AN ADVOCATE'S GUIDE TO TRANSFORMING SPECIAL EDUCATION

CREATING SCHOOLS WHERE ALL STUDENTS CAN THRIVE

Innovate
Public Schools

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE?

The goal of this guide is to help parents and advocates understand what educational opportunity truly looks like for students with disabilities*. It highlights what research and the highest-performing schools have found are the best practices to help students with disabilities achieve at high levels. Concrete examples, interviews, and school profiles show what this looks like in action.

Disabilities vary widely and so do individual students' strengths, needs, and challenges. No single guide could break down the full complexity of our current special education system. We believe that the people closest to the problem can usually find the best solution. Our goal is to share what works so that local advocates can map their own path forward to realize systemic change.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for people who want to transform our current special education system. There are many excellent resources to help parents navigate the current system for their own individual child. This is a different type of guide. This guide is meant to assist those fighting for systemic change for children with disabilities - at a school, district, or broader policy level. The following chapters are designed to help those advocates gain an understanding of the key practices in a successful special education system, and what it takes to move the system. There are bright spots across the nation - schools and communities that show what's possible. This guide points the way there.

**This guide uses "students with disabilities" and "students with special needs" interchangeably. Both align to IDEA's definition of a student in special education services, which is any student who has an individualized education plan (IEP).*

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INTRODUCTION

For far too long, students with disabilities have been left behind. They often get segregated into classrooms with fewer resources and less challenging work. They receive an easier curriculum that does not give them the skills they need for college or a career. They remain stuck in the same special education services, regardless of how moderate their disability may be, or how much it may change over time. When a family asks for more support, they are often dismissed or ignored.

Of the 6.6 million students with disabilities in U.S. public schools, too many are falling through the cracks.*

BY 8TH GRADE, ONLY **8%** are prepared by their schools to read and do math at grade level.

Rhim, Lauren Morando, Jessica Sutter, and Neil Campbell. "Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities: Negotiating Common Ground for District and Charter School Collaboration." *Center for American Progress.* January 31st, 2017.

JUST **66%** graduate high school on time.

"The Condition of Education 2017: Children and Youth With Disabilities." *National Center for Education Statistics.* May 2017.

LESS THAN **50%** of those graduates are fully employed two years after finishing school.

Johnson, David PhD. "The Power of High Expectations for Special Education Students." *University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Blog.* Nov. 25, 2015.

Who's to blame?

The special education system is complex. On a practical level, what that means is that transforming it will ultimately require changes at every level - from the federal and state government down to local school districts and the school and classroom. As the saying goes, "Think global, start local." This guide focuses on what districts and schools can do right now to deliver better results for students.

The 1975 federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says that students with disabilities have the right to a "free and appropriate public education." This law provides a strong legal backing for what researchers and advocates know is best for students with disabilities. But in practice, the federal government has never fully funded the programs necessary to implement this well. State and local governments have also not done nearly enough to provide the resources and support necessary for these students to succeed. School districts have a key role in setting vision, establishings policies, building a strong team, and deciding where to invest their resources. The lack of funding and real shortages in quality general education and special education teachers only makes their job harder. Teachers then struggle to support students with disabilities when they are not supported themselves. Meanwhile, inaccurate assumptions about students with disabilities often lead to denying them the same opportunities to succeed that are afforded to their peers.

To change this, advocates must first understand the law and the rights that it guarantees. Our website (www.innovateschools.org/specialeducation) contains resources that explain these legal rights. But understanding the law is not enough to truly transform educational systems. Advocates and parents must also understand what successful school-level practices look like in order to transform the system into one that truly serves all students. This guide seeks to fill this gap.

*Johnson, David PhD. "The Power of High Expectations for Special Education Students." *University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development Blog.* Nov. 25, 2015.

MYTH 1

The majority of students with disabilities have a severe and debilitating disability.

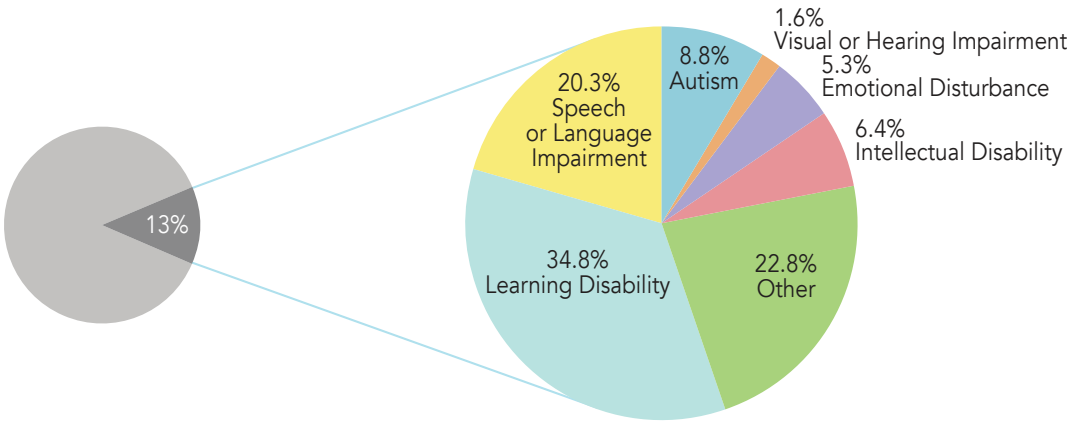
REALITY

The majority of students with disabilities have mild to moderate disabilities. Learning disabilities are the most common.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act covers 13 disabilities. These disabilities range from moderate to severe, depending on each child's unique context. For many students, the moderate level of their disability still makes it completely possible for them to master the same content as their peers with the right support and modifications.

13% of students have a disability and their needs are diverse

Breakdown by disability type, United States, 2015



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database (October 2016)

Common Types of Learning Disabilities

Just over one third of students with disabilities have a specific learning disability. This table shows the most common types.

Dyslexia	Difficulty reading, writing, spelling, and speaking
Dyscalculia	Difficulty with math problems, understanding time, and using money
Dysgraphia	Difficulty with writing, handwriting, spelling, and organizing ideas
Dysphasia (Sensory Integration Disorder)	Difficulty with fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, balance, and manual dexterity
Dysphasia/Aphasia	Difficulty with language and poor reading comprehension
Auditory Processing Disorder	Difficulty hearing differences between sounds, reading, comprehension, and language
Visual Processing Disorder	Difficulty interpreting visual information reading, math, maps, charts, symbols, and pictures

MYTH 2

Students with disabilities can't master the same content as their peers.

REALITY

More than 80% of students with disabilities can meet the same academic standards as other students with the right support.

Experts affirm that the vast majority of students with disabilities - more than 80% - can meet the same academic standards as other students, when they have the right support.[1] Even students with more severe disabilities should have every opportunity possible to learn challenging academic skills.

We know that far better is possible.

There are schools and districts that are showing what's possible and how to get there. This guide summarizes the research on what they are doing right to create schools where students with disabilities can thrive. It is not meant to help parents advocate only for their own child, but rather to help parents and advocates make large-scale changes in our special education system.

Each chapter focuses on a specific solution for transforming special education and can stand alone as a resource for learning about one issue at a time. We hope this guide will help bridge the divide between experts and non-experts in special education, and help more parents have the knowledge they need to organize and advocate for change.

Of course, the solutions explained here cannot be implemented without a dedicated effort between policymakers, school district leaders, administrators, teachers, families and communities. Working together, these groups can ensure that students with disabilities receive the same opportunities as their peers.

All students deserve every shot at success that our schools can provide them. But for far too long, students with disabilities have been left behind. We believe that "all" truly means all. This report puts the student perspective at the center to highlight the research behind the practices that make a difference.

In order for me to thrive, my school must...

Believe in me

Include me

Find me

Catch me when (or before) I fall

Meet me where I am and challenge me

Know me

Involve me and my family

Stick with me

CHAPTER 1

BELIEVE IN ME

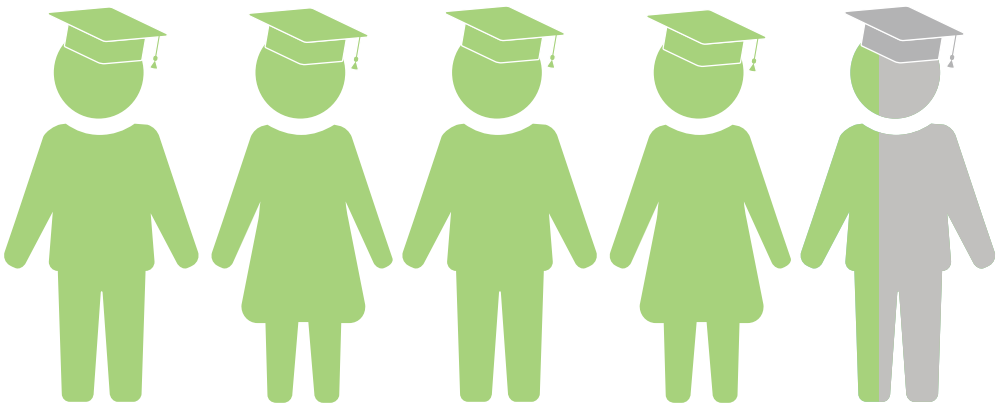
Leaders at every level of the system and the school team
believe in the potential of all students, including those with disabilities.

THE PROBLEM: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES MUST OVERCOME AN ENORMOUS "BELIEF GAP"

Belief is a powerful force. Research has shown that what parents and teachers believe about a child's potential deeply affects how far that child will go in life.[2] Children often live up to the expectations we set for them. Even though the vast majority of students with disabilities have mild disabilities and are capable of leading a successful life in school and beyond, adults often lower their expectations for what they think is possible for them.

In one survey, 85% of students with disabilities expected that they would graduate with a high school diploma.[3] But just 59% of parents of students with disabilities expected their child to do so.[4] Despite having the best interests of their children at heart, parents may not know what is realistic to expect of their child.

Students with disabilities have high expectations for themselves



85% of students with disabilities expected that they would graduate with a high school diploma

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 2 youth telephone interview/mail survey, 2003.

Educators also play a significant role in shaping the opportunities that students with disabilities have. Yet, with competing priorities, challenging working conditions, and few resources, they, too, often have expectations for students with disabilities that are far too low.[5] While more research is necessary to fully understand the impact of teacher expectations on students with disabilities, a 2003 Education Week survey of over 800 general and special education teachers found that "a striking 84 percent of teachers reject[ed] the concept that special education students should be expected to meet the same set of content standards as general education students their age."[6] If students with disabilities are going to graduate with a meaningful diploma, they must have access to challenging, grade-level content every step of the way.

The reasons parents and teachers might lower their expectations for students with disabilities vary widely. But when adults don't believe in students' abilities, their actions show it. For example, parents might enroll them in less challenging courses or they might not explicitly discuss plans for college or career in specific terms from an early age. In the classroom, teachers might call on these students less often than others or give them less time to answer a question before they give the answer or call on another student. They might seat these students in the back of the classroom so they don't distract other students. They may water down the curriculum for them or not encourage them to take on challenging material. When adults lower their expectations, they might simply allow these students to give up on themselves.

Students internalize what others believe about them

Students easily pick up on these low expectations. Often, in response, they disengage. They lose motivation and confidence in themselves. This turns what a teacher believes about a student into a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-confidence is one of the biggest predictors of success for students with disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities has found that students with learning and attention issues are four times more likely than their non-disabled peers to struggle with self-confidence.[7]

A lack of confidence may also explain why students with disabilities struggle to stay on track toward a high school diploma. Nationwide, just 65% of students with disabilities graduate -- far lower than the national average for all students at 83%.[8]

Students of color with disabilities face even lower expectations

Just as teachers expect less from students with a disability, research has also shown that teachers expect less from Black and Latino students in general.[9] Both racism and ableism are rooted in a long history of educational segregation and discrimination. In fact, concerns and lawsuits regarding the segregation of African American students in special education classrooms helped lead the way toward the first federal special education legislation in 1975.[10]

To this day, low expectations for students of certain races and for students with disabilities stand in the way of their success. Chapter 3 "Find Me" describes this issue in more detail.

Whether driven by good intentions or by implicit biases, the result of low expectations is the same: students with disabilities are unfairly denied the learning opportunities they deserve.

THE SOLUTION: WE MUST BELIEVE THAT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES CAN ACHIEVE AT HIGH LEVELS

Experts affirm that the vast majority of special education students - more than 80% - can meet the same academic standards as other students, as long as schools give them the access, accommodations, instruction, and support they need.[11] A common misperception is that students with disabilities are inherently less intelligent than other students. But research has shown that there is no correlation between IQ and disabilities.[12] That means a student can have both a high IQ and a learning disability.

Of course, some students face very severe disabilities that limit their academic success. But too often, we inaccurately lower expectations way too far for even students with moderate disabilities. Once a school labels a student as having "special needs," often staff automatically assume this student shoud be held to a lower standard. They then give these students work that is too easy or far below their grade-level and they don't have the chance to progress. Low expectations set a ceiling for what students with disabilities can do.

"I can't even remember all the times I have heard the sentiment, 'If they could meet standards, they wouldn't have a disability,'" said former education journalist Karin Chenoweth.[13] To Chenoweth, that statement shows a deep misunderstanding of disabilities and the role special education should play.

Just as a student's zip code, skin color or family income should not determine what is possible for him, neither should his disability status. Instead of underestimating what students with disabilities can do, school teams must hold all students to a very high bar, and then provide the curriculum and support to help students get there.

"In many cases, students have surprised their teachers and parents - and themselves - by mastering content that, before standards-based reform, was never taught to them," said Martha Thurlow, Director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO).[14]

Statewide graduation rates for students with disabilities range from 28 to 83%.[15] California is in the higher end of this range: 66% of the students with disabilities in the 2015-16 cohort graduated from high school within four years.[16] The high graduation rates for students with disabilities in some states prove that disability status doesn't necessarily determine a student's destiny. "Not only must we do better, but clearly we can," said Johns Hopkins education professor Robert Balfanz.[17]

When teachers and parents set ambitious but realistic goals for students, it challenges everyone to rethink what is possible. Education research professor Beverly Weiser of Southern Methodist University studied how teacher expectations for students affected their performance. She found that when teachers give students with disabilities challenging work along with helpful feedback, the students score higher on tests. They also show increases in motivation and confidence.[18]

Some schools and districts have already proven this is possible. Here are a few examples:

- In California alone, 200 schools prove that students with disabilities can master grade level standards in both English and math at the same rate as students without disabilities in the state.[19]

- In California, just 10-15% of students with disabilities achieve at grade level. But at KIPP Raíces Elementary in Los Angeles, which serves primarily low-income students, students with disabilities are scoring more than twice the state average in English (36%) and math (50%).[20]

- At Lafayette Elementary School, a school in San Francisco Unified that attracts deaf and hard-of-hearing students from across the city, students with disabilities outperform their peers elsewhere in the district and state. By third grade, most of the deaf and hard-of-hearing students at Lafayette are reading and doing math at grade level or beyond.
- Some districts are bucking the trend and graduating high numbers of students. For example, 86% of students with disabilities in Milpitas Unified graduate high school.[21] Piedmont City Unified School District also graduates the majority of their students with disabilities. In 2015-16, all 39 of their high school seniors with disabilities graduated within four years. Many were also eligible to attend a four-year university in California."[22]

When teachers have high expectations, students rise to the challenge

A teacher's low expectations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for students. The good news is that the self-fulfilling nature of high expectations is just as strong. In 1964, Harvard researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson did the first study on the impact of teacher expectations on student performance.[23] They told teachers that certain students (chosen randomly) would experience dramatic growth in IQ. In the years that followed, teachers began treating those students differently. Rosenthal observed this in subtle yet significant ways. Teachers gave these students more time for answering questions. They gave them more feedback. They even touched and smiled at these students more. Ultimately, these small actions resulted in these students experiencing greater academic growth than others. This finding is somewhat intuitive. When teachers expect certain students to succeed, those expectations become reality.

Teachers can raise their expectations by changing their own actions

It's clear that we all need to raise our expectations for students with disabilities. But how? One approach is to train teachers and parents to analyze their perceptions of students with disabilities. But attitudes and beliefs are hard to change.

Some recent research suggests that schools instead start with changing teacher behavior, rather than beliefs.[24] Robert Pianta at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia studied two groups of teachers; he gave the first group standard information about what teachers should believe and expect of their students. He gave the second group an intense behavioral training in which teachers worked with personal coaches to learn ways to change their behavior. These teachers would videotape their classes over a period of a few months, then reflect with their coach about which new behaviors they could try. For example, when a boy speaks out of turn in class, a teacher may instantly believe the boy is disruptive and needs to be managed. This training would instead show the teacher how to acknowledge the boy's energy and encourage him to express it positively.

The result: the beliefs of the second group of teachers changed way more than the first. When teachers learned *how* to change their behavior towards students, their beliefs about *what* students can achieve organically changed over time.

"It's far more powerful to work from the outside in than the inside out, if you want to change expectations," he said.[25] In other words, to change someone's mind, talking about it is usually not enough. It is far more effective to show someone what to do.

Instead of trying to convince teachers to change their deep subconscious beliefs about students, this research suggests it is more effective to give them tools to respond differently to certain student behaviors. Pianta suggests how teachers can change their behavior toward students who are struggling. When teachers use these strategies over time, they can actually shift their mindset about what they believe students can accomplish.

7 WAYS TEACHERS CAN CHANGE THEIR EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL STUDENTS - INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

1 - Watch how each student interacts: How do they prefer to engage? What do they seem to like to do? Observe so you can understand all their capabilities.

2 - Listen: Try to understand what motivates them, what their goals are, how they view you and their classmates, and the activities you assign them.

3 - Engage: Talk with students about their individual interests. Don't offer advice or opinions – just listen.

4 - Experiment: Change how you react to challenging behaviors. Rather than responding quickly in the moment, take a breath. Realize that their behavior might just be a way of reaching out to you.

5 - Meet: Each week, spend time with students outside of your role as "teacher." Let the students choose a game or other non-academic activity they'd like to do with you. Your job is NOT to teach but watch, listen and narrate what you see, focusing on students' interests and what they do well. This type of activity is really important for students with whom you often feel in conflict or whom you avoid.

6 - Reach out: Know what your students like to do outside of school. Make it a project for them to tell you about it using some medium in which they feel comfortable: music, video, writing, etc. Find both individual and group time for them to share this with you. Watch and listen to how skilled, motivated and interested they can be. Now think about school through their eyes.

7 - Reflect: Think back on your own best and worst teachers, bosses or supervisors. List five words for each that describe how you felt in your interactions with them. How did the best and the worst make you feel? What specifically did they do or say that made you feel that way? Now think about how your students would describe you. Jot down how they might describe you and why. How do your expectations or beliefs shape how they look at you? Are there parallels in your beliefs and their responses to you?

Robert Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia
Excerpted from NPR Morning Edition on
"Teachers' Expectations Can Influence How Students Perform"
by Alix Spiegel, September 2012

Mindset matters, and it starts at the top

School and district leaders can play a powerful role in pushing teachers and students to reach higher. They can create district-wide and school-wide goals that put the needs of their most vulnerable students first. This creates a strong sense of shared responsibility for the success of students with disabilities. Here are a few examples:

- In Shenendehowa, New York, the district's strategic plan stated as one of their goals "to share responsibility for student achievement among general education staff, special education staff, and other staff of the district." This district also set clear targets for achievement levels. For example, "By year 2014, 85% of students receiving special education services will reach at least a level 3 [proficiency] on State assessments."[26]

- In Florida, an Orange County Public Schools goal stated that "80% percent of students receiving special education services will graduate with a standard diploma."[27]

- At James Campbell High School in Honolulu, Hawaii, the school's goals stated clearly, "The performance gap between general education students and students receiving special education services will be reduced to no more than 10% by 2014."[28]

Setting ambitious goals does not guarantee improvement. But it is a good place to start. When districts and schools explicitly state their high expectations for students with special needs, they send the message that all students can learn and achieve, despite their differences.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

BELIEVE IN ME

Leaders at every level of the system and the school team believe in the potential of all students, including those with disabilities.

WHAT TO ASK

- Does everyone in the school system believe students with disabilities can learn at a high level?
- Do they show it in their interactions with students, families and each other?
- Do they make these goals and intentions clear in the plans to which they hold themselves accountable?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- District or charter school network leaders express their belief that all students can achieve at high levels and act on that by making sure everyone shares responsibility for the success of students with disabilities.
- The school board and district leaders have publicly stated that the success of students with disabilities is a priority. They publicly present data at least twice a year on how students are doing, and assess whether it's effective.
- District-level or network-level strategic plans include specific measurable goals about improving the performance of students with disabilities and these are updated on an annual basis.
- The district / charter school network surveys students to understand their experience and sets targets for improving on issues that surface in the survey results that relate to students with disabilities.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- All teachers take responsibility for all students. Teacher teams regularly review and discuss data and progress of students with disabilities during common planning time.
- Students with disabilities are enrolled in all levels and types of courses including advanced classes, AP/IB classes, and college-track courses, as well as participate in enrichment and extracurricular activities. Schools track how many students with disabilities are in these classes and activities, and set goals accordingly.
- Students with disabilities are among the students highlighted and celebrated for their strengths in school assemblies, awards ceremonies, newsletters, programs, etc.
- All school staff use language that demonstrates their deep and unwavering belief in the potential of all students to achieve significant academic gains and find success in college and life. This belief is expressed clearly throughout classes and during school events.

HOW CAN PARENTS KNOW WHETHER THEIR SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE THEIR CHILD WITH A DISABILITY WILL THRIVE?

At the end of each chapter in this guide, advocates will find this two-page summary that describes the concrete actions that districts, charter management organizations, and schools must take to ensure that students with disabilities succeed. Each section aligns directly with each chapter of this report. Parents can use this tool to advocate not only for their own child, but also to push for reforms that are necessary at a broader level. These observable actions help parent advocates know very clearly what to "look for" in a school, organization, or district that is truly doing what it takes to help students with disabilities succeed. It helps parent advocates pinpoint exactly how their school system is falling short, and more importantly, how to demand more.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The superintendent/CEO, principal, special education and general education teachers, staff, and student families believe all students can graduate prepared for college and/or career.
- The superintendent/CEO and principal set an educational vision that addresses how to use school money, staff, space, and time to support students with disabilities, and makes this a priority for everyone -- not just special education specialists.
- Leaders hold all staff accountable for having high expectations for students with disabilities and proactively include these students in the classroom. The school team - including teachers, administrators, and instructional support staff - takes responsibility for the success of every student. They make sure all students receive appropriate support to engage in challenging work, and they regularly discuss each student's progress.

CHAPTER 2

INCLUDE ME

The school team includes students with special needs in general education classrooms during as much of the school day as possible.

THE PROBLEM: HISTORICALLY, SEGREGATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES HAS LED TO POOR OUTCOMES

For many years, "special education" has been not only a label, but a place. Many educators and parents believed that students with disabilities couldn't handle the typical general education classroom. They believed that self-contained learning environments offer better instruction, a better sense of community, and a more thoughtful approach to unique needs.

A fundamental part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the requirement that students with disabilities be placed in the "least restrictive environment" in schools.[29] Schools are expected to begin by placing students with disabilities in a general education classroom. Students are only removed from these classrooms when school staff decide that "the nature or severity of the disability of a child"[30] makes it impossible to teach this student in a general education setting.

However, this isn't always what happens. In 2014, only 62% of students with disabilities nationwide were educated in general education classrooms for more than 80% of the day.[31] In California, it was 53%.[32]

THE SOLUTION: THE MOST EFFECTIVE SCHOOL PRACTICE IS "INCLUSION"

In 2004, a study conducted by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute looked at school districts that have achieved better-than-expected results for students with disabilities. They found one thing these schools had in common: they all practiced inclusion.[33]

"Inclusion" means that students with disabilities spend as much of the school day as possible in general education, learning the same content and skills as other students. This allows these students to have equal access to grade-level curriculum, general education teachers, and meaningful learning experiences. By not segregating these students in separate classrooms, it can also help these students feel less stigmatized.

Inclusion is also an attitude. "[Our philosophy] is making sure that you are always thinking that the child is a general education student first," said a teacher from Oxford Preparatory Academy, a school that practices full inclusion, in a 2016 report by the California Charter Schools Association. "Here's your general education student who has some special needs; not here is a special education student."[34]

In the Donahue Institute study, when interviewing all of the case study districts and schools, "among the most common phrases heard during discussions of curriculum access was 'they are all our kids.'"[35]

> ***"[Our philosophy] is making sure that you are always thinking that the child is a general education student first...Here's your general education student who has some special needs; not here is a special education student."***
>
> Teacher, Oxford Preparatory Academy
> 2016 report by the California Charter Schools Association

In 2001, the American Institutes for Research identified four academically strong California districts for students in special education based on standardized test results. All four of these districts practiced inclusion. They emphasized "creating a learning community unified in the belief that all children can learn."[36]

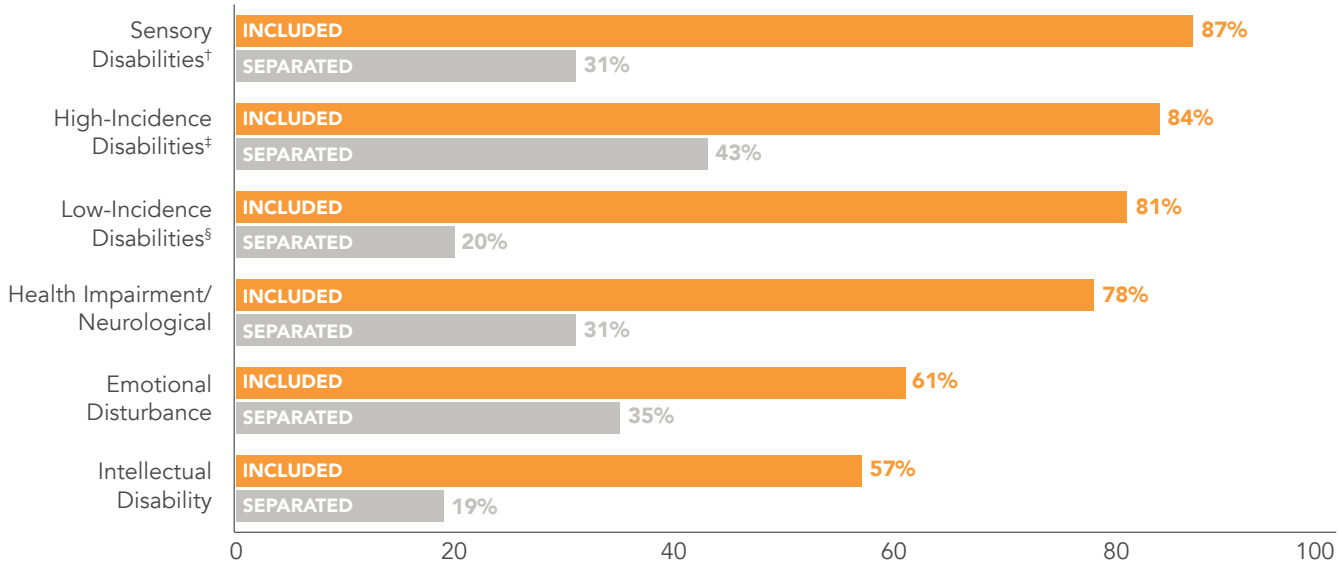
Research shows that when students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms for the majority of the school day, they are more likely to meet grade-level standards than students with similar disabilities who are assigned to separate classrooms. In 2001, the Okaloosa County School District in Florida pushed to include more students in general education programs. By 2014, the number of students with disabilities who passed Florida's state achievement tests increased from 41% to 69% in reading. It increased from 47% to 78% in math.[37]

There are long-term benefits to inclusion as well. One Massachusetts study found that when students with high-incidence disabilities are included, the probability that they will graduate on time nearly doubles. Across all disability categories, this finding was consistent: when controlling for all other factors, students with disabilities who were included, were far more likely to graduate than students who were not.[38] Another study looked at high school students with disabilities who earned 80% or more of their academic credits in general education classrooms. The study found these students were twice as likely to enroll and stay in postsecondary education than those who received fewer credits in general education classrooms.[39]

"While neither simple nor cheap, inclusive practices are convincingly the best way to ensure that students with disabilities get access to the same challenging curriculum as their peers," said the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD).[40]

Students with disabilities who are included are more likely to graduate within four years

Percent likelihood of four-year graduation in the state of Massachusetts by inclusion status, from 2005 to 2012*



SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005 - 2012. State of Massachusetts. Laura Schifter. Using Survival Analysis to Understand Graduation of Students with Disabilities, Exceptional Children 2016, Vol. 82(4) 479-496

*Participation in the general education setting for more than 80% of the school day.
†Sensory disabilities in this study include hearing impairment, vision impairment, or physical impairment.
‡High-incidence disabilities in this study include learning disability and speech impairment.
§Low-incidence disabilities in this study include autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blind.

Students with disabilities may still benefit from a different classroom setting at times. Sometimes, they need individualized support that works better outside a general education classroom. Sometimes they need a modified curriculum. But at inclusion schools, the school teams aim to make this the exception, rather than the norm. As much as possible, they ensure that students with disabilities - particularly moderate disabilities - can access the same curriculum in the same classrooms as their peers.

More inclusion leads to better outcomes for *all* students

Some parents fear that inclusive classrooms hurt the academic achievement of students without disabilities. They fear that students with special needs distract teacher attention away from other students. There is limited research on this topic. But so far, studies show that students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms perform around the same as students in classrooms with fewer or no students with disabilities.[41] They have also found that the presence of students with severe disabilities does not decrease teachers' instructional time or the attention paid to other students.

Some research has found that inclusion practices actually benefit all students, not just those with disabilities. Many studies show that inclusion can help students without disabilities develop empathy for students with disabilities. It can also teach them to appreciate and interact across other types of difference.[42]

Sometimes, inclusion practices also provide other students with more individualized attention in the classroom.

Schools and districts are often legally required to provide students with disabilities with teaching aides or paraprofessionals. When schools practice inclusion well, all students benefit from having these extra adults in the classroom.

For example, after Lafayette Elementary School implemented inclusive practices, some classes

were co-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Parents of students without disabilities began noticing how the extra support of special education instruction benefited their children too. "We have a lot of parents asking us, 'Can my kid without a disability be in a co-taught class too?'" said Principal Heath Caceres. "It kind of becomes contagious."[43]

To make inclusion work, school teams *must* let student needs drive all decisions

Inclusion does not mean placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms and then hoping for the best. The most effective schools don't just embrace inclusion. They also put the right support in place to make it work. Here are a few common strategies:

1 - Effective Push-in Supports

Historically, schools taught students with disabilities in separate classrooms. Sometimes these students were "pulled out" of class into small groups in a nearby room or area. More recently, the focus on inclusion has shifted more schools toward a "push-in" model. In this model, specialists come into general education classrooms for some part of the class period to assist students with disabilities. For example, the special education teacher could facilitate a small reading group in an English class. Or, the special education teacher could help a student with a math lesson by providing feedback as the student practices the problems. At the Waldorf-inspired Alice Birney Elementary School in Sacramento, five special education specialists provide a combination of individual push-in supports and small pull-out groups to help with reading, writing, and math support throughout the day.[44] At the Oakland Charter School for the Arts, students with significant mental health needs begin their day with a breakfast combined with group therapy.[45] Then in their general education classes, staff counselors and therapists provide support as needed.

2 - Co-teaching

In this strategy, general and special education teachers teach within the same classroom. Both teachers co-plan and deliver the same curriculum to students in large and small groups. The general educator specializes in the overall curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The special education teachers bring in their knowledge of how to adapt instruction and manage behavior.

For example, in the Wyckoff school district in New Jersey, special education elementary teacher Lynda Auxter used to move between classrooms. But she now spends the entire day in one fifth grade classroom with a general educator. "Sometimes [the general educator] does that whole-group lesson. Sometimes, I do whole-group lessons," Auxter told *Education Week*. "Sometimes, she pulls special and general small groups; sometimes, I pull special and general small groups."[46]

Co-teaching works best when students can't necessarily tell the difference between a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Instead, all students benefit from more individualized instruction, whether they have a disability or not. Both teachers can provide different strategies for presenting content as well as ensuring students receive targeted support.

3 - Flexible Grouping

Teachers have the power to decide where a student learns: in pairs, in small groups, or with the whole class. They also group kids for different activities - like pulling together a group of students who are struggling with fractions to work with an adult or having the most advanced readers pair together.

Too often, the default is to group students with disabilities together. These groupings should be flexible and change from day to day and week to week based on students' work. That way, no student remains segregated in a certain group for the entire year.

Teachers group students in a flexible way that depends on the individual needs of each student, and the daily objective of each lesson. Instead of saying, "This is where this student belongs for the rest of the year," they ask, "Given the context of my class *today*, what makes the most sense for grouping my students?"

A 2004 study conducted by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute looked at school districts that have achieved better-than-expected results for students with disabilities. The study found that classroom strategies -- like flexible groupings -- helped create an inclusive environment for students with special needs.[47]

The high-performing Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. has great examples of all three of these strategies. A special educator is assigned to each grade level for push-in support. In the middle school grades, a special educator co-teaches with a general educator. Students cycle through learning "stations" based on their needs -- regardless of whether they have a disability. Teachers collect data on how well students perform on each assignment, and then group and regroup students as necessary.[48]

Embrace neurodiversity: View learning differences as strengths

To change the way educators think of students with disabilities, we might need to change the way we think about learning and disability more generally. Most people think of disabilities as a barrier that prevents students from functioning *normally.* But some researchers and disability advocates have developed a powerful new idea called "neurodiversity" to expand what we think of as "normal."

The phrase "neurodiversity" was coined in the early 1990s by journalist Harvey Blume and Australian autism activist Judy Singer. Through the perspective of neurodiversity, "neurological differences are to be honored and respected just like any other human variation, including diversity in race, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on," wrote educator Thomas Armstrong.[49]

Recent brain research has supported this theory.[50] The research has found that learning differences can actually help a child to succeed.[51] For example, the same characteristics of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) that make it difficult for them to focus might actually also help them multitask better than their peers. Students with autism spectrum disorders might struggle socializing with their peers. But they may outperform them in a task that requires them to find small errors in computer code.

"As an adult with autism, I find the idea of natural variation to be more appealing than the alternative – the suggestion than I am innately bad, or broken and in need of repair," said John Elder Robison, College of William and Mary Scholar-in-Residence.[52]

This challenges common attitudes about disabilities. In the past, society has seen differences as deficits and treated them as problems to be solved. Based on this latest research, Armstrong says that special educators need to shift their focus. Instead of fixing and correcting students, educators should instead create environments where neurodiverse students can all succeed.

This means that schools encourage students to learn from these differences. It also means schools develop ways to accommodate all sorts of brains. When teachers emphasize students' abilities rather than their disabilities, they help ensure that these students not only stay in school, but thrive there.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

INCLUDE ME

The school team includes students with special needs in general education classrooms during as much of the school day as possible.

WHAT TO ASK

- Are students with disabilities included as much as possible in general education classrooms (per their IEPs)? Right now, what percentage of students with disabilities are fully included, partially included or in separate settings?
- Are students with disabilities included not just in general instruction classrooms, but in all aspects of school culture, e.g. school events and field trips, enrichment, sports and extracurricular activities? Do leaders allocate resources and provide staffing and training to effectively support inclusion?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- District / charter school network leaders share a district-wide vision for inclusion of special education students as an explicit core value. This is clearly expressed in mission, vision and strategic planning.
- District / charter school network leaders give schools flexibility to make decisions about how to best use staff and resources, and to create the schedule in a way that includes students with disabilities in general education classrooms, at every grade level.
- Special education staff are included in annual district-level or charter school network-level conversations in which principals make decisions about their budget and staffing.
- District / charter school network keeps track of the number of students who are fully included, partially included, or in separate settings and the extent to which these approaches are working for students.
- District / charter school network leaders expect and support general education teachers to build their expertise in special education, and special education teachers to develop greater content expertise. This could include professional development for the entire staff that is focused on special education topics, knowledge, and skills. It could also be integrating special education topics into general trainings (e.g. a session on literacy that includes a focus on learning disabilities and specific strategies to support struggling readers with dyslexia or traumatic brain injury).

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- School leaders make staffing decisions that allow students who need additional intervention or small group instruction to get the time and support they need. For example, a school leader may hire more paraprofessionals, resource specialists, teacher assistants, and co-teachers according to the needs of the student population.
- The school has regular common planning time for general and special education teachers to plan instruction together. Both special education teachers and general education teachers collaborate, co-plan, co-teach, and work with small and large groups of students based on student need. Both deliver content and provide specific supports to struggling students.
- Students with disabilities are seated throughout the classroom alongside their peers without disabilities, at all grade levels. Teachers regularly call on all students, including those with disabilities and ensure all students are engaged in the lesson.
- Student groupings are flexible and change over time based on students' needs and academic progress. Students are not working in the same groups every day based exclusively on their disability status.
- For students who can't be fully included in the general classroom, the school team provides opportunities throughout the school day for students to build relationships and participate in important aspects of the school's culture (e.g. extracurriculars, homework clubs, assemblies, shared lunch times and recess, etc.).

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- Teachers provide individualized support that addresses the specific disabilities of students.
- Teachers give students with disabilities access to the same standards, curriculum and learning environments as other students.
- The school team intentionally designs its staffing plan, budget, physical layout, and schedules to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This requires strong collaboration between general education and special education teachers. This could include co-teaching in the same classroom, one-on-one support (e.g. push-in or pull-out strategies), and flexible groupings that change over the course of the day, week or year.
- The school team creates a school culture that is safe, welcoming and inclusive of students with disabilities. The school culture celebrates and explores learning differences among students. Staff educate all students about the rights of people with disabilities. They also teach students about the contributions people with disabilities have made to society, science, art, technology, literature, etc.

CHAPTER 3
FIND ME

The school team has a quick, accurate and transparent process for identifying students who will benefit from an individualized education plan (IEP).

THE PROBLEM: THE "WAIT-TO-FAIL" APPROACH LEAVES STUDENTS FURTHER AND FURTHER BEHIND

To support students with disabilities, first schools have to accurately identify who they are. Doctors can usually identify the most severe disabilities in a student at an early age. Often, they can diagnose students well before they enter public school. These disabilities, like blindness or deafness, tend to be easy to spot. They have obvious symptoms and a biological basis that doctors can test.

But for milder disabilities, schools staff usually end up making the diagnosis. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states that school districts are not only responsible for assessing children from families who request special education services. They are also responsible for having a process to seek out and find these students to begin with - a duty commonly referred to as "Child Find." This means that the district should always be looking out for students who "may" need to be assessed, regardless of whether they ultimately qualify for special education or not.

This isn't easy. Not every student who is struggling has a disability, and not every student who has a disability may look like they are struggling. As a result, schools often wait for students to fail before evaluating them for special education services. Some schools wait to test students for a learning disability until after they have had months or even years of failing grades. Other schools wait until a student's annual standardized test shows they are behind grade level. Sometimes, schools deliberately wait for students to develop a large discrepancy between their academic performance and their IQ. This "IQ discrepancy model" means that students have to wait far too long to get the support they need. By the time they are identified, it is often too late to catch up.

Under IDEA, a parent has the legal right to request a special education evaluation at any point in their child's school career. But many parents don't know this.

Alexa Posny, the former state director of special education in Kansas observed this in her state: "We were missing a lot of kids, and we were catching them way too late, because we were waiting for them to fail before we identified them."[53] Teachers and administrators then interpreted any student's struggle as a sign of a disability. Posny believes that this led them to over-identify children with disabilities by as much as 50%.

Once schools finally test students for disabilities, the National Academies' National Research Council found that the diagnosis tends to be inaccurate. The process can also be extremely slow.[54]

"While we know clearly the costs of waiting too long, few school districts have in place a mechanism to identify and help children before failure takes hold," said Joseph Torgesen, a research professor at Florida State University.[55] Torgesen notes that in most cases, schools have no system-wide identification process until third grade. By that time, addressing student disabilities becomes harder and more expensive, and those students struggle to catch up.

Human judgment and bias in special education also limits who gets help

The reality now is the process to decide whether a student should receive special education services relies a lot on human judgment. This is the case from the start. Usually, the identification process begins with a subjective recommendation from a teacher that a student be evaluated. While a teacher and even a parent's recommendation can be a powerful tool to identify when students need specialized support, it is also fraught with human error, lack of expertise in disabilities, and oftentimes bias.

Far too often, racial bias also affects this process. Whether consciously or not, teachers and administrators often assume that students of color can't learn at high levels. A White student and a Black student struggling in the same ways are often treated very differently. This can also happen for English learners. These students face the same struggle as anyone learning a new language. But teachers can misinterpret their struggle as a disability and then recommend these students be evaluated. The same can happen with students who are experiencing trauma. School staff can easily misinterpret their short-term behavioral challenges as a long-term problem caused by a disability. Diagnosis of a disability requires expertise in the identification process and in the specific disability being evaluated for - expertise and training that even the best school staff often don't have.

After a student is recommended for special education evaluation, the student then meets with a school or district psychologist who runs thorough, standardized tests to determine whether the student has a disability. Though these tests provide objective data, the interpretation of the results by district and school staff can also often be subjective. For example, though a student may score numerically low in a math processing assessment, the school or district can ultimately decide that this does not affect the student's ability to succeed in math class, and is not enough to merit special education services.

This subjectivity can lead to both over- and under-identification of students. For certain racial subgroups, students are over-identified for certain disability types -- a phenomenon called "disproportionality." For example, 2.63% of all Black students, nationally, are identified as having an intellectual disability. Though this may not be a large number at first glance, it's almost two and half times the rate for White students.[56] While 17% of school-age children are Black, they represent 33% of students identified as having an intellectual disability.[57]

At the same time, recent research suggests that paradoxically, under-identification is also a problem. One study compared Black and Latino students with White students at similar levels of achievement and with similar risk factors (such as low family education, low-income and low birth weight). In this analysis, the disproportionality actually reversed. They found that Black and Latino students were less likely to be identified for special education services across five disability categories. Black students were 58% less likely to be diagnosed for learning disabilities and Latino students were 29% less likely.[58] In these cases, schools deprive students of color of the services they need.

The researchers behind the study argue that this may occur because educators are often more responsive to White parents. They also argue that "low expectations regarding Black children's abilities may also lead some professionals to ignore the neurological basis of low academic achievement and 'problem' behavior."[59]

In other instances, the over-identification of students of color doesn't come from a teacher's bias. It reflects the environmental factors that have disproportionately affected students of color. For example, 36% of urban Black children have elevated levels of lead in their blood, compared to only 4% of suburban White children. Black children are also about twice as likely to be born prematurely. They are three times more likely to suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome.[60] These factors can influence whether a student develops a learning disability.

Racial bias can affect disability diagnoses in contradictory ways. Certain students in certain areas can be overrepresented, while other students are underrepresented. At a district level, both trends can happen at the same time and hurt students. They mean services don't get to the students who most need them.

That's why it is crucial that school leaders and staff are aware of racial bias in its many forms. They must investigate their own process and combat whatever racial trends they may have. That way they can ensure they deliver the right services to the right students.

When schools don't have a strong process in place for identifying students for special education services, students can struggle or even fail for far too long. They can also receive a mismatch of services that do not address the true challenges the student faces.

THE SOLUTION: SCREEN ALL STUDENTS AND INTERVENE QUICKLY

Some schools and districts have looked to the field of public health to learn how to best identify learning disabilities. Doctors screen all patients using common measures. For example, they measure every patient's blood pressure to determine their cardiovascular health. As patients develop illnesses, doctors use more and more tests and interventions to gather information and provide care.[61]

Similarly, researchers say that schools should universally screen all students for learning disabilities starting in kindergarten. Rather than waiting for subjective recommendations from parents or teachers, universal screening allows teachers to pick up on potential challenges before students struggle.

For example, students with dyslexia often start to fall behind their peers in reading as early as the first grade. Studies have shown that once these early achievement gaps develop they often persist over the long-term, even if students receive intensive support later on. But when students get the support they need as early as kindergarten or pre-school, they are far more likely to catch up. When teachers introduce effective programs early they can target the basic reading foundational skills even before children learn to read. The lesson is clear: The earlier schools can diagnose student disabilities and provide students with the right support, the more likely they will be able to catch up.[62]

A universal screening process might include a whole range of assessments. For example, it could include a wide variety of academic assessments that provide information about the students' ability to master grade-level standards and how they respond to specific interventions in reading, math, or writing, as well as teacher or parent behavioral ratings or structured interview notes. These assessments don't give a diagnosis.

They just provide more information. Administrators, teachers and a school or district psychologist must then interpret the data to decide whether it points toward one or more disabilities.

A special California task force of longtime educators and expert researchers focused on statewide special education policies found that universal screening and following up with appropriate intervention is the best course of action for most schools. The task force also argued these actions can prevent many academic and behavioral difficulties from developing in the first place.[63]

The California Charter Schools Association had similar findings when they looked at charter schools with the strongest results for students with disabilities. They found that these schools' specialists provided support services to all students as needed, regardless of whether the student had been identified as having a disability. For example, one school had a speech and language pathology assistant provide intervention to all students who struggled with speech in younger grades.

Speech services started as soon as students showed any signs of struggle with speech. Some researchers believe that these early identification and prevention programs could reduce the number of students with reading problems by up to 70%.[64]

Once school teams identify students with disabilities and determine interventions, they then have to measure whether the interventions have actually worked. If not, they can either create an alternative plan or increase the intensity of the interventions. Chapter 4 describes this in more detail.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

FIND ME

The school team has a quick, accurate and transparent process for identifying students who will benefit from an individualized education plan (IEP).

WHAT TO ASK

- How quickly does the school assess students? Do parents or teachers currently have to fight to get their child assessed?
- How accurately do schools identify students with disabilities?
- Does the school and district/CMO take steps to ensure the process is accurate, objective and bias-free?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- District / charter school network leaders have a clear process for identifying students with special needs that meets the legal requirements of "Child Find" under IDEA legislation. The process is followed throughout the year, including summer months. Leaders notify parents about policies related to special education and communicate the legal rights of parents and students.
- District / charter school network officials collect and analyze data about specific disability types and report any disproportionality in terms of race, EL status, or income.
- Schools identify students with most disabilities in early elementary grades and the district/CMO provides resources and training for implementing universal screening and early identification processes.
- The district / charter school network supports early identification through ongoing staff, community, and family education and communication. This communication is particularly present in preschool, pre-k, and kindergarten programs with targeted outreach to families that may not know their legal rights or the benefits of early identification.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- School team proactively sends home information to all parents, especially those with students in early grades, to explain the process for assessing and identifying students with disabilities, the timelines, and the legal rights of parents and students throughout the process.
- If a parent requests that a student be assessed for special education services, the school team acts quickly to perform complete psycho-educational assessments as required by law.
- School teams collect data from a wide variety of sources including academic assessments, behavioral checklists, and early childhood development inventories for all students, including those in early grades. Teams use this data to conduct universal screenings and identify students who need additional support and those who might benefit from special education services.
- School-wide systems are in place for sharing data about student performance and behavior, which is used to make decisions about which students are referred to be assessed and when for special education.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team provides early, school-wide and appropriately intensive support to all students as soon as they fall behind.
- If these interventions are not enough, the school starts a collaborative, unbiased and timely process to formally evaluate a student's need for special education services.
- The school team regularly reviews the results from the identification process to ensure that certain student groups -- particularly students of color, low-income students, and English-language learners -- are not over-identified as having a disability.
- The school team proactively communicates with families at every step of the identification process.

CHAPTER 4

CATCH ME WHEN (OR BEFORE) I FALL

The school team regularly tracks every student's behavioral, social-emotional and academic progress to ensure they don't fall behind.

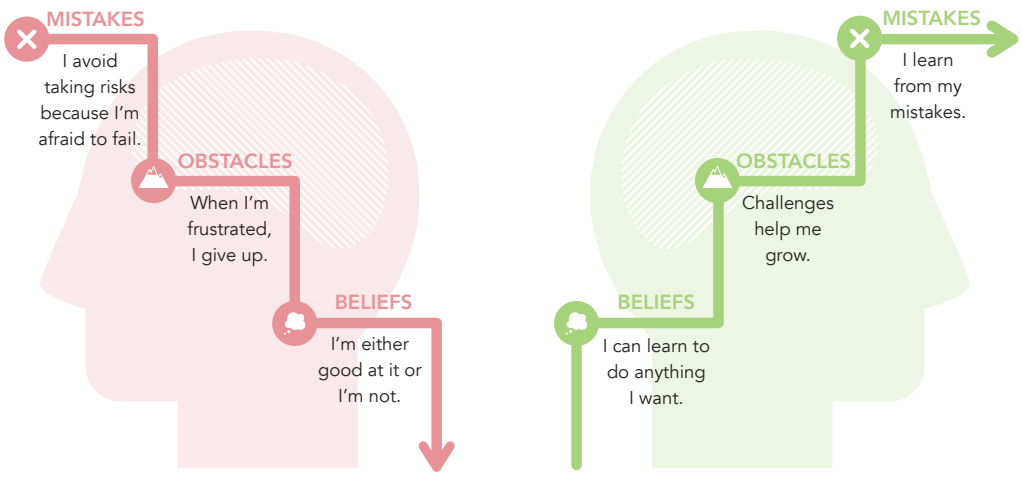
THE PROBLEM: A DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS OFTEN BECOMES A STUDENT'S DESTINY

Once a student is identified as having a disability, educators often have a fixed perception about what that student needs. Some believe that a diagnosis of a disability inherently means the student will always struggle in the same way. These perceptions can end up trapping students in certain interventions or settings for far too long.

But like all students, students with disabilities grow and change over time. Their needs can shift. They can easily move from needing one kind of support to another type to needing nothing at all. It is important that teachers craft their instruction based on how these needs evolve. Just because a student needs a certain kind of support one semester doesn't mean they'll need that same support again later on. As Ryan Parry, who oversees special education for the Covina-Valley Unified School District, said, "Special ed is not a placement. It's a service."[65]

People with a **"fixed mindset"** believe that intelligence is something you're born with and doesn't change over time.

People with a **"growth mindset"** believe that intelligence can be developed with practice and hard work.



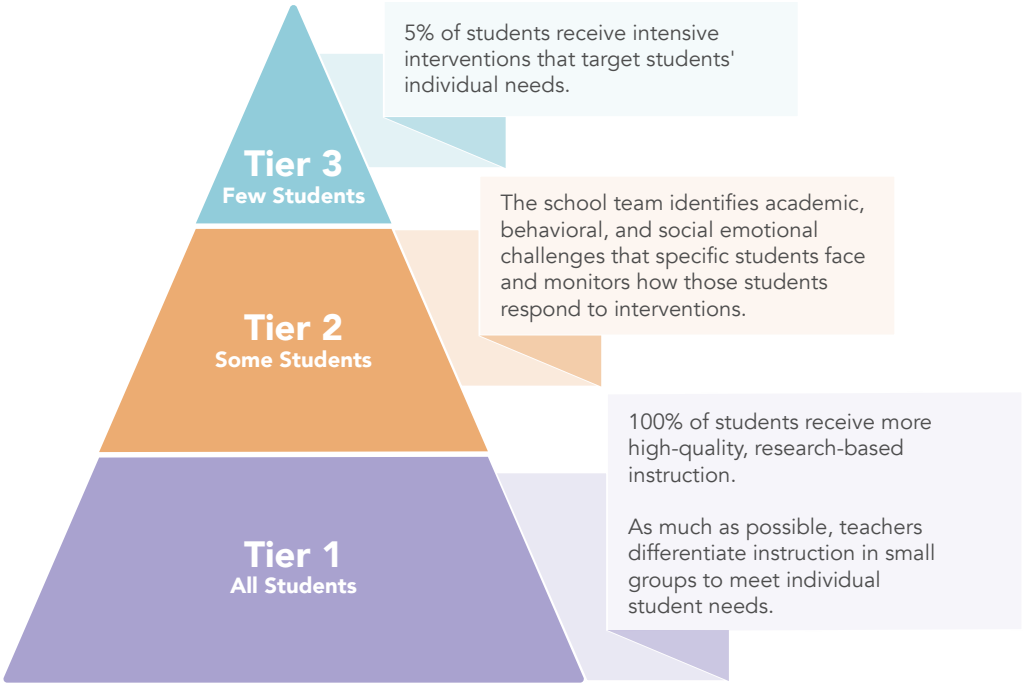
When school teams reject a **"fixed mindset"** and instead treat students with a **"growth mindset,"** they build a school culture where students feel comfortable to take risks, learn from failure, and can develop their intelligence over time through hard work.

Source: Content adapted from *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck

THE SOLUTION: USE "TIERED INSTRUCTION" TO GET THE RIGHT SUPPORT TO THE RIGHT STUDENTS AT THE RIGHT TIME

To serve students with disabilities effectively, school teams must look at interventions with a growth mindset. They must believe that special education interventions can – and should – change depending on student needs. To do this, many schools and districts have adopted "tiered instruction." In this approach, teachers provide three different levels – or "tiers" – of instructional strategies, depending on a student's individual needs. Teachers closely track how students respond over time. Then they move students from one tier of interventions to another, depending on how fast they progress. If they continue to struggle, the teacher might increase the intensity of the support. If they respond well to the intervention and develop more confidence and independence, the teacher or school might decrease the support.

Tiered Instruction: More intensive support for students who need it most



Source: content adapted from RTI Action Network. http://www.rtinetwork.org/

Tier 1 support - Core instruction for all students

In the first level – or "Tier 1" – students receive general instruction in their general education classroom using the standard curriculum. Schools use broad instructional or behavioral strategies to support all students. Tier 1 interventions might include a teacher standing near a student when giving instructions, using visual cues, giving a student more structured note-taking templates or outlines, and/or assigning a student a seat near the teacher or a seat in an area with few distractions. Ideally, school teams would expect this level to meet the needs of about 80% of students.[66] At multiple points throughout the year, teachers evaluate how well students are responding to the general instructional approach. For example, a school might adopt a research-based reading curriculum and screen all students for reading problems three times per year to determine which students might need supports beyond the school-wide reading curriculum.

Tier 2 support - Group interventions

However, around 15% of students may still be struggling with just traditional instruction. These students are then moved to "Tier 2."At this level, students receive more intensive instruction in smaller group settings to help them access the general curriculum or additional support from their classroom teacher. This could include a behavior contract, a reward system, or modified assessments. It could also include repeated opportunities for practice.

For example, Tier 1 students could have guided reading three times a week, while Tier 2 students could have it five times a week. These interventions can be administered by an educator with special training, such as a reading specialist. But for smaller schools or those with fewer resources, general education teachers provide these interventions on their own. The interventions may take place over the course of several weeks, with the school team checking in over time to monitor progress.

Tier 3 support - Intensive interventions

Even with Tier 2 support, approximately 5% of students may still not meet their learning or behavior goals. These students are moved to "Tier 3." At this level, students often work one-on-one with a specialist for longer periods of time. In contrast, students in Tier 2 can usually manage larger groups for shorter amounts of time. Tier 3 students may need more individualized instruction. Sometimes they may need a custom-made curriculum that covers the foundational skills they may have missed. At this point, schools may also evaluate these students to determine what special education services they may need on an ongoing basis.

Research-based intervention processes have helped schools implement tiered instruction more effectively. One of the most common forms of tiered instruction is called Response to Intervention (RtI), which focuses on academic instruction and support. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) focuses on behavioral support. More recently, districts and schools have begun shifting toward Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). MTSS draws on both RtI and PBIS to address both academic and behavioral needs. Research has shown that these tiered systems can improve both academic performance and behavior. This is particularly true for low-income students and students of color.[67]

The key to all these approaches: they have highly trained and supported staff who know how to organize students into levels of escalating need and flexibly adapt to the changing needs of students over time. Students move between these tiers over the course of the year based on how they respond to various interventions and assessments. Depending on their progress, a student might move between Tiers 1 and 2 fluidly over the course of the year in one or more subjects. They also can move into Tier 2 and right back to Tier 1 after learning knowledge or skills they had missed in prior years.

Of course, legally under IDEA, parents have the right to ask schools to assess students for special education services immediately, instead of going through the tiered instruction process. In fact, in 2011, the U.S. Department of Education specifically stated that RtI could not be used to delay or deny special education identification. But when done well, the gradual progression of RtI can help ensure that teachers do not unnecessarily shuffle students with disabilities into the most intensive tier and separate them from the rest of the students. Instead, teachers move them into a more intensive tier only when data shows that they will truly benefit from that level of support.

Tiered instruction helps schools take a proactive – not reactive – approach to student support

These approaches allow schools to meet student needs without placing them in unnecessarily restrictive settings. As Chapter 3 "Find Me" described, schools must work to ensure they quickly and accurately identify students for special education services. However, identification should not be a standalone process. It should be part of an overall intervention system that provides support to all students, measures if it's working, and increases the supports when necessary.

Educators in Kansas have seen positive results since the Kansas State Department of Education adopted MTSS in 2007. "As we began to implement effective intervention at each tier, we began to see fewer children being referred to special education," said Alexa Posny, then state director of special education in Kansas.[68] When fewer students are referred, students are less likely to be over-identified and those who truly do have special needs get more of the resources they need.

Tiered instruction benefits all students

More recently, schools and districts have expanded their use of tiered instruction to cover all students. Federal law lets schools use up to 15% of their special education funds for students without disabilities who nonetheless need more support.[69] This makes it easier for schools to use tiered instruction with all students.

Since this model is more flexible, teachers can move students from one tier to the next based on the most current data. This allows them to offer more targeted support to struggling students – whether or not they have a disability. This means that tiered instruction can "blur" the lines between general and special education, often in positive ways. Researchers from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) looked at two charter school networks (STRIVE Preparatory Schools in Denver and Uncommon Schools in New York City). They found they both successfully used tiered instruction to ensure that "students with special needs have similar education experiences and expectations to their general education peers."[70] Students with disabilities did indeed receive more support from special educators. But researchers also observed that other struggling students were also included in this support, even though they didn't have an IEP.

Another example of a school using tiered instruction is Lafayette Elementary in San Francisco. Principal Heath Caceres says that at Lafayette, it's possible for a student with a disability to still be in Tier 1, while a student without a disability can be in Tier 3. This flexible model allows teachers to ensure that all students get what they need, when they need it.

Tiered instruction helps students "exit out" from special education interventions if they no longer need them

By addressing needs as they emerge, school teams can actually decrease the number of students who require an IEP. While "exiting out" of special education should not be the goal for all students with disabilities, some students may develop independent skills and no longer need extra services. Research has found that when some schools train teachers in a tiered model of support, "special education leaders in these schools say that many students who may have acquired IEPs in other schools no longer require them."[71] More than half of students who receive speech services ultimately after a while don't need them anymore, leaving far fewer who need further evaluation for disabilities.[72] Under an effective system of tiered instruction and accurate identification, services go to students who need them the most when they need them -- rather than to students who may only need services for several years.

For example, the rural Sanger district in California's Central Valley adopted RtI in 2005. When schools trained teachers in providing tiered support for students, they met the needs of many students without using special education services. After adopting RtI, the district's rate of special education identification fell from 10% to 7%. Special Education Director Kimberly Salomonson believes this rate more accurately captures students' likelihood to have a disability in her schools. When tiered instruction helps students reach grade-level success in the general education classroom, she believes "they are not special education and should not be labeled as such."[73]

Similarly, at KIPP Raíces in Los Angeles, whenever possible, the school team makes an effort to exit students from special education services if it is clear that they no longer need them. "The goal is really to have kids become independent," said Medalla Dimapindan, the school's lead resource specialist.

Of course, some students with disabilities will require special education services throughout their entire school career. But for other students, a disability diagnosis does not necessarily mean they need the most intensive interventions. The most effective schools use the data from tiered instruction to determine what interventions work and which can change. They also use data to ensure that students who are no longer struggling can "exit out" when they no longer need extra support.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

CATCH ME WHEN (OR BEFORE) I FALL

The school team regularly tracks every student's behavioral, social-emotional and academic progress to ensure they don't fall behind.

WHAT TO ASK

- Do school staff consistently use a shared school-wide system to monitor and provide support to all students, both with and without disabilities?
- Are all students assessed for strengths and needs, and is student data driving decisions about instruction, behavior, interventions, and resource allocation?
- Do school team members consistently provide accommodations and modifications that enable students to access the curriculum?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network holds each school accountable for monitoring data to detect trends in student performance at the individual, classroom, and school level and adjusts instruction accordingly. Principals are evaluated based on their ability to do this, and their managers intervene and support if they struggle.
- The district / charter school network ensures that all teachers are trained in the best ways to support students with disabilities by allocating funding for both general education and special education teachers to participate in professional development focused on supporting students with disabilities.
- The district / charter school network provides funding for teams of teachers from the same school (not just individual representative teachers) to attend professional development together and collaboratively adjust school-wide practices to better support students with disabilities.
- The district fully funds intervention programs so programs can succeed at the school level.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- Teachers consistently use a shared school-wide system to monitor student data and provide support to both students with and without disabilities. A multidisciplinary team of teachers and staff is responsible for looking at school-wide data and designing interventions to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students.
- Teachers can explain and share documented evidence of the steps they have taken to support specific students, how the students responded, and then how they adjusted.
- The school's professional development calendar includes specific sessions on supporting students with disabilities or integrates special education topics into general training sessions.
- The school reserves time each week for collaboration between special education teachers and the general education teachers.
- All students receive some small-group or individualized instruction every day.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team provides a wide range of increasingly intensive supports to meet the needs of all learners, including those who are struggling and those who are advanced, and proactively works to prevent academic and behavioral challenges. This includes universal screening, early intervention and frequent progress monitoring, all while supporting students to learn and grow independently.
- Comprehensive, research-based intervention processes – like multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) – help schools identify students with disabilities earlier and more accurately.
- Both general and special education teachers at the school have strong training in special education interventions, particularly for the most common disabilities among their students.

CHAPTER 5

MEET ME WHERE I AM AND CHALLENGE ME

The school team provides support for students with disabilities, yet still engages them in rigorous, grade-level content every step of the way.

THE PROBLEM: "WATERING DOWN" INSTRUCTION DOESN'T HELP STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Effective teachers look for ways to differentiate instruction between groups and individualize instruction for specific students. But too often, instead of maintaining the rigor of the material and building students up to that level, school teams "water down" curriculum for struggling students to below the grade level of an average student.

Sometimes this happens because teachers are not given the resources or professional development to understand how to differentiate instruction effectively. Without support, instead of helping students with special needs tackle challenging material, they often lower the bar and make it easier. This does a disservice to these students and doesn't prepare them to tackle even tougher challenges later on. As Chapter 1 "Believe In Me" explains, this lowers expectations for all students instead of giving them the rigor they deserve -- and need -- to accomplish their future goals.

All students benefit from content that challenges them. Of course, it is unrealistic to hold students with very severe disabilities to the same standards as every other student. But often school teams only give students with moderate disabilities curriculum that matches their comfort level and don't provide any academic curriculum at all to students with severe disabilities. This doesn't give these students the chance to grow. With the right support in place, many of these students can rise to challenge.

When these students don't receive challenging material in one grade, it sets them up to be unprepared for challenging material in the following grade, and eventually in college, career, or life. Rigor, with appropriate support, matters at all levels. If school teams constantly water down materials, these students will never have a chance to reach their potential to meet or exceed grade level standards.

THE SOLUTION: USE SPECIAL EDUCATION MODIFICATIONS THAT BENEFIT EVERYONE THROUGH UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL)

An important lesson for educators surprisingly comes from the field of architecture. By law, architects in the United States have to create buildings that have few barriers for diverse groups of people.

However, when architects make adjustments, they don't just benefit people with disabilities. They also make buildings more accessible for a wide range of people. For example, when buildings have ramps instead of only stairs, they not only help those in wheelchairs. They also help parents with strollers, or people with carts.

In the 1990s, David Rose, Anne Meyer and colleagues at the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) developed a theory that applied this same idea to education. They called it Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and based it on the most recent research on brain development and how people learn. Rather than teaching to the middle, in this approach, teachers "engineer" lesson plans, considering how they can make content accessible for the widest range of students without watering it down.[74] When the government reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, they officially included the term "universal design" within the federal law.[75]

At Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, Principal Heath Caceres stresses this point about UDL with his staff: "Everybody has a disability. At some point, everyone has struggled to understand or accomplish something without extra support." By remembering universal design when creating lessons, teachers make sure everybody can access content in the best ways they can.

Research supports this theory. Research from the University at Albany found that "effective literacy instruction for special education students in the early years resembles effective instruction for all students."[76] Some recent studies have shown that when classrooms use differentiated instruction and UDL, they have higher levels of access and learning among all students.[77]

"We used to think our role was to make sure general education teachers knew who was in their rooms so they could make the right modifications," said Michael Tefs, Superintendent of Wooster City Schools in Ohio. "Now, we know our role is to provide time for all teachers to work together to improve instruction for all students."[78]

This means that great special education ends up being great general education. Of course, for some students with more severe disabilities, school teams must still provide one-on-one support specifically catered to their needs. But often, when teachers design their lessons for the widest range of learners possible, these modifications make instruction more effective for everyone.

"We want the paraprofessionals to make that transition from 'I'm just serving Peter' to 'I'm serving everybody,'" said Lafayette Principal Caceres. "We want them to be thinking, 'I'm going to focus on Peter and make sure he's getting what he needs, but I'm going to be able to have a relationship with every student in this class.'"

UDL has become even more important now that student populations are even more diverse. Teachers can't rely on a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Instead, they should consider how adapting a lesson for one group of students can ultimately help all students.

THREE KEY PARTS TO UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

1 - Present content in different ways

First, UDL emphasizes presenting content in multiple ways. This allows students with different learning styles to access the information equally. For example, for one lesson, a teacher gives all the eighth grade students in her class a book at a ninth grade reading level. But she gives her struggling students -- whether they have a disability or not -- a shorter passage to read and has them read it several times.

She also provides these students with guided notes to help them summarize each part, and covers a list of vocabulary words with them before reading to make the text less overwhelming. Strategies like this still expose struggling students to high levels of rigor, but in more bite-sized formats.

In math, if a student learns best from hands-on activities, teachers can give her clay, food or wooden blocks in order to practice numerical problems.[79] To be clear, teachers should still expect students with moderate disabilities to arrive at the same answer as every other student and understand the same standards. Teachers can simply allow students to get there on different paths.

2 - Allow different forms of assessment

Most of the time, teachers have students show what they've learned through written tests and essays. But many Common Core standards do not require that students must show their learning this way. UDL stresses that teachers should allow students to express what they've learned in many ways. For example, when teaching students narrative techniques like dialogue and plot, teachers could ask students to "draw a cartoon strip, do an oral presentation, complete a work of art, compose a musical piece, or write a graphic novel." Students can also analyze dialogue and plot in a short video or a live interview, instead of a written essay if the standard is measuring the students' ability to analyze dialogue rather than their ability to write an essay.[80]

3 - Build upon a student's strengths

Recent research on neurodiversity shows that a disability can also provide unique strengths to a student that can work to their advantage (see Chapter 2 "Include Me").[81]

But too often, special education focuses instead on student deficits. In the past, special educators often taught students how to "live with their disability." In contrast, a neurodiversity-based approach teaches students how to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. That ends up benefiting everyone.

Ultimately, great special education instruction doesn't make content "easier." Instead, it combines high expectations with the right support. Through intentionally designing lessons that cater to all students, including students with disabilities, school teams can ensure that all students feel supported while also being challenged.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

MEET ME WHERE I AM AND CHALLENGE ME

The school team provides support for students with disabilities, yet still engages them in rigorous, grade-level content every step of the way.

WHAT TO ASK

- How does school staff differentiate instruction and interventions based on student needs?
- How do they make sure all students feel supported in taking on rigorous material that they find challenging?

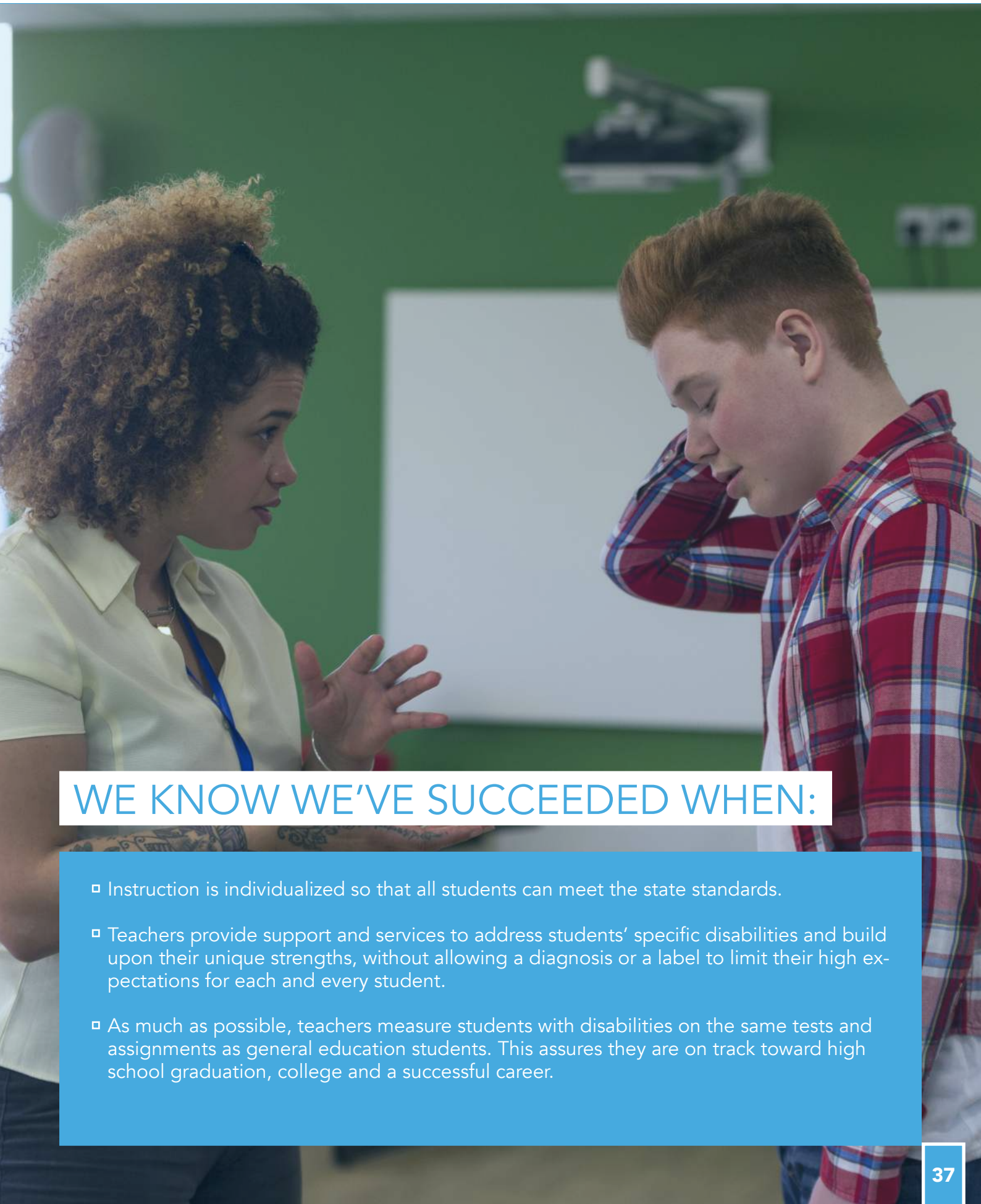
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network leaders train principals how to analyze data to make decisions about differentiating instruction and can explain how principals train teachers in that same process.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- The school provides accommodations so that students with disabilities can reach the same expectations as their peers and only provides modifications (changing the content/expectation) when absolutely necessary. Teachers can communicate a rationale for modifications and accommodations.
- All students, regardless of whether they have a disability, have an individualized learning plan tailored to their unique needs.
- The school team meets before any major transition in the student's education (e.g. moving from elementary to middle school and graduating high school) to align with the student and family on goals, anticipate challenges, and develop a support plan.
- The school has a culture where having different paths to achieve a common goal or outcome is normal and celebrated. The principal, teachers and students can share stories that show this, and students are encouraged to take different approaches to solve problems and reflect on those differences.
- The school trains both general and special education teachers how to use the principles of Universal Design Learning in their lesson planning.



WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- Instruction is individualized so that all students can meet the state standards.
- Teachers provide support and services to address students' specific disabilities and build upon their unique strengths, without allowing a diagnosis or a label to limit their high expectations for each and every student.
- As much as possible, teachers measure students with disabilities on the same tests and assignments as general education students. This assures they are on track toward high school graduation, college and a successful career.

CHAPTER 6

KNOW ME

The school team and families all work together to understand the needs of every student from the student's first day and track the student's progress over time.

THE PROBLEM: THERE'S NOTHING INDIVIDUALIZED ABOUT MOST INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS (IEPS)

A school cannot serve students with disabilities well unless they also know them well. When schools invest the time to understand their students well, interventions are more likely to succeed.

Schools are required by law to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students if their disability affects their access to a "free and appropriate education." This plan should be co-created by the parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, the school/district psychologist, and any other relevant members of the IEP team. Depending on age and severity of their disability, students may also be involved in the process. An IEP keeps everyone on the same page about students' goals, as well as the best ways to support them in the classroom and at home.

But in many schools, this isn't what the process or plan looks like. That isn't because school leaders and teachers don't care. Too often, they aren't given enough time, training or support. School staff have little time to consider the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student, and instead "copy and paste" one intervention plan for every student that comes afterwards.

THE SOLUTION: CREATE SCHOOL-WIDE SYSTEMS THAT HELP TEACHERS LEARN MORE ABOUT EACH STUDENT'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND GET AHEAD OF CHALLENGES

At the most effective schools for students with disabilities, educators use the school-wide systems and tools to communicate with each other about student needs. They use the same data-tracking tools and assessments to document the patterns and trends of each student. In these schools, general education and special education teachers also have time each week to reflect on data, collaboratively plan supports that students need, and work together to ensure that a student's IEP reflects the specific needs of the student.

At KIPP Raíces, the principal sends out a monthly survey to teachers, asking which students need help. Teachers are required to identify at least three students. The school team then develops intervention plans that they monitor on a weekly and monthly basis. Teachers also list what interventions they have already tried, and current teachers can also review past year comments at the beginning of the new school year. The school team learns all this information before they

have a "Student Support Team" (SST) meeting, where they determine an action plan for struggling students. "That way, we don't waste time trying things others have already tried and that haven't worked, or we know to keep going with strategies that have worked before," said Principal Yesenia Castro.

Engage parents to get valuable insight into student needs

Research has shown that parents play an important role in driving student achievement. But family engagement is even more critical for students with disabilities. A 2012 Harvard Family Research Project brief noted that for children with disabilities, families are not only advocates for their children. They also have insight into their children's specific needs that teachers may not have.[82] Research from the University of Florida found many ways in which this insight helps parents support schools. In some examples, parents helped ensure teachers placed students in appropriate classrooms. Other times, parents helped teachers monitor student progress. Parents also provided teachers with ideas for adapting instruction to meet the needs of their children.[83]

A 2016 report by the California Charter Schools Association highlighted several parent engagement strategies from effective schools. Some facilitated parent trainings on how to support students with disabilities. Others had all general education teachers meet with students in small groups outside of the school setting. This helped teachers get to know them better and determine the best ways in which to support them. One school expected each of its general education teachers to do twenty of these check-ins with parents per year. At other schools, all teachers could request home visits when they noticed a student struggling academically, socially or emotionally.[84]

Make data guide the conversation

When making decisions about students with disabilities, many schools only look at a student's annual test results. But the most successful schools use multiple data points to track progress all year long, and adjust instruction. As discussed in Chapter 4 "Catch Me When (Or Before) I Fall," the most effective schools have an organized system for tracking data about their students. That helps schools understand each student's strengths and weaknesses more clearly and track interventions and progress over time.

At KIPP Raíces, the SST process described above doesn't just rely on teachers' observations. Teachers base their meetings on concrete data they've collected on each student over time. Before an SST meeting happens, teachers fill out a form with students' areas of strength and challenge, as well as the interventions they've tried. They also include each student's results on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment of students' growth in learning, data from their "running records" that teachers use to measure reading levels, writing samples, and any other information that helps illustrate the challenge and lack of progress. Teachers gather these same types of data every three to six weeks for follow-up SST meetings with the school and family to determine if things have improved.

"We're constantly looking at data," said Castro. "Parents are rarely surprised by student needs, because they are steeped in their own student's data all year long."

The most effective schools for students with disabilities also assess students multiple times throughout the school year, according to a 2016 California Charter Schools Association report on special education.[85] Some schools also encouraged teachers to give students daily "exit tickets" - a quick assessment question students have to answer before leaving class. This helps teachers check how much students have progressed each day.

At Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, school leaders and staff share data on student performance and academic objectives across the school, and make school-wide decisions based on what they find.

Data helps the school team make decisions about how to use resources, make interventions in behavior and instruction, and when to move students from one area to the next. The crucial part: it's not just one teacher doing this on her own. The entire school team works with data together in order to make better systematic decisions across the whole school.

Invest time in creating strong IEPs

An IEP should not be a vague summary of a student's disability and a generic set of interventions. It should reflect the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student. At Two Rivers in Washington, D.C., the school focuses on making sure that IEPs are "tailored to the specific needs of the student, goals are tied to clear standards and data, and goals allow tracking of progress and adjustment of instruction to meet their needs."[86] Though this may sound like it's just meeting the basic expectations for an IEP, very often most IEP goals are not tied to grade-level academic standards or any concrete measures of student performance at all. When school teams use grade-level expectations or other concrete measures as reference points within the IEP, they can help teachers, parents, and students develop a clear picture of what the student needs to work on to demonstrate growth.

The most effective schools prioritize getting to know their students early. They work together with families to get as much insight on a student as possible. Then they use data to help determine what kinds of support work best. That goes beyond creating a strong IEP. It means taking a holistic view of each student that includes data, as well as personal insight into their strengths and weaknesses.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

KNOW ME

The school team and families all work together to understand the needs of every student from the student's first day and track the student's progress over time.

WHAT TO ASK

- Do school teams build strong, trusting relationships with students with disabilities that help them to strengthen instruction and support?
- How do they use data to regularly track students' progress and understand their unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs?
- Does the school team authentically engage a wide range of school staff and the parents in the IEP process to ensure the IEP is a meaningful tool that guides the instruction for that student?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network leaders set policies that encourage school staff to frequently communicate with parents about student progress and provides technology that makes it easy to do so.
- The district / charter school network leaders have regular town hall or open forum meetings with families to hear concerns regarding special education issues at the district level.
- The district / charter school network leaders have an easy-to-use system that allows all teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and the family to easily access a student's IEP online and obtain a hard copy.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- The school and family communicate weekly about student progress and challenges, and at least quarterly about whether or not the student is accomplishing academic goals.
- Teachers know and can articulate each student's strengths, interests and goals, beyond what's written in the IEP.
- Students know their data and can talk about where they are succeeding and where they need help.
- The school is welcoming to students, and students feel connected to the staff. Students can identify several adults on campus whom they can go to for support - people whom they can seek out if they have a problem.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team builds strong and lasting relationships with students and families.
- Educators use data regularly to measure the academic progress and social-emotional/behavioral development of all students, including students with disabilities, and track whether interventions are working.
- The school team communicates regularly with parents and students about interventions and progress, both inside and outside of school.

CHAPTER 7

INVOLVE ME AND MY FAMILY

The school team engages students in decisions about their own learning and engages parents and guardians as equal and important partners in a child's education.

THE PROBLEM: AT MANY SCHOOLS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS AREN'T AS INVOLVED IN THE LEARNING PROCESS AS THEY SHOULD BE

Research has found that student and parent engagement is critical for students with disabilities. But it's also time-consuming and difficult for teachers who are already strapped for time. As a result, special education interventions often happen to students, not with them. A former high school special education teacher, Toni R. Van Laarhoven, told Education Week that often students in IEP meetings "just sit silently, or people would ask them yes-or-no questions."[87] Education Week also reported that a 2004 federal longitudinal study found that about seven in 10 students with disabilities said they understood what services they would need to deal with their disability. However, less than one-third of these students said they gave their opinions on services to the professionals they worked with.[88]

THE SOLUTION: STUDENTS DO BETTER WHEN THEY'RE INVOLVED IN THEIR OWN LEARNING

School teams need to invest their resources and energy in engaging students and their families. Support is crucial. But ultimately, the goal should be that students with disabilities learn how to ask for what they need. Research has shown that for students with disabilities, a student's sense of self-determination is a particularly important predictor of future academic success.[89] The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center also identified self-advocacy as an important predictor of future education and employment.[90]

The most effective schools for students with disabilities help build these skills early. For example, at Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, staff and school leaders begin conversations with students about self-advocacy around fourth and fifth grade. "We talk with parents about finding ways that a student can cope with their disability even without these supports," said Principal Heath Caceres. "Instead of only saying, 'They need this extra thing' or 'We need to modify this more,' I also want to ask, 'How can they take control of their own learning?'"

This isn't necessarily specific to students with disabilities. All students benefit from taking ownership of their own academic goals and progress. As discussed in Chapter 4, many schools can use "Tier 1" interventions to help promote self-advocacy among all students. For example, teachers can create charts where students color in their reading levels as they advance.

When teachers expect all students to take responsibility for their own learning, it makes it easier for students with disabilities to also have a voice and ask for what they need.

Involve students in developing and revising their Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Perhaps one of the most important ways to promote self-advocacy is to involve students in their own Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan (another plan guaranteed under civil rights law that protects students with disabilities from discrimination and requires schools to meet their needs). "Student Voices," a recent report by the National Center for Learning Disabilities, researched students with learning and attention issues. They found that students who took an active role in their IEP, 504 plan, and transition planning meetings were more likely to self-advocate for their needs. They were more likely to take initiative in planning for their future after high school in general. They were also more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

At Two Rivers Charter School in Washington, D.C., which serves students from pre-K to eighth grade, some students lead their own IEP meetings. Beforehand, the student picks assignments from school to put in a portfolio.

According to the school's website: "Whenever possible, the portfolio also documents the process the student went through to produce each piece of work, meaning that a portfolio includes multiple drafts and the feedback the student received from peers and teachers. Finally, each piece includes a written reflection about the process of creating the work."[91]

At the meeting, the student speaks for the majority of the time. They present their work, reflect on data and feedback, and set their own goals for how to grow in the future. Particularly for students with IEPs, Two Rivers staff believe this helps these students "understand the nature of their abilities and individual challenges" and "develop a clear picture of what they need to work on to demonstrate growth."[92]

Of course, student-led conferences and IEP meetings look different depending on the age and readiness of each student. For example, young students can start by simply sitting at the table. Then they can begin generally identifying their likes and dislikes of different classroom settings. Teachers can help students gather materials before their meeting, analyze their work, and set goals. Over time and as students get older, students can gain more ownership over the process. The ultimate goal is that each student learns self-awareness and self-advocacy. Planning these conferences takes time. But Two Rivers believes "student-led IEPs are so powerful that committing to this time is worthwhile."[93]

Inform families throughout the year

For students with disabilities, parents bring valuable information and support to the table. However, communication needs to run in both directions. Schools should also inform and consult parents about any incidents that happen at school. At the very least, this means involving parents in the Response to Intervention (RtI) process. Chapter 4 "Catch Me When (or Before) I Fall" describes RtI/MTSS processes in more detail. Schools must keep parents informed when their child is struggling and in need of an intervention. Schools should also involve parents when setting IEP goals for their child and in monitoring their progress.

The Mary Lyon School in Boston, Massachusetts creates "individual student communication plans to manage its connections with every family." The K-8 school serves around 120 students, and 41% of its students have disabilities. Parents receive daily "logbooks" explaining their child's progress. According to one Mary Lyon parent, "The school is just as committed to the success and achievement of the special needs students as to any other children in the school. As a parent, it's reassuring that home and school are working together toward common goals."[94] Students feel a stronger sense of support when all stakeholders are on the same page. To do this, schools must commit to spending more time on supporting students and families.

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

INVOLVE ME AND MY FAMILY

The school team engages students in decisions about their own learning and engages parents and guardians as equal and important partners in a child's education.

WHAT TO ASK

- How do the school and district communicate with parents/guardians?
- How are students involved in their own IEP process, and are they learning to independently advocate for themselves within and beyond the education system?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network provides training for psychologists and special education teachers on how to communicate complex topics in an accessible way so that all stakeholders -- teachers, student, famiy -- truly understand the student's disability, strengths and goals.
- The district requires that each IEP meeting concludes with a short survey to ask families if they felt heard and supported during the process.
- The district trains its special education staff how to run IEP meetings effectively and respectfully to gather family input.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- Students share their strengths and interests at the IEP meeting. And in later elementary grades and beyond, they play a more active role in setting their own IEP goals.
- The school recognizes that parents know their children best and asks for their input on how to better understand and support their students at school. Parent surveys indicate that parents feel they have a clear voice in shaping the goals at the IEP meeting.
- The school provides native language translation to families who need it, as required by law. The school proactively offers these services to families.
- The school team discusses student goals and needs with the family in a straightforward, candid and accessible way. They avoid confusing jargon or acronyms and take the time to explain the diagnosis and approach. During the initial meeting, the school psychologist explains the disability so clearly that everyone understands, has an opportunity to ask questions, and can explain it themselves.
- Parents and other family members work with educators to use the same strategies at home and school.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team supports students to understand their learning goals and needs. Students are supported to track their own progress and have a voice in developing and monitoring their own IEP.
- The school team and parents work together to holistically understand student strengths and challenges, both in the classroom and at home. Parents participate in developing the IEP, monitoring their child's progress, and adjusting the plan for support.

CHAPTER 8
STICK WITH ME

Given the unique learning needs of students with disabilities, they benefit even more than other students from consistency over time. When school leaders and teachers stay at their school for many years, they develop trusting and supportive relationships with students, families and one another.

THE PROBLEM: HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ARE HARD TO FIND AND KEEP

Nationwide, there is a shortage of special education teachers. In the 2013-2014 school year, 49 states reported a shortage of special education teachers or related service personnel.[95] In 2011, 51% of all school districts and 90% of high-poverty schools reported having difficulty recruiting highly qualified special education teachers.[96]

This shortage partially comes from the fact that special education teachers are at an increased risk of leaving the profession. Special education teachers leave the profession at nearly double the rate of general education teachers.[97]

There are many different reasons for this. When researchers synthesized research around the topic in the last 30 years, they found that key factors leading to special education burn-out include the lack of administrative support, paperwork, and challenging student behaviors.[98] Other researchers looked at "role overload" -- the experience of feeling there are "too many unique demands on one's time and resources."[99]

Others point to the unique loneliness of the job. As NPR reported in 2015, "On top of the normal demands of teaching, special education teachers face additional pressures: feelings of isolation, fear of lawsuits, and students who demand extra attention. Many are the only special-needs teacher in their grade or their school, or sometimes in the entire district."[100] Unfortunately, special education teachers face all these struggles daily.

Burnt-out teachers are less effective with their students. A research review showed that students with disabilities who have exhausted or disengaged teachers perform worse.[101] These students are "frequently disruptive, struggle socially and emotionally, and attain their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals less frequently -- all of which impact academic development."[102]

When their special education teachers decide to leave the school, students also suffer. Schools with high "relational trust" (good social relationships among members of the school community) have higher student achievement. But this is only possible when educators stay with a school for a long period of time. As some research has argued, because teacher turnover "disrupts the formation or maintenance of these relationships, it may also harm student achievement."[103]

Many studies have shown that teacher turnover has a disruptive effect on feelings of school community and trust. When teachers leave schools, relationships built between students and schools are lost.[104]

Meanwhile, recent research has found that schools serving low-income communities of color find it harder to both find and retain qualified special education teachers.[105] The uneven distribution of these teachers makes it harder for these schools to achieve high results for students with disabilities.

Special education teachers and school leaders are also underprepared

At the same time, even the special education teachers that stay often lack mastery of general education content. Before helping make general education curriculum more accessible to students with disabilities, special education teachers must first have core knowledge of general education topics on their own.[106] And yet, often special education training focuses on "instructional strategies in isolation from the general education curriculum."[107] As of 2011, only 17 states required a person seeking a special education license to first complete a general education license.[108] In California, only 36% of new special education teachers in 2015–16 had a preliminary teaching credential.[109]

According to a report by the Learning Policy Institute, in California the proportion of underprepared new special education teachers has grown significantly in the last two years. "When schools struggle to fill a position with a qualified teacher, they often hire teachers who are still in training or who hold emergency-type permits without training."[110] By 2015–16, nearly two-thirds (64%) of new special education teachers in California had qualifications below the usual standard. As the Learning Policy Institute noted, "In no other major teaching field do interns, permits, and waivers make up a majority of new teachers."[111]

Unfortunately, principals are also rarely prepared to support students with disabilities. A literature review by the University of Florida found that:

- Most school leadership preparation programs -- even those that "embrace a social justice model of leadership" -- neglect special education. In one study, 53% of principals claimed they had not taken any courses related to special education.

- A review of curriculum of school leadership programs also found that disability and special education topics did not receive much attention. When these topics were addressed, the focus was on the legal technicalities of special education and not on actual instructional practices and strategies.[112]

THE SOLUTION: TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, SCHOOL LEADERS AND DISTRICT STAFF HAVE TO SUPPORT THEIR TEACHERS

Research has shown that students perform better when they have strong academic and social support from teachers, parents, community members, and peers.[113] But this is even more true for students with disabilities, who need stability and consistency more than most. Students with disabilities need ongoing, authentic relationships with caring adults who know and understand them. They need adults who have the knowledge to try different interventions in search of the right solutions, as well as the patience to keep trying when those interventions don't work. In other words, students with disabilities need great teachers who stick around so that both can grow together over time.

Principals must make smart choices about their team and resources

Principals don't have to be experts in special education. But if they aren't, the most successful principals hire people who are.

Heath Caceres, the principal at Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, devotes significant time to actively recruiting teachers who have the expertise his team needs. "I have to realize I'm going to be a learner too. I know a lot of things but I don't know everything. I can't do what Jordan does for PBIS (postitive behavioral intervention and supports), or what Mary does for technology. I can bring in my own expertise, but I also should give them license to go ahead and do what they need to do."

Caceres has made strategic staffing choices to make sure teachers have support. The school is a magnet for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and about 16% of students have IEPs. He took advantage of the flexibility he had in his budget to channel resources towards more teachers with special education expertise. He's hired fewer paraprofessionals and more resource specialist program (RSP) teachers. Whereas most RSP teachers have a caseload of around 30 students, at Lafayette they only have 14. The school also works with two local universities to bring in student teachers for extra help. In the 2017-2018 school year, they had 13 student teachers serving 25 classrooms. The principal believes assistance from student teachers has been a critical factor in preventing teacher burn-out. At Lafayette, the student-teacher ratio is now down to 11:1.

Districts can give principals the autonomy to make critical decisions about staffing and where to put resources. They can also provide support and training for principals to navigate coimplex special education rules. Research has found that when principals put their full administrative support behind special education teachers, students with disabilities achieve more. Ultimately, this leads to better outcomes for students with disabilities or any other students who are struggling.[114]

Create a culture of collaboration

Administrative support alone is not enough. Teacher retention also requires creating a strong culture that includes collaboration. Research has shown that teachers are more likely to stay when they have productive working relationships with colleagues.[115] According to one study examining teachers' working conditions and their job satisfaction: "Teachers have chosen a career in which social relationships are central, and they find that their work with students is influenced heavily by the relationships they form with other adults -- their principal and their colleagues -- in the school."[116] The study found that both new and veteran teachers are more likely to stay teaching in a school where all teachers share responsibility for student success.[117]

A 2013 international survey of middle school teachers by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development also found that when teachers are "included in school decision-making and collaborate often with others," they are "more likely to say that teaching is a valued profession in their society." These teachers also report higher levels of job satisfaction and confidence in their work.[118] Research has also found that teacher collaboration can lead to improved pedagogy, better student behavior management, more student-centered instruction, and a greater ability to reflect on and adapt instruction.[119]

In Snowline Joint Unified in Southern California, Pam DeRenard, an elementary special education teacher, said collaboration was crucial to helping students with disabilities succeed during recent reforms: "All of our students learn differently, and having the time for teachers to bounce ideas off each other has been beneficial to our teaching. We learn new strategies and different ways to reach our students. Collaboration is the key to unlocking our special education students' potential."[120]

Teachers shouldn't have to use their break times to find time to collaborate. Research shows that teachers are more likely to stay in the profession when they have access to collaboration on-site, at school, continuously throughout the year.[121] Snowline District gives special education teachers full days to meet and analyze data together, identify strengths and weaknesses, and collaborate on lesson-planning and instructional strategy. When schools and districts provide that time within a teacher's workday, they send the message that collaboration is a priority.

"Grow your own" - Create a pipeline for great teachers to become school leaders

One of the most effective ways to both combat teacher turnover and improve school leadership is to create more supportive networks for dedicated teachers within a district. The book "Turning Around a High-Poverty District: Learning from Sanger" examined how Sanger Unified School District in California made this work. "Typically, when a district loses strong leaders, it launches a search for outside candidates."[122] Instead, leaders in Sanger made a conscious decision to "grow their own, believing that Sanger's culture and practices are best preserved by those already familiar with them."

From 2008 to 2013, the district filled every single principal and district administrator vacancy with educators within their district. They did this by making several key changes. First, they helped train principals to become strong instructional leaders. Instead of focusing on "managing the school building," they shifted principals' focus to creating a strong, positive school culture. They also held principals accountable for tracking progress on key initiatives.

They encouraged excellent teachers to become school coaches, called Curriculum Service Providers (CSPs). They also partnered with Fresno State University (FSU) to bring an administration credentialing program to the district. CSPs had the opportunity to enroll and attend classes with FSU within the district. This not only made professional development more convenient. It also created "a support group among those enrolled in the program." Many CSPs eventually went on to become assistant principals and principals.[123]

KIPP Raíces, a charter school in Los Angeles, has also taken this approach. The school has seven full-time and one part-time staff member supporting special education, and the KIPP Los Angeles network office has several program managers that serve all the schools in their Los Angeles network, as well as a director of special education, who has worked in many different special education environments and schools for more than 20 years. Since the school was founded in 2009, the special education team has grown by bringing in specialists from other schools or by promoting teachers or specialists to new levels. The principal has worked at the school since 2009 -- she was a founding first grade teacher -- and each year more than 90% of teachers return to the school.

KIPP LA also strives to provide as many services as possible in-house, rather than contracting services out to an external provider. "This way we can actually control the quality of our services," said Kim Dammann, KIPP LA Managing Director of Special Education. "It takes someone who works within the team on an ongoing basis to really meet kids' needs. It's getting to know the teachers and students and understanding the culture, and going above and beyond to help them with whatever they need."

WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

STICK WITH ME

Given the unique learning needs of students with disabilities, they benefit even more than other students from consistency over time. When school leaders and teachers stay at their school for many years, they develop trusting and supportive relationships with students, families and one another.

WHAT TO ASK

- Do the district, CMO and/or school retain special education teachers at the same rate as other teachers? How do they proactively avoid burnout? Do they provide training and support to staff and allocate resources to make sure that workloads are manageable?
- Do they support the growth of staff with ongoing professional development and coaching? Are there strong pathways to develop talent from within (like paraprofessionals training to become teachers)?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- Retention rates for special education teachers and paraprofessionals are equal to or stronger than those of general education teachers.
- The district / charter school network keeps special education teachers at the same school to ensure consistency, rather than rotating them to a different school from one year to the next.
- The district has training and credentialing programs in place to support experienced paraprofessionals to become teachers.
- The district has clear standards and expectations for special education teachers, including an instructional teaching rubric.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- The school leader has developed strong systems to train, coach, and support special education teachers. These systems are not managed separately from the support and development of general education teachers. Special education teachers typically report directly to the principal, not an external supervisor.
- Special education teachers receive coaching and feedback about how they teach and support students, not just about IEP implementation and compliance. Teachers report that the feedback is valuable and helps them grow in their practice.
- Some members of the school's leadership team (principal, assistant principal, deans, department chairs, grade-level chairs, etc.) have special education expertise.
- The school allocates resources and hires sufficient staff in ways that best support students with disabilities. They ensure that special education staff have reasonable caseloads of students.
- The school allocates resources so special education staff provide support to students across one to two grade levels (maximum) OR one to two subject areas (maximum), instead of supporting many different grades and subjects.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- Teachers and other staff actively collaborate to support the needs of students.
- The school team supports special education staff with coaching, professional development, and additional planning time so they can help students succeed.
- The administrative team creates a professional culture of excellence that makes teachers want to stay.

School Profile

LAFAYETTE ELEMENTARY

A diverse and inclusive neighborhood school in San Francisco

At Lafayette Elementary School in San Francisco, principal Heath Caceres stresses this to his staff: "Everybody has a disability. At some point, everyone has struggled to understand or accomplish something without extra support."

It's this culture of embracing difference that has led to Lafayette's school-wide success in special education. At Lafayette, students with disabilities are an integral part of the community, and their needs are openly discussed. A disability is simply seen as part of a student's unique expression of their strengths and weaknesses.

It's no surprise then that students with disabilities at Lafayette outperform their peers elsewhere in the district and state.

Lafayette is one of the city's oldest schools, established in 1867. When their enrollment dropped in the 1970s, they developed a range of programs to attract more families, including one for special education. Lafayette now serves around 550 students from kindergarten to fifth grade, and 16% of students at Lafayette receive special education services. Around 30 of these students are deaf and hard-of-hearing.

As of the 2016-17 school year, around half of Lafayette's students with disabilities were on grade level in math and reading, compared with about 18% of students with disabilities in the San Francisco Unified School District and just 13% statewide. By third grade, most of its deaf and hard-of-hearing students are reading and doing math at grade level and beyond.

In 2016, these strong results helped the school earn a rare Blue Ribbon award, honoring schools that "have demonstrated considerable improvement in the performance of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds."

LAFAYETTE SCHOOL
TITLE I ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

What is the secret to success?

There are many things that the team at Lafayette does that drive their school's success. Most important: it's not just one teacher doing this all by themselves. Every single person on the team works together to help serve students best and they've built strong systems to help them do that.

Inclusion makes every student feel welcome

Inclusion is at the heart of Lafayette's culture - both in word and practice. The school's goal is for students with disabilities to be in general education classrooms with other students as much as possible. When you look into a classroom, it's hard to tell which students have disabilities. About half of deaf and hard-of-hearing students spend their entire school day in general education classes and activities, with a visiting teacher who occasionally provides specialized instruction for students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. The other half split their time between special classes with their deaf and hard-of-hearing peers and general education classes. Each year, Lafayette participates in national "Inclusion Week," in which students discuss and write about what inclusion means to them and how they've felt included or excluded.

Lafayette's key to success - investing in teachers

Lafayette has more teaching staff with training in special education than many other schools of its size. Caceres has prioritized hiring fully certified teachers over paraprofessionals with less training and expertise. He says their expertise has led to more rigorous instruction.

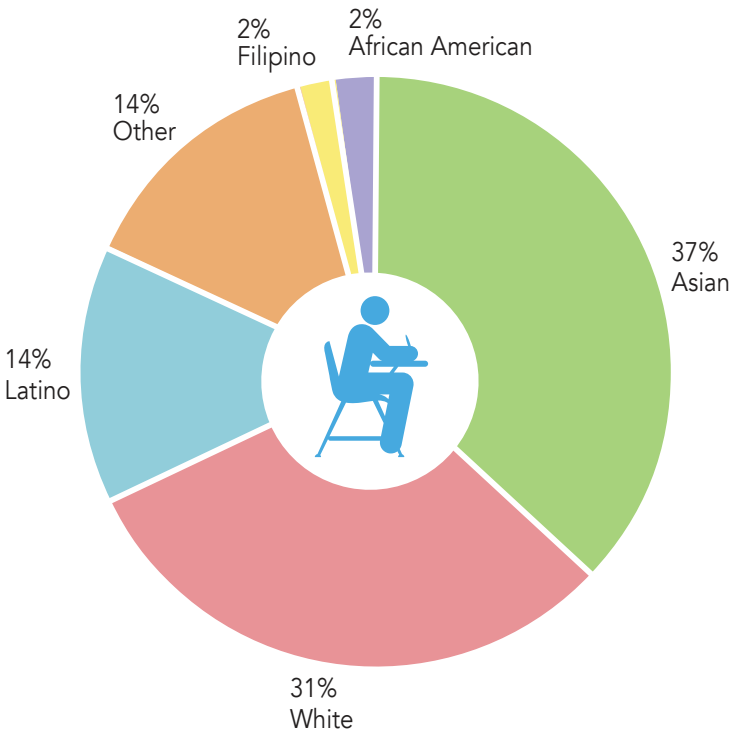
"This was one of the biggest things when I first came here," said Caceres. "I wanted to put more adults who know what they're doing in front of our kids." Caceres took advantage of the flexibility he had in his budget to put more adults in the classroom. That meant hiring fewer paraprofessionals and more resource specialist (RSP) teachers with a full teaching credential in special education.

As a result, Caceres says that special education teachers at Lafayette have a much smaller caseload than usual. Overall, in addition to 22 general education teachers, the school also has three special day class teachers, three resource specialists, and 10 paraprofessionals, all focused primarily on special education. Lafayette also employs a range of other specialists according to its students' needs in any given year, including speech therapists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists.

Lafayette also partners with both San Francisco State University and the University of San Francisco to have at least 10 student teachers each year (with 13 planned for the 2017-2018 school year). This ensures that there are plenty of caring adults ready to help students with disabilities as they navigate the curriculum.

Lafayette serves a diverse group of students

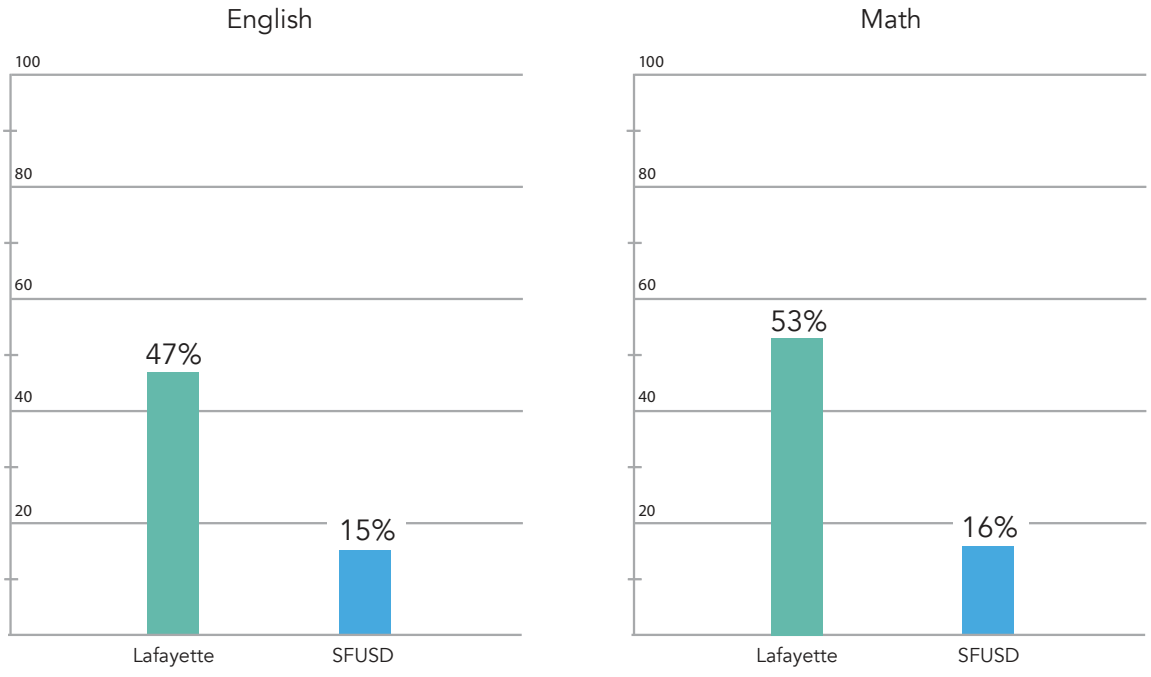
Student enrollment by race, 2016-17



Source: California Department of Education, Enrollment Files 2016-17

Lafayette outperforms San Francisco Unified for students with disabilities

Percent proficient in English and math, 2016-17



Source: California Department of Education, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), 2016-17

It also creates a pipeline of new teachers who have already developed skills and relationships within the school community.

Lafayette also regularly supports teachers' professional development. Teachers regularly observe each other and provide feedback. They analyze student work together in in-house professional development sessions and are encouraged to lead in areas they are passionate about, including going to external trainings or bringing in trainers.

When general and special education teachers collaborate, students win

In addition to three "special day" classes for students who need additional support outside the general education classroom, Lafayette has specified inclusion classrooms at each grade level, in which special education teachers and general education teachers co-teach. These teachers use the same curriculum and plan together how they'll teach it each week. All have been carefully selected to ensure they are prepared to work together. They are also trained in the "Power of Two" approach, which focuses on effective ways for teachers to co-teach.

Great special education is simply great education

Many of Lafayette's special education strategies make instruction more effective for all students, not only those with disabilities. Caceres says this is intentional. "We want the paraprofessionals to make that transition from 'I'm just serving Peter' to 'I'm serving everybody,'" he said. "We want them to be thinking, 'I'm going to focus on Peter and make sure he's getting what he needs, but I'm going to be able to have a relationship with every student in this class.'"

This also extends to curriculum. Teachers receive training in Universal Design Learning (UDL). Instead of adapting curriculum only for students with disabilities, this approach encourages teachers to design lessons from the beginning in a way that makes them accessible to every student - a model for "personalized learning" that benefits all students.

Over time, parents of Lafayette students without disabilities began noticing how the extra support of special education instruction benefited their children too. "We have a lot of parents asking us, "Can my kid without a disability be in a co-taught class too?" said Caceres. "It kind of becomes contagious."

Students receive support, while also learning to advocate for their own needs

Even with all this provided support, Lafayette also makes sure to encourage student independence. Caceres knows that in order for students with disabilities to succeed academically in the future,

they need to learn how to take care of themselves. To set these students up for long-term success, he focuses on giving students the tools they need to help themselves. "In two years, I want these students to be able to survive in a mainstream class," said Caceres. "Their disability is not going away, but what they need from us is to learn how they can scaffold their own learning over time."

At around 4th and 5th grade, staff and school leaders begin conversations with students with disabilities about how they can best manage their disability even without extra support. "Instead of only saying 'They need this extra thing' or 'We need to modify this more,' I also want to ask, 'How can they take control of their own learning?'" said Caceres.

School Profile

KIPP RAÍCES ACADEMY

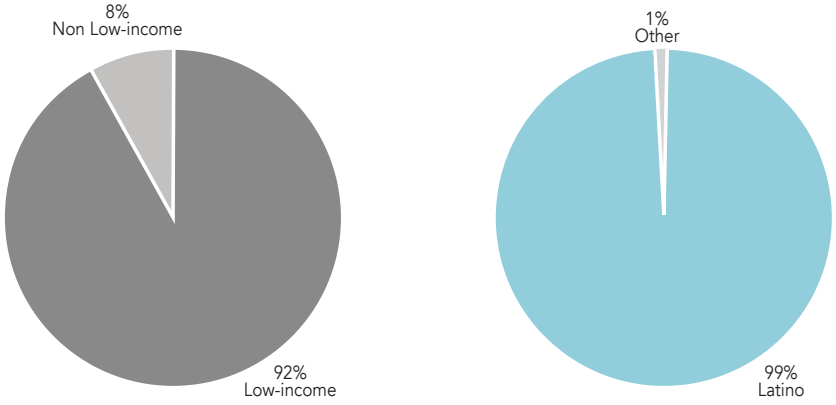
A low-income school in Los Angeles where students with disabilities excel

The staff at KIPP Raíces Academy ("raíces" is Spanish for "roots") are more than coworkers, said the school's principal, Yesenia Castro. They're a *familia*, working together day in and day out to ensure that all students -- including those with disabilities -- learn at high levels. "We are invested in each other's success, because that means success for all of our kids," she said.

That attitude and the resulting systems and supports the KIPP Raíces staff has put in place have helped make the school one of the few California public schools that both serves a low-income community and has almost closed the achievement gap for its students with disabilities. More than 90% of KIPP Raíces' 565 students come from low-income and Latino families, and the vast majority outperform their peers in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). But most notably, the 10% of KIPP Raíces students with special learning needs do so as well: 36% score proficient in ELA and 50% in math, compared with less than 8% in LAUSD. This means that students with disabilities at KIPP Raíces are more than four times as likely to be proficient in ELA and eight times as likely to be proficient in math as the students with disabilities elsewhere in the district.

KIPP Raíces serves predominantly low-income and Latino Students

Student demographics, 2016-2017



Source: California Department of Education, Enrollment Files 2016-17

"It's a really loving place, but it is also coupled with high expectations and a focus on results," founder Amber Young Medina told the L.A. School Report when KIPP Raíces became the first KIPP school to earn a National Blue Ribbon in 2015. KIPP Raíces educators know that every single child is capable of incredible things, and they work hard together to make that a reality.

KIPP Raíces is part of the KIPP LA network of 15 charter schools. Yesenia Castro (principal at Raíces), Kim Dammann (KIPP LA Managing Director of Special Education), and Medalla Dimapindan (lead resource specialist at Raíces) share their thoughts about how the school does it.

A strong culture of collaboration

Like so many school leaders who achieve great results for students with disabilities, Castro approaches her staff and students with a spirit of inclusion and collaboration. "Our special education students are not seen as a separate category or group; they're all our kids, there's a shared ownership," said Castro. Each classroom works closely with others in its grade level, and even across grade levels TK-4.

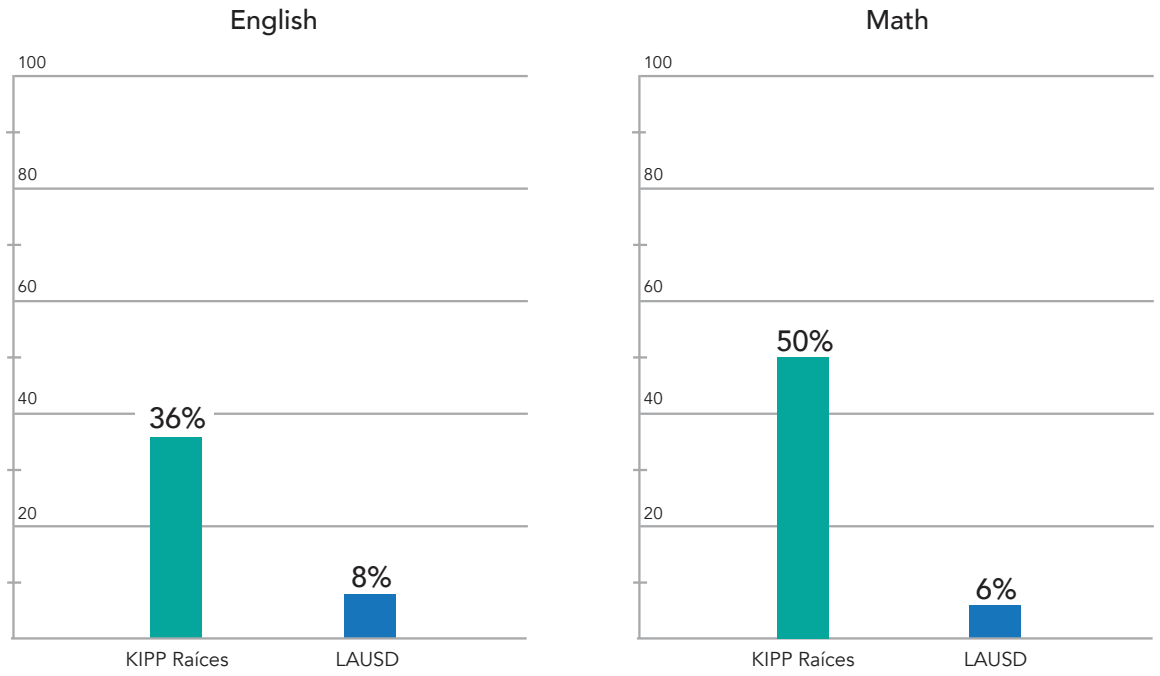
Even more than other children, students with disabilities need stability and consistency. They thrive when they develop ongoing, authentic relationships with caring adults who know and understand them, and who have the knowledge to try different interventions in search of the right solutions -- as well as the patience to keep trying when those interventions don't work.

Many on the KIPP Raíces and local KIPP LA special education teams have worked in special education for a long time, and most have worked together at KIPP for years. The school has seven full-time and one part-time staff member supporting special education, and the KIPP LA central office has several program managers, as well as a director of special education, Kim Dammann, who has worked in many special education environments and schools for more than 20 years. Since the school was founded in 2008, the special education team has expanded, either by bringing in specialists from other schools, or by promoting teachers or specialists to new levels. The principal has also been around since 2009 -- she was a founding first grade teacher -- and each year more than 90% of teachers return to the school.

To keep those relationships strong, KIPP LA strives to provide as many services as possible in-house, rather than contracting services out to an external provider. "This way we can actually control the quality of our services," said Dammann. "It takes someone who works within the team on an ongoing basis to really meet kids' needs. It's getting to know the teachers and students and understanding the culture, and going above and beyond to help them with whatever they need."

KIPP Raíces outperforms Los Angeles Unified for students with disabilities

Percent proficient in English and math, 2016-17



Source: California Department of Education, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), 2016-17

With so many years working together, the special education team is able to communicate openly and frequently about what's working and what's not working, extending that open communication to parents, general education teachers, and regional staff.

"There's just constant communication about what's being done with the students and seeing where they're at," said Castro. Teachers also meet every week for three hours with their grade level and receive tailored professional development on relevant topics, often including behavior management and special education interventions, from special education staff. To help teachers stay focused on instruction, Dimapindan handles all IEP paperwork and meets with every general education teacher every six weeks, rotating through grade levels each week.

Effective instruction is differentiated, not diluted

When schools "water down" content and instruction to ensure that students with disabilities can master them, this does students a significant disservice. When these students don't receive challenging material in one grade, it sets them up to be unprepared for challenging material in the following grade, and eventually in college, career, or life.

Like other schools that achieve great results for students with special needs, KIPP Raíces provides every student with a rigorous curriculum -- but gives students many chances to learn material, with a range of instructional approaches. "Students whose needs have not been met through traditional teaching methods benefit from supplemental, direct instruction, small group work, workshops, call and response, hands-on learning, chanting, role-playing, team-teaching, individualized instruction, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, computer activities, and other innovative techniques," said the school's 2013 charter renewal petition.

This year, the administration has reserved an additional hour of common planning time in the weekly schedule. During this time, grade-level teams meet to plan instruction, look at data, and discuss student progress. Assistant principals also provide classroom coverage throughout the week to allow teachers to leave their classroom and observe other teachers' techniques.

"Differentiation" based on student needs comes so naturally to the school's teachers that it's easy for them to extend it to students with disabilities. "When we look at all our kids -- English Language Learners, special education, general education -- it's more of 'what systems will work for that child in particular?' and that's what we do," one of the school's general education teachers told the California Charter Schools Association for its 2016 report on effective approaches to special education. "Every teacher adjusts their teaching style to meet the needs of the children in the classroom."

Staying on top of student challenges

At the most effective schools for students with disabilities, educators use the school-wide systems and tools to communicate with each other about student needs. They use the same data-tracking tools and assessments to document the patterns and trends of each student, not just those with disabilities. The most successful schools use multiple data points to track progress all year long and adjust instruction. At KIPP Raíces, regardless of whether a student has an IEP, the school has a structure called "Student Support Team" (SST) designed to ensure students get the help they need. Grade-level managers review data regularly and flag those students who seem to be struggling either academically or behaviorally, so that an SST -- made up of administrators, teachers, and parents, and the special education lead (if the student has an IEP) can be created. That team meets to determine the best next steps, then monitors progress together in an SST meeting every few weeks until things improve.

Unlike at some other schools, SST meetings at KIPP Raíces aren't rooted in teachers' mere observations or guesses, nor do they only consider annual test scores. SST meetings are anchored in real (and real-time) data about what students are learning and not learning. Before an SST meeting happens, teachers complete a form with the student's areas of strength and challenge, as well as the interventions they've tried. The form also includes data such as results of the Measures of Academic Progress assessment of students' growth in learning, data from "running records" that teachers use to measure reading levels, writing samples, "exit tickets" that gauge student understanding of a lesson or unit, and any other information that helps illustrate the challenge and lack of progress.

These same types of data are then gathered by teachers every three to six weeks for follow-up SST meetings. If the student isn't improving after three or more SST meetings, students may be referred for a special education evaluation.

"We're constantly looking at data," said Castro. Parents are rarely surprised by student needs, because they are steeped in their own student's data all year long.

The school provides parents with information about types of student data at "back to school night" in the beginning of the year, and then regularly sends home information about how each student is doing relative to grade-level standards.

To involve teachers more deeply and get ahead of problems, last year the principal began to send out a monthly survey to teachers, asking which few students needed help and what interventions they had already tried. Teachers also review the past year's SSTs at the beginning of the new school year, so they can build upon what's worked and avoid interventions that haven't. The SST embodies the school's proactive approach to ensuring students are on track. In a typical year, the school conducts close to 200 SSTs (some for the same student) across a student body of about 550 students.

Tiered interventions help schools adjust support over time

Although many students nationally are identified as having a learning disability and kept trapped in that diagnosis for years, research shows that this is a mistake. Like all students, individuals with disabilities grow and change over time, with their needs for services shifting or sometimes going away entirely. As such, many schools and districts, including KIPP Raíces, have adopted a "tiered instruction" approach, which provides three different levels – or "tiers" – of instructional strategies, depending on a student's individual needs. As students struggle or progress, they receive more or less intense interventions as a result.

The goal is to provide such effective support early on that students can eventually support themselves. "The goal is really to have these kids become independent," said Dimapindan. At KIPP Raíces, students learn strategies for how to manage in spite of their disabilities. Over time, they can then choose to "exit" special education services if these students feel they no longer need it.

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