

CROSS & JOFTUS

Supporting High-Quality Special Education Services

Unlike other consultants who have come through our district, Cross & Joftus dug deep, bringing substantive knowledge and asking probing, thoughtful questions in a way that was supportive and engaging, not pedantic or threatening.

--Brian Pulvino, Director of Special Education, Syracuse City School District

For nearly a decade, Cross & Joftus (C&J) has worked with states and districts across the U.S. and with some of the most influential nonprofits and foundations to support education reforms and improve student achievement. Increasingly, C&J is helping states and districts that are struggling to “do more with less” as they work to achieve continuous improvement for all students, including those with disabilities.

Our Philosophy and Approach

Cross & Joftus consultants operate from the belief that all students receiving special education services are general education students first and foremost, and it is the responsibility of all educators in a school and a school system to ensure that students receive the services and supports they need. Special education is not a place; rather it is a system of services and sets of services that are balanced across the need for compliance with procedural guarantees and a specific focus on educational benefit for these students. There is no one secret ingredient for ensuring high-quality special education services. Rather, it takes great teaching, differentiation, access to the core curriculum with appropriate supports and leadership, and collaboration across all parts of the system to promote the best possible results for all students. Engaging an entire system of educators to support every student also involves utilizing various assessment data to inform instructional supports, as well as developing and consistently applying tiered interventions across the system—in short, employing a well established Response to Intervention (RtI) system to support all learners.

The C&J philosophy of supporting high-quality special education services dovetails with the approach guiding all of our work: a coherence model of educational improvement.¹ Our team has significant experience in developing actionable plans to build coherence across systems focused on bolstering learning and improving educational outcomes for all students. By using the lens of coherence and basing our analyses on multiple data points – including student and district data systems, teaching and learning observations, document reviews, surveys, and interviews and focus group data, C&J has developed a consistent and aligned set of evaluation protocols. Moreover, C&J routinely helps districts implement action plans that result in striking improvements in achievement for all student groups.

To promote systemic coherence and maximize opportunities for improvement, C&J organizes its work around **four key areas: Leadership, Empowering Culture and Human Capital, Curriculum and Assessment, and Instruction and Professional Development**. The decision to focus on these areas is based on Harvard Graduate School of Education research and refined through our work in Kansas, California, Indiana, and New York (see “Our Experience” below for more information). Our approach builds on processes developed and honed over the past seven years. To identify unique strengths and challenges for each client, as well as to make concrete recommendations as to how special education programs, services, instruction, and systems can be improved, C&J selects from the following research- and evidence-based methods and strategies:

¹Coherence is the degree to which the system’s goals, theory of action for improvement, strategies, culture, structures and policies, use of resources, and stakeholders are aligned and implemented. See Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A., and King, C. “Note on the PELP Coherence Framework,” *Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University*, Harvard Graduate School of Education & Harvard Business School. Rev. January 2007.

- Obtaining and reviewing existing data, strategic plans, reports, documentation of operational processes, policies and procedures to provide background and context;
- Conducting detailed interviews with senior staff to flesh out division priorities, management level activities, and resource constraints and with supervisors and special education staff to document current processes, identify data and other process tool needs, and identify gaps or inefficiencies in policies, systems, structures, or resources;
- Conducting focus groups with special education stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, service providers, and principals and analyzing focus group data;
- Participating in classroom observations using Cross & Joftus' Focused Classroom Walkthrough tool and analyzing resulting data;
- Administering surveys and analyzing survey results;
- Developing detailed process maps of the current business processes of the different teams and division activities that impact key special education and instructional intervention outcomes;
- Deconstructing and reconstructing processes, as necessary, to improve efficiency and effectiveness of activities impacting the provision of services;
- Analyzing key performance data and providing a set of performance metrics that offer timely intelligence around progress, performance, and actions required;
- Analyzing resource allocations across schools and students with the goal of better aligning resources with goals and best practices;
- Combining data and analyses to develop a coherent story, highlighting systemic strengths and challenges, and developing concrete recommendations and plans for improvement; and
- Providing ongoing facilitation and technical support for strategic planning, professional development, and long-term systems change.

Our Value

Cross & Joftus is uniquely suited to support districts and states looking to improve their special education services. We are a small firm that ensures direct partner involvement in every project. Working with us also guarantees access to our consultants and associates, who are among the country's leading education and management experts. Each C&J project team is comprised of national special education leaders, as well as those with intimate local knowledge of each state or district.

C&J consultants have directed special education programs from state and district offices, schools, and classrooms; conducted research and worked with universities and think tanks to translate research into practice; designed and built special education data systems; conducted evaluations and reviews of special education systems in both large and small districts; and developed and implemented professional development and technical support for states, districts, schools, and charter organizations.

Our Experience

Cross & Joftus has helped many states and school districts analyze their policies, systems, and practices to drive organizational improvements and increase student achievement; much of this work is directly focused on special education. Past and ongoing projects include:

Kansas State Department of Education

In 2008-09, Cross & Joftus worked with the state education agency (SEA) and five low-performing school districts through the Kansas Learning Network, a collaborative, systemic effort to improve the support the SEA

provides to districts and the quality of districts and schools and, ultimately, to increase student achievement. Based on the success of that work, the SEA has awarded C&J contracts each year since to provide services to *all* districts and schools in the state that have been identified for improvement. C&J conducts needs assessments of all districts, conducts in-depth special education analyses where needed (in seven districts so far), and provides ongoing technical support and professional development to district and school leaders, teachers, and staff. This work has resulted in increased student achievement and improved coherence.

Los Angeles Unified School District Charter School ARRA Special Education Project

Cross & Joftus is working with 168 charter schools in Los Angeles Unified School District. The primary focus is to examine the extent to which supports and services for students with disabilities are in place, and whether those services are high quality, effective, and research-based. We are addressing gaps in services and quality by developing and implementing programs to serve a more comprehensive set of students with disabilities, including those with more extensive challenges. The scope of this work requires the collaborative identification of needs and the design of creative service models that meet legal requirements. The project design and its outcomes have the potential to become a model that may be used in other systems, both traditional and charter, and is a new approach to school organization that recognizes the unique nature and potential of charter schools as well as charter and educational management organizations in providing for the needs of students with disabilities and all students at risk of school failure.

Sacramento County Office of Education

Cross & Joftus is providing the Juvenile Court and Community Schools programs and special education departments with the following services: (a) reviewing and conferring on State and Federal compliance within Juvenile Court schools, Community Schools, and special education departments; (b) evaluating effectiveness of current database systems and the impact of data on instructional programs; (c) providing a protocol of best practices in serving high-risk youth that could be utilized as a template with other county offices of education; and (d) providing training to staff on using classroom observations to evaluate past professional development efforts and plan for future ones.

Syracuse City School District (NY)

Cross & Joftus was recently engaged by Syracuse City School District to conduct a review of its special education program. As part of the review, C&J will use its Focused Classroom Walkthrough tool to provide the district with an understanding of the extent to which its teachers use research-based teaching and learning strategies, especially for students with disabilities.

Wayne Township MSD, Indianapolis, IN

Cross & Joftus has worked for the past seven years with seven Wayne Township schools (six elementary schools no smaller than 625 students, and one high school serving 10th-12th grade students with a population of 4,300 students) all of which are on Program Improvement (PI) for students with disabilities. C&J has provided evaluations of student data systems and services, integration of services with intervention programs currently in place, support for leadership at each of the schools, in-service and professional development opportunities for staff, and individual counseling and coaching for district office staff and school site teams. Of the six elementary schools served, five are currently off PI status, and the sixth has made AYP for the first year. The high school has reevaluated and reorganized its services and administration and is moving forward with improvements in AYP, attendance, and graduation rates for students with disabilities.

Learn More

To inquire about bringing C&J's special education expertise to your state or district please contact Christopher Cross at chris@edstrategies.net or 925-683-4877, or Alice Parker at alice@edstrategies.net or 916-952-7766.