

# The Power of Innovative Leadership

Demonstrating what's possible when a leader has a vision for change in their community.

## Background

Ralston Public Schools (RPS) has prioritized targeted learning for teachers and leaders in support of improving outcomes for all students, especially those with disabilities. To achieve this, RPS partnered with SPED Strategies over the last two years to deliver onsite engagements.

In the first year of collaboration, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning, Dr. Harley, worked closely with SPED Strategies to design and implement a sequence of learning for all staff members across the district. Dr. Harley's goal was to ensure everyone had a shared understanding and belief about inclusion.

“When we arrived in RPS, we realized that many students were being pulled from Tier 1 instruction for Tier 2 support, and the data reflected the impact of that loss. Our True North aligned with NDE's Journey to Inclusion Project: all students must have equitable access to the full rigor of grade-level instruction. **SPED Strategies helped us deliver that message and guide the transition.**”

– Dr. Harley  
Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning

Together SPED Strategies, Dr. Harley and Dr. Sara Zabrowski-Gates, Director for Teaching & Learning, organized the staff into three groups based on the grade-levels they supported. During already scheduled professional development days for the district, all staff dug into sixty minute sessions on topics including:

What is inclusive education?

Why does inclusive education matter?

How can you create the conditions for inclusive education?



## Early Learnings

The sessions received mixed reviews. Some staff were excited about the opportunity to think critically about inclusion and its role in RPS, while others wanted more time and concrete resources to do so.

With the three sessions completed, focus shifted to leaders. While educators considered their role in advancing inclusion in their classrooms, leaders were challenged to consider how they can create building wide conditions. It was at this session that a spark occurred for Mr. Knight, the Blumfield Elementary Principal. He realized that if he created space for all staff to learn together, rather than in content or grade teams, students would see increased success.

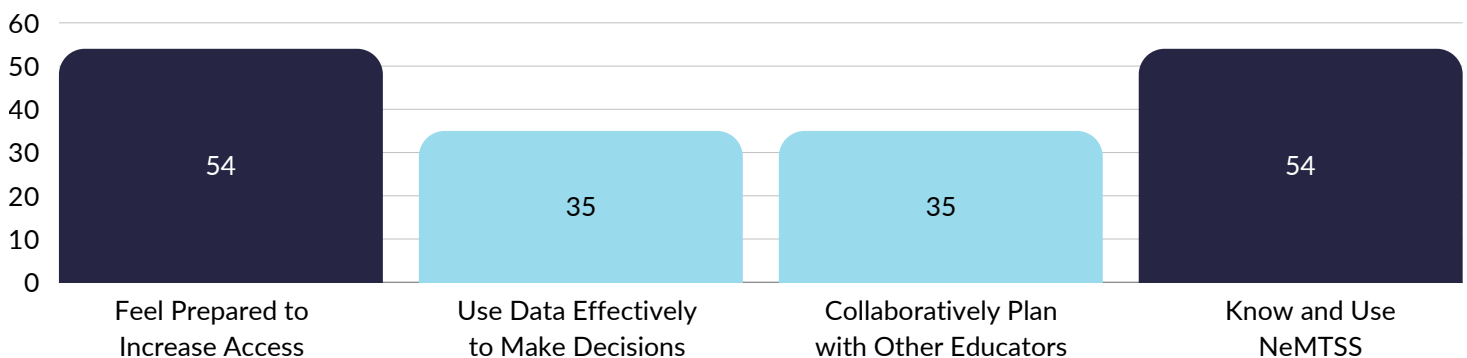
“I would love to see workshop-style sessions where we could take existing lessons/projects, etc, and apply more universal design strategies. Having the expert and colleagues there to brainstorm with instead of theoretical presentations with the expectation of doing it later on our own limited time. It would be meaningful and help us really make progress on the initiatives instead of just learning ‘about’ them.”  
- Participant

Following the leader session, Dr. Harley, Dr. Zabrowski-Gates, Mr. Knight and SPED Strategies sat down to chart a course for what would be an incredible year of learning for the Blumfield staff.

## A Vision for Change

Mr. Knight knew that in order for the initiative to be successful, his staff must have a role in designing the experience. In recognition, SPED Strategies implemented an inventory to gather insight into the staff's beliefs at the beginning of the project. This inventory assessed topics such as the ability to ensure all students access grade level learning in daily lessons and their ability to collaborate with varied staff members to ensure students with disabilities are successful.

When analyzing the results, clear focus areas emerged with only about a third or a half of the staff feeling confident in the following areas.



Using this information, SPED Strategies designed a curated series of five professional learning sessions focused on key ideas in the four focus areas. Simultaneously, Mr. Knight prioritized time in the already busy professional development schedule and the project launched.





“The time to talk in groups and take the individual lesson time to plan how to embed SPED Strategies was important for the teachers to see how to implement in real life!”  
– Participant

As the sessions were implemented, the participants expressed incredibly high levels of satisfaction. Instead of mixed results as seen in the first year, 94% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions they attended at Blumfield positively impacted their ability to meet the needs of diverse learners.

This was the impact of Blumfield staff self-identifying their areas of opportunity and the building-leaders prioritizing time to offer aligned supports.

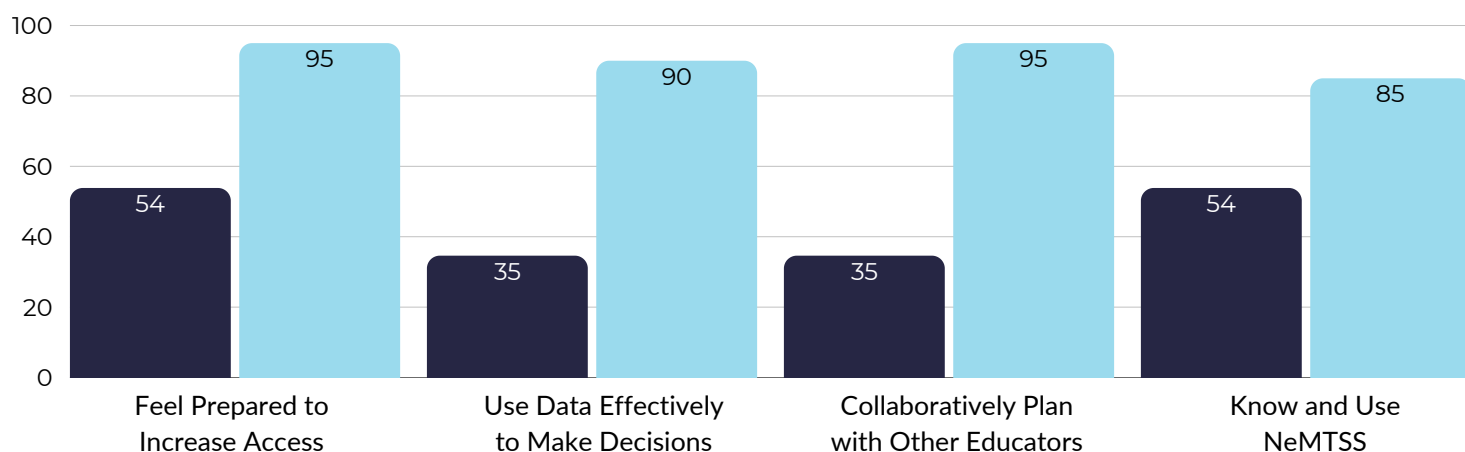
## The Results of Strategic Collaboration

At the conclusion of the series Mr. Knight and Assistant Principal Melanie Reeves had already started to see the impact on staff. Sitting in on meetings and conversations, they heard more consistent language when describing student performance and an increased desire to jump in and collaborate when designing lessons.

“Our collaboration has been better and more focused. Our conversations are healthier even when they’ve been difficult.”  
– Mr. Knight  
Blumfield Elementary Principal

But what was remarkable was what surfaced when the staff completed the inventory for a second time. When comparing the findings from the beginning of the year to the end of the series, they saw a significant increase in staff members' beliefs related to their ability to support all students in their classrooms; in some cases more than a 65% change.

● May 2024 ● January 2025



## What's Next?

Mr. Knight and the staff at Blumfield are inspired. As they look ahead to the next school year, they are equipped with a renewed sense of purpose and a shared set of strategies for collaborating in service of meeting the needs of all students.

