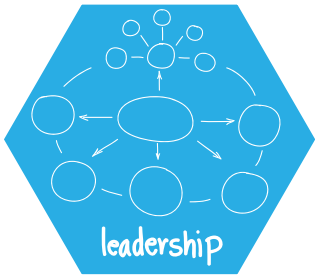
There are a variety of things that special educators have been successful doing to improve collaboration. Obviously it's about talking to your colleagues in general education. Inclusion-based programs also tend to break down the silo effect. In many cases when we have students who are supported by both general education and special education, we have a situation where there is more communication about the work of both. We should be offering many more graduation award ceremonies that involve kids with special needs that are shared by general education and special education. And certainly the involvement in parent engagement is an essential ingredient here.

Part of this is avoiding the silence of special education—what happens on the "dark side" is not something that we talk about. One of the problems we have in special education is we haven't articulated our value well enough and the positive effect we have on kids.

It is important for the administration and the community to help the school system move in this direction. Senior leaders need to communicate to the community at large that it is important to have these collaborations in order to strengthen the programs for all students. This really emanates from the top and works its way down through the levels of administration. We should create opportunities to recognize staff members who have been successful in working across the regular and special education divide.

We should acknowledge teachers. Annual recognition is a great way to highlight that we value this kind of collaboration. As we move in this direction of teacher accountability nationwide, as we approach teacher evaluation systems, accountability is partially linked to student success on standardized measures. Certainly in the Race to the Top States, that program will be a catalyst to strengthen ties between regular and special education. Ownership for student achievement is going to be much more closely shared now rather than being more siloed.

How many of us have been at IEP meetings or read IEPs that really don't provide the kind of measurement and outcome data that we would like?



Special Education Human Resource Management

The evolution of special education over the past four decades has resulted in varied administrative and organizational structures within school districts. But now we are in an era where there is a wide acceptance among district leaders of the need for a learning organization. A learning organization is an environment espoused by educational leaders, like Rick DuFour—the creation of professional learning communities where staff and administrators work together to achieve exceptional performance, even in the face of obstacles. Human resource management then becomes a big part of the leadership challenge.

Special education directors arguably have one of the worst jobs in the education system. It's a very challenging role and this leader has to be able to not only operate things on a daily basis, sometimes with a great deal of crisis attached to it, but also must have a vision of what the future should look like and how we should all work together.

The culture in schools, particularly schools that support special education well, are cultures that are built upon inclusiveness and involvement by everybody in the decision-making process. Decisions are based upon metrics and outcomes. How many of us have been at IEP meetings or read IEPs that really don't provide the kind of measurement and outcome data that we would like?

One of the problems we have in special education is that there is considerable variation from district to district in the utilization of related services – speech pathology, psychology and social work. Establishing entrance and exit criteria can significantly can change the opportunity for the district to operate those programs.

We also know there is considerable variation from district to district in utilization of paraprofessional staff, and certainly, the

discharge of those who are exiting from paraprofessional programs. And again, metrics and entrance and exit criteria are essential in this part of the discussion. We also know that in districts, often within the same district, there are a wide variety of practice patterns for the person writing the IEP, the case manager, the team chair, and the IEP coordinator. This varies considerably from building to building and district to district. Again, if we establish a culture, metrics, and outcomes, some of that starts to change. This is a struggle in the field. We come from a world that has been heavily driven by compliance measurements. Did the IEP get out in time? Did Mom read the IEP? Did she sign it? We have been much less focused on successful outcomes in many cases. School communities and learning communities have moved towards performance criteria, but special education has not been as involved to this point. We have to lead, not abandon, some of our compliance issues and focus on interventions and support systems that work on behalf of children.

Focusing on the outcome measures is most critical. We often talk about the costs of services, but we don't talk about the costs that come with special education students who aren't successful in schools and go on to have all kinds of challenges. So it has come upon us to really look at this organizational capacity in a very serious way.

Relative to paraprofessionals, there are students who benefit from paraprofessional services. But we have a challenge in special education. We don't necessarily view paraprofessionals as the original intent for providing special education services. They were designed to be short term rather than long-term kinds of services. School systems rarely have clearly established criteria for the use of paraprofessional services. We have a broad sense about when a paraprofessional may be useful. We suggest establishing criteria to determine when using paraprofessional services is necessary and effective. We want to be sure that paraprofessional services, in particular, do not become a social roadblock or a support service that is not effective in terms of application of resources. We want to make sure that we have criteria for determining when paraprofessionals should be employed, but also as equally, if not even more importantly, that we have some criteria of when those services should be retracted. This idea of focusing around metrics, really being concerned about outcome measures and being comfortable with the idea of collecting and analyzing data to determine the most effective services is something that warrants serious consideration

within the context of our field.
There are a number of children who absolutely need the support of paraprofessionals. But it was not designed to be a lasting part of our delivery system. If Peter is having trouble in this particular part of the classroom, we will provide him a paraprofessional for the short term to get over a set of bumps, and measure that, and then go on to the next step. The elasticity is far too often moved to a sense of rigidness inside a school district. If we started out with 40 paraprofessionals last year, we will have 40 plus the next year, as opposed to that number going up and down and based upon the needs of the students.

We do ourselves no favors when we meet with parents at IEP meetings and we don't provide them with time limits. Peter will have a paraprofessional for the next two months. He will graduate from speech therapy in six months to five years. The perception then, when we start to change that service and support system, is that parents perceive us engaging in a takeaway and do not understand how we got there. The issue of expectations needs to be managed more effectively in our communication with parents and students.

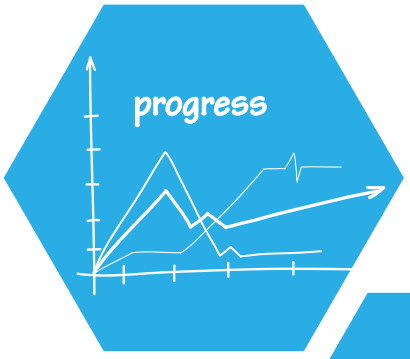
This idea that more services are always better is something that needs to be challenged. We need to take a serious look at the type of supports that are needed and become much better at providing, in a surgical way, the specific type of support that is needed at that moment in time. We need to be clear as a team when those kinds of services should be reduced or modified to meet the ever changing developmental needs of the student.

Paraprofessionals being assigned to students and to schools and typically growing over time is well documented. Yet, we do know there are limitations with the application of paraprofessionals. When paraprofessional services are provided for students who do not necessarily benefit from them, there are social isolation implications. There is not a lot of data to support that the use of a paraprofessional actually results in higher academic achievement. There are a lot of different ways we can look at this, but at the end of the day we need to look at outcome measures—the results in student academic achievement. We need to use the data and our lengthy experience with special education services to raise questions about what is in the best interest of students, long term, and to find a way to be comfortable raising those questions and

have it not be controversial.

One of the main goals of special education is to prepare our citizens to have a fruitful and productive life. That gets us into the topic area of transition service. Paraprofessionals pay close attention to this part of the discussion. It is hard to conceive that utilization of paraprofessionals in the way we have formatted it in many of our schools prepare students for an independent life of transition into the mainstream of society after age 21. So we have to understand and engage our goals, not just occurring in the school building but also occurring after school.

The urgency to utilize data more effectively is certainly apparent in special education.



Effective Use of Special Education Data Systems

Data helps district leaders determine policies and practices they will use to meet mandates and demands for accountability. The urgency to utilize data more effectively is certainly apparent in special education. We have lots of data, but most of it remains unused, and as such is rarely helpful in changing the way we deliver special education services.

As school administrators and special education leaders, we have to become more comfortable with using data to inform decisions. In special education there are a variety of ways we collect data. We have individual assessment data for students which is used to guide decisions around whether special education services are necessary. However, we often stop at that point and we don't collect the kind of information that's meaningful across the entire special education program.

Establishing a culture where data can be collected, analyzed, and used to guide larger programs and decisions is really an important thing. We need to become comfortable with the idea of sharing information with students and with parents in order to guide our decisions. The idea of intermittently collecting information on how a paraprofessional is being used for particular students or being employed in a program and how that is resulting in improvements in student academic performance is just one example.

We can also collect data on how many personnel we have for a particular number of students in comparison to other schools and programs with similar demographics to make some comparisons. We can take a look at the data from professional associations on how we use speech therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, and so forth. I know as I raise those points broadly in the field and with special educators in particular, it raises all kinds of questions.

Just starting to recognize that there is merit in collecting, analyzing and using data to drive decision-making in a meaningful way is something that we would encourage. It needs to become part of our common vernacular and become part of how we make informed decisions within our field. The idea is to collect multiple measures to identify what services are needed and what services a particular school should provide. And we also should use data to guide decisions around how to effectively manage the limited resources we have available for students.

School systems become large families. Large families often want to overlook data because they want to protect existing positions and programs rather than try to morph into the kinds of programs that are needed at any particular point in time. Take a cautionary note that it is very difficult to generalize in this context, but it is something to be mindful of as we look at how to improve special education programs, school-by-school, district-by-district.

In many districts data is not thought through. How many children entered the speech therapy program in your district last year? How many children exited the speech therapy program? How many paraprofessionals were added to the delivery system? How many children exited paraprofessional delivery systems? We are not easily handling that data and communicating it among a variety of participants, and data should be benchmarks of how we achieve success.

A problem in districts is comparing to other districts. State reports are significantly different from one state to the other. Yet we can all learn a lot from the models of other districts and the success of their programs. We certainly have to detach ourselves emotionally from the data. When teams begin to collect and analyze data there is often a desire to have a preconceived outcome to protect teaching positions or therapist positions. So the data analysis is often focused on the staff rather than about providing the best services for students or the most cost effective way to approach special education delivery.

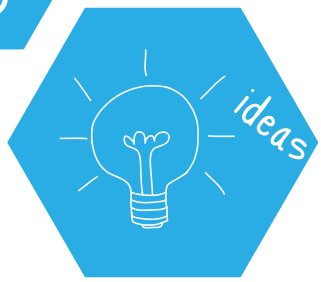
We have got to find a way to become very objective with the way we collect and analyze data and not let our family orientation impact how we interpret results. If we can step back for a moment between our respective schools, we can collect meaningful information about how many service providers we have, what are their particular case loads, how are we most effectively and efficiently addressing the individual needs of students, and what kinds of services might we need that we don't have. It's not all about cost containment, it's also about cost shifting that is warranted and as the information suggests.

There is an appreciation for the importance of collecting and analyzing data. That is a huge step in the right direction, but then we have to be able to agree on what data makes the most sense. I was recently examining paraprofessional data for a district that has about three times more paraprofessionals than any other school district of its size in one state. I could not help but raise questions about whether that was effective, particularly in light of the fact that there were more teachers than typical and the academic achievement of special education students was less than expected given the demographics. It was the data that allowed for significant conversation about the way this particular district is approaching special education. They have been using an overwhelming inclusive model and missed some opportunities to offer more pinpointed intervention services. They can use comparisons to ensure that they are every bit successful as other districts in the region with similar demographics. We have a topic that is critical and essential to examine and be comfortable with as we look collectively to improve our field.

The data problem also speaks to our culture. If we have a culture of looking for best practice, we welcome data from other districts about how they are performing and how they are performing differently from how we perform. Often times that is not well received in comparison districts. We gave an example of a district with a significant number of paraprofessionals in comparison to other districts. The comparison data and practice pattern was received with a great deal of defensiveness. As I began to raise questions and explore the data very publicly I got all kinds of questions from paraprofessionals looking to protect their positions. And I got questions from teachers looking to retain support services in their classrooms even at times when there wasn't compelling

information to suggest that its was the best decision for their students. Again, it's that family orientation that's protecting the relationships we establish within our schools. At times the culture overrides what's most effective for students and what we are able to sustain and support in the context of the fiscal realities that we are all forced to work within.

We are in a crisis in America for public education. Schools do not have enough money.



Addressing Special Education Budget Challenges

For many of you there is a budgeting scenario that plays out all to often. The superintendent meets with the school board to discuss how to get the job done and increasingly, that means doing more with less. What's been happening in recent years with all the federal mandates and regulations is that special education costs keep going up and budgets keep going down. Addressing this budget issue is a big leadership challenge.

Across the country there has been a significant increase over the last ten years in special education budgets, both in real dollars and as a percentage in general education budget. We are in a crisis in America for public education. Schools do not have enough money. We can talk about this from the point of view of recession. We can talk about this from the point of view that charter schools are bleeding off public school resources. We can look at it in terms of the legacy costs that exist for retirement and health insurance for many states and districts. Regardless, it is hard to imagine that this budget issue is going to work itself out over a short period of time.

We are also faced with a problem in special education budgets. The superintendent would usually say, I don't know what this special education director wants, but I know that I have to provide the service no matter what he or she is asking me to do. As practitioners know, that is simply not the case. There are a variety of ways to go solve problems. We are faced with an increasing challenge in our communities of making our special education dollars transparent and real to the community, and we are doing it now at a time when community hostility towards special education in general, and some kids with disabilities specifically, is heat-

ing up. For instance, we often hear the word encroachment. There is concern that special education is encroaching on general education dollars. SPED is taking away resources that general education students should have. This is a very difficult area. The solution, and I'm not trying to be simplistic, is to design budgets that are defensible, transparent, make sense, and to talk about the strengths and weaknesses. We can also look for opportunities to supplement some of our dollars through Medicaid billing. We should look at ways of reducing our special education population appropriately, because there certainly are districts with a disproportionate number of children inside special education.

We're often asked to give examples of how districts can use data to change the way they allocate SPED resources. There's an example of a district where we were taking a look at the level of speech therapy services. It's a district that has had declining enrollment, yet has significantly more speech therapists per student than any other district I can find—by twice as much. The speech therapists are very lovely, capable people, and very confident professionals, but their jobs had been shrinking in terms of the need for their services, so they began to span out and take on things that weren't related to speech therapy to fill their time. And again, it was out of a desire to retain those personnel rather than to consider how the district would benefit from significant remediation services for regular education students who were at some risk. There were a series of positions that really needed to be retracted over time because they were no longer necessary.

I think if we are comfortable with this idea of using data to drive decisions and we do an analysis of our service providers, of our number of teachers and paraprofessionals, we can find other ways to utilize and recapture some of these funds to promote other kinds of programs that are more geared towards the contemporary need for students. We could go on and on about those kinds of examples. I am hinting about how this is done. It is done through a careful analysis of what the needs are of the students—through a careful comparative analysis. You get benchmark information from professional associations, from comparisons with other school districts and with examination of best practices. With many instances we find that what we have done is rather than have zero-based budgeting, meaning we budget based on the needs of students, we have budgeted based on the needs of our personnel, regardless at times of the needs of the students.

As I mentioned before, there are three immediate areas that have a significant impact on special education budgets. One is the utilization of related services or clinical services. Many districts have moved into a private or public partnership with close performance contracting that immediately removes a great deal of the legacy costs and includes the metric outcome measurements that we are looking for in that delivery system. The second is the area of para-professional resources. In many of the districts we work with, this resource has undergone significant growth for a variety of reasons. Up until recently, paraprofessionals were used as an inexpensive part of the delivery system, when in fact it actually isn't because of the legacy costs. Again, many districts have gone into private/public partnerships of thinking about ways to manage the paraprofessionals and utilization. The third area is the practice management of the IEPs. You probably think, and I certainly would have this bias from experience, that there are a wide variety of skills in your district among the people who are writing the IEPs, and what they are looking at. Lets imagine we have a situation where Peter isn't making progress in his program. If he is not making progress in his program, is it because of Peter's inability to learn? Is it because of Peter's inability to get the resources and the right learning from the individual he is working with? Is it from the inability of the district to provide those services? Rarely do we engage in outcome measurements at those meetings, and the more we do that, the more we lead towards a discussion of the value of our interventions.

Let's close by explaining what we mean by an inclusive process for budget development and also the advantages of using an outside consultant to facilitate the process. Essentially an inclusive process allows you to collect as much information as possible, so let's just start with that piece. Certainly the special education teachers need to be involved because they give you a better sense of the needs of the students. Starting from where the students are by collecting information makes an enormous amount of sense. It is not the entire picture, but it is an important one. The special education staff is usually involved very little. That is a missed opportunity to collect information as close to the needs of the students as possible. I would promote the idea of a zero-based approach where special education staff have direct input and provide information that works its way up through the special education administration and to the school committee.

Along the way we have to have the opportunity to collect and analyze data on best practices and make comparisons. You wouldn't necessarily assume, for example, that related service providers like occupational therapists and speech therapists would be suggesting budgetary cuts to their own department or to their friend—as in the case of the example I offered where a district had declining enrollment and their needs had gone down. We have to have checks and balances, but at the same time, I think we have to be mindful in collecting as much information as we can to help us guide decision-making.

And it's also important to remember that we are very focused on special education, but special education is one piece of the budgetary pie. We talk about in districts that special education costs have crept up to 25-30% or more of the total budget. That's very significant within the overall district budget, but special education is one major driver, not the only driver, so we have to balance the special education cost against the needs for regular education and all the support that we need to manage our schools and our districts.

About the Authors

Peter J. Bittel, EdD

Peter J. Bittel, EdD is cofounder and CEO of Futures Education, a company that provides special education and clinical services and management to school districts across the country. Dr. Bittel is a speech-language pathologist with over thirty-five years of executive leadership experience in the areas of special education, rehabilitation, and developmental disabilities. He has taught at the primary, secondary, college, and graduate levels.

Nicholas Young, PhD, EdD

Dr. Nicholas Young is the Superintendent of South Hadley Public Schools in South Hadley, MA. Prior to that, Dr. Young was the Superintendent of Schools in neighboring Hadley, MA. Dr. Young holds a B.S. from Austin Peay State University and a M.A. in Clinical Psychology, a M.A. in Human Resources with a focus in Industrial and Organizational psychology, a Masters of Public Administration, a CAGS in School Psychology, and a Doctor of Education in Educational Psychology from American International College. He finished a post-doctoral fellowship in clinical psychology and earned a M.Ed. in Educational Administration and a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction at AIC. Dr. Young completed individualized graduate studies in school counseling as well as a CAGS in Educational Administration at Westfield State College before obtaining a MBA from Western New England College. Dr. Young also holds a Ph.D. from Union Institute & University with a specialization in educational administration.

About SPED Ahead

SPEDAhead offers a series of webinars and related content to school administrators and special education specialists to catalyze discussions about new ideas and promising practices that help exceptional students achieve. With a series of free interactive online events and related multimedia web-based resources, we will explore answers to tough questions and shape effective leadership strategies for addressing special needs students' challenges for literacy skills, scholastic achievement and peer relationships. For whitepapers, webinars, and podcasts, see:
http://plearn.co/sped-ahead-webinars

About Presence Learning

PresenceLearning (www.presencelearning.com) is the leading provider of online speech therapy and other special education-related services for K-12 districts and families of children with special needs. PresenceLearning's nationwide network of hundreds of highly qualified clinicians includes speech language pathologists (SLPs), occupational therapists (OTs) and other related services professionals. Therapy sessions are delivered "anytime anywhere" via live videoconferencing using the latest in evidence-based practices combined with powerful progress reporting.

Serving thousands of students in public, charter and virtual schools across the U.S. and globally, PresenceLearning has shown that online delivery of related services is practical, convenient and highly effective.

To learn more about PresenceLearning please visit our website at PresenceLearning.com.