

High-Quality Instruction & Materials: Ensuring Equity & Inclusion for ALL Students

Blue Engine & SPED Strategies

Blue Engine and SPED Strategies, two organizations on a mission to improve outcomes for students who think and learn differently, have come together to elevate strategies and practices that school systems can use to design for and meet the needs of students with disabilities as part of continued school reopening. Over many years working with schools, school systems, and states, our organizations have developed expertise in improving systems and instruction for our most marginalized students. We share our recommendations with the aim of spurring actions that result in learning experiences that meet the needs of every single student.

To fully address the needs of students with disabilities, school systems should consider taking the following actions before the start of the 2021-2022 school year:

- 1 Design and implement recovery learning programs that provide inclusive and equitable access to students with disabilities.
- 2 Accelerate therapies and supports for students with disabilities.
- 3 Double-down on high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students.

To that end, today we are releasing the third of a three-part series of resources to help school systems take action in each of these areas, **High Quality Instruction & Materials: Ensuring Equity and Inclusion for All Students**.

Our organizations are optimistic about the progress we can make for ALL students when we come together in partnership to advance these key priorities. We continue to support school systems as they work tirelessly to meet the needs of students with disabilities. **Reach out to jessi@blueengine.org and kristi@spedstrategies.com to get involved or learn more about our work.**

[Blue Engine](#) is an education nonprofit that optimizes the power of team teaching, the approach of having multiple teachers work together in a classroom in service of a shared outcome for students. We partner with teachers, schools, districts, and education organizations to ensure that educators can effectively collaborate and individualize instruction for every learner—regardless of race, income level, or learning style. In doing so, Blue Engine delivers mindset shifts and effective practices for teachers and engaging, identity-affirming learning experiences for students.



[SPED Strategies](#) believes every student with a disability deserves a high quality education in an environment where they thrive. We support leaders across all levels of the education system and community by connecting the dots between policy, funding, and academics to advance outcomes for students with disabilities.



The Problem

COVID-19 school disruptions and lost instruction have disproportionately impacted our most vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities. History shows us that when students with disabilities struggle, the typical response is to reduce instructional rigor and segregate them from their general education peers.

School leaders currently face unprecedented challenges, including the pressing need to address learning loss and the emergence of potential legal challenges over missed services for students with disabilities. Separate intensive intervention programs are a tempting quick fix, but they often fail to achieve their aims. In practice, these interventions too often segregate students from the general education classroom and are often unaligned with grade-level standards or real-time classroom instruction. As a result, students fail to ever attain mastery of grade-level content.

Research has shown that students with disabilities learn the most when they are taught in inclusive settings with access to key resources: grade-level learning, strong instruction, and teachers with high expectations (Hehir et al., 2016; The New Teacher Project, 2018). This was true before the COVID-19 pandemic, and remains critically important now as schools plan for learning recovery. Thus, school leaders should strive to bridge the gap by enhancing, rather than diminishing, access to high-quality, grade-level learning each day.

The Solution

To accelerate learning, ensure students with disabilities have access to grade-level learning by doubling down on high-quality curriculum and instruction.

All students, including students with disabilities, are capable of making progress in grade-level learning, every day, with the right supports.¹ As school systems thoughtfully plan for learning recovery, there is much discussion about adding new programs and interventions, some of which would segregate students with disabilities from environments most likely to provide them access to grade-level content. When considering how to accelerate learning for students with disabilities, we urge leaders to start by doubling down on what we know matters the most: providing access to high-quality curriculum and instruction² for every student, every day with the right supports³ and aligning all intensive intervention⁴ to core instruction.

In order to do this, we urge leaders to focus on the following priorities:

- 1** Address critical mindsets of leaders, teachers and support staff,
- 2** Protect core instructional time, especially for students with disabilities, and
- 3** Proactively plan for supports that will enable students with disabilities to be successful during core instruction.

¹ All students with disabilities, including students with significant disabilities should be taught towards mastery of grade-level standards, whether those are regular academic standards, or aligned alternate standards.

² Core instruction uses high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum and instructional materials that ensure all students engage in the full rigor of learning.

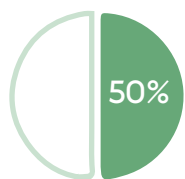
³ Core supports are individualized supports and scaffolds (e.g. curriculum-embedded supports, instructional strategies, specialized supports) that prepare students with the knowledge, skills, or prerequisite learning to engage with grade-level content.

⁴ Intensive intervention is systematic, explicit instruction targeting the foundational gaps that, if unaddressed, will continue to interfere with grade-level learning; they are used in addition to, not as a replacement for, core instruction and core supports.

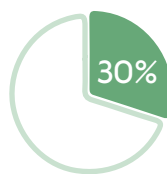
Priority 1: MINDSETS

Address critical mindsets of teachers, leaders and support staff so they can effectively support students with disabilities to achieve grade-level learning.

Data from a 2019 survey conducted by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) and Understood For All showed that general educators vary in their mindsets and beliefs about inclusion. **In fact, only 50% of teachers surveyed felt strongly that students with learning & attention issues can achieve grade-level standards; additionally, only 30% of those same teachers felt strongly that when they try their best, they can be successful teaching students with learning and attention issues** (Galiatsos, p. 13-14).



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Mindsets of teachers can dramatically inhibit the growth of students with disabilities, who are just as capable of achieving at grade level when provided with the right supports (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2017). This must be tackled head-on as part of recovery plans.

In order to do so, the following mindsets must be addressed through leadership and ongoing support:

- All students are capable of achieving grade-level learning with the right supports (*Priorities 2 & 3*)
- All educators are responsible for supporting students with disabilities to achieve grade-level learning (*Priority 2*)
- All educators *can* be successful supporting students with disabilities, even if they don't have special education certification (*Priority 3*)

We go into more detail about how to take action on these mindsets below.



Leadership

School and school system leaders must model these mindsets through the expectations they set and the decisions they make with regard to policies and programming. Additionally, leaders should model effective collaboration and joint decision-making across general and special education in service of breaking down silos that commonly exist between the two.



Ongoing Support

Achievement gaps have widened, and teachers will need more support than ever to provide effective core instruction with aligned specialized supports that enable students with disabilities to achieve grade-level learning. Teachers will need support in building their own efficacy, understanding their roles, collaborating across teams and learning environments, and using data and high-leverage instructional strategies to meet the needs of all learners.

⁵ All students with disabilities, including students with significant disabilities, should be taught towards mastery of grade-level standards, whether they be regular academic standards, or aligned alternate standards.

Priority 2: PROTECT CORE INSTRUCTIONAL TIME, ESPECIALLY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.

Mindsets:

- All students are capable of achieving grade-level learning with the right supports
- All educators are responsible for supporting students with disabilities to achieve grade-level learning.

Research shows that inclusive core instruction with embedded core supports confers substantial benefits to students with and without disabilities (Hehir et al., 2016). For students with disabilities, this includes higher test scores and graduation rates (NCLD, 2017). Therefore, the first priority for school leaders should be to protect core instruction, and support teachers' ability to plan and execute instruction that will meet the needs of all learners.



Prioritize core instruction time in the school schedule.

Students with disabilities should engage in grade-level learning, alongside their nondisabled peers, every day. The school schedule should reflect this principle through the following action items:

- **Prioritize inclusion over pull-out.** Students with disabilities must have access to core instruction led by a content expert. This means that pulling students out to receive core supports, related services, or interventions in a separate setting should not be our first response when students struggle with grade-level content. Instead, students should receive special education and related services in the general education classroom as much as possible.
- **Schedule specialized services, pull out special education, and/or related services around core instruction.** Special education instruction and related services should support the student's success in the general education curriculum. Schools should schedule students with disabilities first so that programming constraints don't get in the way of accessing high-quality instruction at grade-level in the classroom.
- **Provide training and support to families seeking an inclusive education for their children.** Families are active decision makers in instructional setting decisions as part of the IEP team and are often told that pull-out environments are more beneficial because students receive increased attention and support in a small group setting. Schools must intentionally educate families on the benefits of inclusion and partner together to ensure the right supports are in place for students to be successful in an inclusive learning environment.



Create protected space and time for ongoing collaboration.

Teachers will need to adjust the year-long scope and sequence, prioritize standards, and adjust core supports and individualized learning for students. General education teachers, special education teachers, and student support experts will need additional, protected time to collaborate in order to:

- **Form as a team.** Devote time to intentional team formation for all members of the team: general educators, special educators, and service providers. Team formation should incorporate time for explicitly setting a shared vision and developing systems for collaboration, communication, and daily instructional planning.
- **Align on high-priority content.** Teams must align on the [highest-priority](#) content for the upcoming year to ensure all educators are working towards the same goals for grade-level learning.
- **Share expertise.** Devote time for teams to share and develop expertise to meet the needs of all students:

Special educators

need to share their expertise on IEPs, accommodations, supports, and scaffolds so that general educators can design more accessible, effective lesson plans.

General educators

need to share their expertise of their specific content so that special educators can internalize content, uphold grade-level rigor, and align on top-priority learning goals.

Providers (e.g. speech and occupational therapists, counselors, etc.)

need to share expertise so that all educators can integrate functional skills into daily instructional planning.

Paraprofessionals

need to share their deep expertise on individual student responses so that all educators and providers can adjust supports.

- **Reflect and improve.** Teaching teams need time outside of the classroom to reflect on data and share feedback with each other. Now more than ever, teachers will need to ensure they have time to reflect on both student progress and their own collaboration to ensure appropriate adjustments are being made in service of meeting the needs of all learners.

Priority 3: PROACTIVELY PLAN SUPPORTS THAT WILL ENABLE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES TO BE SUCCESSFUL DURING CORE INSTRUCTION.

Mindsets:

- All students are capable of achieving grade-level learning with the right supports
- All educators can be successful supporting students with disabilities, even if they don't have special education certification .

The majority of students will have missed certain prerequisites upon entering their classrooms in the fall. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, students with disabilities were often stuck in an [endless loop of remediation](#), being taught isolated skills below grade level. It is critical that schools shape instructional models and strategies around core instruction to ensure that all teacher efforts are in alignment and directed towards grade-level learning.



Build a shared understanding about individual student needs.

School leaders must build a culture of high expectations grounded in the belief that all students with disabilities are capable of engaging in rigorous learning by:

- **Addressing misunderstandings.** Ensure all educators have [foundational knowledge](#) about learning disabilities and proactively address commonly held misunderstandings about [learning & thinking differences](#).
- **Ensuring all educators utilize IEPs.** Support and expect general educators to become [familiar with the IEPs](#) of the students they support and integrate them into daily instructional planning.



Create responsive data collection mechanisms.

Disruptions to school impacted the typical assessment cycle (diagnostics, progress monitoring, statewide assessments) used to measure progress, adjust instruction, and justify shifts in support. Despite these disruptions, schools should not wait until things “return to normal” to evaluate student learning. It is more critical than ever to establish strong assessment structures, and adjust screening procedures for special education eligibility.

- **Learner profiles.** Teachers should collect and leverage student preferences in [learner profiles](#) to “re-baseline” student learning needs, preferences, strengths, and challenges after a year of learning disruptions.
- **Pre-assessment.** Teachers should administer a pre-assessment ahead of every new unit to understand current student mastery, and to identify the prerequisite skills ideal for accelerated instruction to ensure that all students can access grade-level content.
- **Daily lesson data.** Teachers should collect live data during the lesson to immediately address misunderstandings in addition to administering a daily, grade-level appropriate assessment of lesson mastery to address unfinished learning the next day.
- **Special education eligibility screening.** School leaders should bring together leaders from across the system to make [intentional adjustments](#) to the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) / Response to Intervention (RTI) data collection and review process used for special education eligibility. This should build upon the classroom learner profiles, pre-assessments, and daily lesson data collections.



Focus all instructional models on accelerating grade-level learning.

Schools should begin with student needs and then decide how they will use their human capital to meet those needs. Regardless of the instructional model, all teachers should be designing instruction to accelerate learning in core instruction.

- **Optimize all models to accelerate grade-level learning.** Whether a school is operating a full inclusion-teaching model, a resource model, a substantially separate model, or a continuum or all three, all instruction should advance grade-level learning.
 - **Inclusion and co-teaching instruction** should focus on leveraging the respective expertise of the general education and special education teacher to ensure all students access the full rigor of grade-level learning, every day. These partners need protected time to co-plan units and lessons, embed core and specialized supports during instruction, and analyze student data.
 - **Resource or pull-out instruction** should focus on preparing students (e.g. building vocabulary, symbols, background knowledge) to engage in the full rigor of grade-level learning during core instruction. Resource periods should not be used to provide below grade-level instruction or unaligned intensive interventions.
 - **Substantially separate instruction** should focus on 1) advancing progress towards grade-level alternate achievement standards when students have significant disabilities, 2) building in functional skill development, and 3) creating opportunities for inclusion in school activities (e.g. lunch, specials) and grade-level learning as much as possible.
- **Train all teachers on integrating [high-leverage instructional strategies](#) into core instruction.** All teachers must be explicitly trained on strategies that will help all students, including students with disabilities, engage in the full rigor of grade-level learning, such as:
 - Using flexible groups responsive to daily data
 - Providing pre-planned and [in-the-moment scaffolds](#)
 - Pre-teaching objectives to prime students for core instruction
 - Previewing key terminology, vocabulary, or symbols
 - Building context and background knowledge
 - Providing extra instruction and practice on aligned, critical prerequisite skills
- **Coordinate IEP supports across instructional settings.** Students with disabilities are typically guaranteed supports (e.g. accommodations, assistive technology, sensory support, and accessibility support) as part of their IEP. Teachers must [embed these supports in their daily instructional planning](#) and ensure students receive these supports across instructional settings.

All teachers should:

 - 1 Know the specialized supports in the IEP for all students they support
 - 2 Integrate specialized supports into daily instructional planning
 - 3 Coordinate support delivery across instructional settings
- **Apply innovations to instructional models going forward.** More than ever before, creating strong systems to support students with disabilities will require flexible and responsive supports. Teachers should leverage advances in IEP supports such as accessibility features and assistive technology to support students with disabilities across all instructional models, and during quick pivots to remote or hybrid instruction.

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