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Students with Unique Learning Profiles: Do Teachers Have Adequate Support?

Abundant evidence exists that teachers are the most important factor in shaping students' educational experiences and trajectories.¹ Students facing such unique educational circumstances as learning disabilities, housing instability, and exposure to poverty may particularly rely on teachers and schools for their social and educational development.²

Because support from teachers is vital to the success of students with unique learning profiles (ULPs), it is a logical next step to investigate the extent to which teachers have the help and resources they need to support such students.³ The need to understand teachers' support systems is particularly acute for teachers who work in schools with high rates of ULP students. For example, teachers working in high-poverty, predominantly urban schools often support students who not only have academic

¹ Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Rowan, Correnti, and Miller, 2002.

² Downey, von Hippel, and Broh, 2004; Stosich, 2016.

³ In the survey, students with ULPs are defined as "students living in poverty, students with disabilities, students in foster care, over-age students, or undercredited students."

In the RAND Corporation's web-based May 2017 American Educator Panel (AEP) survey, we asked a nationally representative sample of teachers to rate the sufficiency of their access to a variety of supports for helping ULP students. These supports included the following:

- leadership (e.g., key information and guidance from school or district administrators)
- school culture that promotes belonging for all students
- time (e.g., planning or release time to prepare for supporting students)
- materials and tools (e.g., curricula, activities, technology, simplified texts)
- access to staff with specific expertise within or outside of school
- access to families of ULP students
- training and information (e.g., professional development, books)
- access to student records, including learning history, areas of strength and interest, and unique social/family situations
- transition planning protocols for ULP students (e.g., for middle school to high school, for high school to postsecondary).

needs but also struggle with the social consequences of exposure to poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, and the everyday stress of living in dangerous neighborhoods.⁴ Thus, it is imperative that teachers have access to a range of on-the-job supports that better enable them to educate and empower students with ULPs.

Prior research has suggested that job-embedded support from colleagues and experts, strong instructional leadership from principals, and positive school culture are key to teachers of ULP students' performance, job satisfaction, and career longevity. In addition, prior RAND studies using nationally representative data have demonstrated that professional development and peer feedback are essential for teachers' ability to help students meet state standards for mathematics and English-language arts.⁵ However, the nationwide prevalence of supports related to planning time and materials specifically geared to the needs of ULP students is much less clear, as is our understanding of disparities in support access between teachers in schools with high versus low levels of student poverty.⁶

⁴ Berliner, 2009; Kraft et al., 2015; Rothstein, 2004; Yoshikawa, Aber, and Beardslee, 2012.

⁵ Hamilton et al., 2016; Johnston and Tsai, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2016; Prado Tuma, Hamilton, and Tsai, 2018.

⁶ Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, 2012; Ladd, 2011; Simon and Johnson, 2015.

Most Teachers Reported Having Sufficient Access to Many Forms of Support

As shown in Figure 1, we found that the vast majority of teachers who work with ULP students reported having “mostly sufficient” or “completely sufficient” access to a supportive school culture promoting belonging for all students (84 percent) and leadership support from administrators (74 percent).⁷ Many teachers (74 percent) reported sufficient access to student records. A majority of teachers also reported having sufficient access to almost all other forms of support in question, including staff with specific expertise (67 percent), materials and tools (61 percent), and families of ULP students (60 percent).

Fewer Teachers Had the Time and Training Needed to Support Students with Unique Learning Profiles

Although many forms of support appeared to be quite common, not every resource was universally available. As demonstrated in the bottom row of

⁷ Ninety-one percent of respondents said that they currently support ULP students, and all findings presented hereafter are constrained to this large subgroup of teachers.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

We examined the weighted percentages of those who support students with ULPs and those who had access to supports for students with ULPs. We also estimated weighted cross-tabulations to illuminate differences in sufficiency of support by school-level characteristics used in the linear probability models. Finally, we conducted supplemental analyses that included many additional covariates and a vector of state fixed effects to better understand whether the associations found in the primary analysis were potentially confounded by characteristics of the schools or respondents. These weighted, multivariate linear probability models included a series of demographic control variables from the National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core of Data.¹

¹ These included school-level variables, such as urbanicity; percentage free and reduced-price lunch; percentage white, black, and Hispanic; school size; an indicator for elementary school; district-level variables, such as percentage English language-learner students and special education students; and state-level fixed effects.

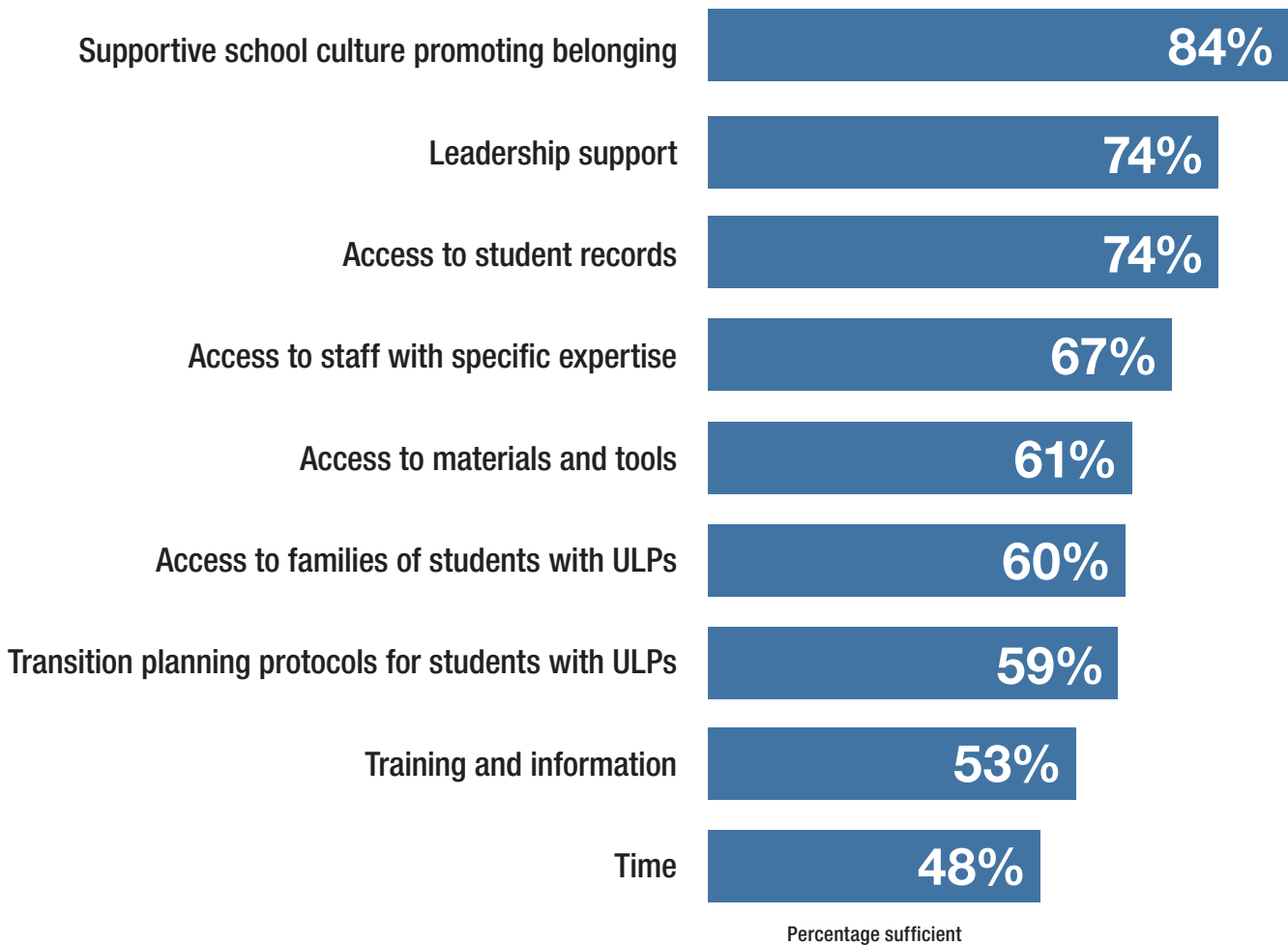
Figure 1, we found that fewer than half of the teachers (48 percent) who support ULP students reported having sufficient time to plan or prepare for supporting

these students. Furthermore, we found that only 53 percent indicated that they had sufficient access to training and information.

FIGURE 1

Most Teachers Have Access to Most Supports— Except Time and Training

Teacher-Reported Sufficiency of Access to Supports for Students with Unique Learning Profiles



NOTE: In the survey, ULP students are defined as “students living in poverty, students with disabilities, students in foster care, over-age students, or undercredited students.”

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About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

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