

Tutoring: 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 who are at risk of missing key developmental milestones or losing skills necessary for life after high school.
- 3 Double-down on high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students.

To that end, today we are releasing the first of a three-part series of resources to help school systems take action in each of these areas, **Tutoring: 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

We're on the verge of rolling out large-scale tutoring, but there is limited discussion about how these initiatives are being designed to support students with disabilities.

The United States is on the precipice of investing billions of dollars in national tutoring initiatives to help mitigate unfinished learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The recently passed American Rescue Plan, as one example, is sending \$122.8 billion in aid to elementary and secondary schools across the country. Twenty percent of those funds - \$24.5 billion - must be spent on addressing unfinished learning through evidence-based programs such as tutoring to address the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student subgroups, including students with disabilities.¹(American Rescue Plan §2001(e)(1))

It is critical that large-scale tutoring initiatives are designed to create equitable access for students who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19-related unfinished learning, including students with disabilities. Many of these students did not receive the typical specialized instruction, therapies, and services called for in their IEPs, causing them to fall even further behind their peers. While tutoring cannot replace special education, tutoring initiatives present a unique opportunity to build additional strong relationships with caring adults and to accelerate and personalize learning for students with disabilities leading up to the 2021-2022 school year.

The Solution

Key players must proactively design tutoring programs that are explicitly inclusive and responsive to the needs of students with disabilities.

There have been recent calls to action to ensure tutoring initiatives are designed using research-based practices. At the same time, the evidence base for how tutoring programs should be designed for students with disabilities is limited. We advocate that school systems consider the following priorities to ensure that students with disabilities have their needs met alongside their non-disabled peers. The good news is that the decisions districts make to support students with disabilities undoubtedly benefit all students (Galiastos, 7) and a specific portion of the America Rescue Plan funding has been earmarked so that school systems have the resources to take on exactly this type of work.

Programs should be designed with the following priorities in mind:

- 1 Address Critical Mindsets Of Tutors
- 2 Accelerate, Don't Backtrack
- 3 Group Meaningfully
- 4 Collaboration Is Critical

¹ The problem and solution defined here intentionally focuses on students with disabilities supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There are specialized programming decisions, funding opportunities, and legal obligations that are unique to this population.

Priority 1: MINDSETS

Address critical mindsets of tutors so they can effectively support students with disabilities.

Data from a 2019 survey showed that general educators vary in their understanding of learning and attention issues. **In fact, 1 in 3 viewed students' disabilities as laziness; and 1 in 4 believed ADD/ADHD can be outgrown** (Galiastos, 13) - none of which is true. In order to ensure that students with disabilities receive the tutoring support they need and deserve, these myths must be debunked prior to the start of tutoring and revisited regularly.



The following mindsets must be addressed in tutor selection and ongoing support:

- Students with disabilities are capable of reaching grade level standards given the right supports.² *(Priority 2)*
- Students with disabilities benefit from learning alongside peers with similar learning needs, regardless of disability. *(Priority 3)*
- Students with disabilities can learn from tutors who have the right skills and mindsets, even if they don't have special education certification. *(Priority 4)*

We go into more detail about how to act on these mindsets in Priorities 2-4.



Selection

In all program models, select tutors who demonstrate a belief in the capabilities of all students and willingness to learn and grow as instructors to meet the needs of all students. ([Learn more](#))



Ongoing Training

Provide ongoing training to address misunderstandings and reinforce positive mindsets about the capabilities of all students. ([Learn more](#))

² All students with disabilities, including students with significant disabilities should be taught towards mastery of the appropriate grade-level standards, whether they be [regular academic standards](#), or [aligned alternate standards](#).

Priority 2: ACCELERATE, DON'T BACKTRACK

Mindset: Students with disabilities are capable of reaching grade-level standards when given the right support.

To promote learning acceleration, tutoring must be directly connected to a student's grade-level classroom instruction (Robinson, 6; NSSA, 7, 23, 24). It should not backtrack. While planning instruction for tutoring groups, leaders should consider the following:



Align to High-Quality Instructional Material

Leaders must align tutoring to the high-quality curriculum and instructional materials used in regular classroom instruction. This is particularly important for students with disabilities who typically require extra time focused on explicit, structured instruction aligned to core content. ([IES Practice Guides](#))

- Tutors should not be left to plan on their own, unless they are certified or experienced teachers. See Priority 4.
- Leaders should not invest in unaligned intervention programs, whether computer-based or tutor-led, for tutoring.
- Support tutors to leverage the supplemental materials many high quality curricula include can ensure content in tutoring sessions is aligned.



Coordinate Programming

To forward manage a more robust set of summer programming opportunities for students with disabilities, leaders must connect tutoring with existing summer programming for students with disabilities (e.g. [extended school year](#) and [compensatory education](#)). Leaders must plan for staffing, scheduling (e.g. flexible hours, remote services), and logistics with students with disabilities in mind first to promote equitable access to the tutoring program.



Train on Instructional and Specialized Support Strategies

All students, including those with disabilities, benefit from universal design and other evidence-based strategies. Tutors must be explicitly trained on strategies that will help maintain grade-level rigor for students with disabilities. While these strategies are designed to support students with disabilities, they benefit all students. Strategies include but are not limited to:

Instructional Strategies

- [providing explicit instruction](#)
- [pre-teaching academic vocabulary](#)
- [building background knowledge](#)
- [introducing need-aligned scaffolds](#)
- [providing strategy instruction](#)

Specialized Support Strategies

- [integrating assistive technology](#)
- [integrating common accommodations](#)
- [designing physical space for sensory needs](#)
- [promoting self-advocacy & self determination](#)
- [integrating behavior support strategies](#)

Note: The strategies above do not replace the special education and related services defined in the IEP.

Priority 3: GROUP MEANINGFULLY

Mindset: Students with disabilities benefit from learning alongside peers with similar learning needs, regardless of ability.

A significant benefit of tutoring is that it offers supplemental instruction in small groups where students are able to receive individualized instruction (Robinson, 1). While planning group assignments, leaders should consider the following:



Prioritize Support Need Over Mastery

Students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers benefit from working in groups that are needs-based (e.g. decoding), not mastery-based (e.g. low, middle, high). Doing so allows tutors to adapt instructional strategies to meet student needs, thereby increasing student access and engagement. Assigning groups this way requires a deep awareness of student needs. Some tactical approaches to grouping to consider include:

If your tutors are experienced teachers and logistics allow:

You may consider [flexible grouping](#), a proven strategy where students are assigned to temporary groups that last only as long as necessary to achieve a targeted goal. Once met, students are reassigned to new groups based on a new, needs-based goal. Flexible grouping recognizes that student needs are not stagnant - they vary over time and by topic or skill.

If your tutors are inexperienced and/or logistics DO NOT allow:

Assign students to tutors for a longer period of time. Relationships are a key driver of student investment and tutoring success (Robinson, 5), particularly when tutors are not content experts or pedagogical masters. However, leaders should not assume that groups will remain the same from September to June; they should be reconsidered quarterly using recent data on student learning.



Leverage Talent

To promote equity, leaders must place the right tutors with groups containing students with disabilities.

If possible, staff groups with special educators or content experts. They are trained to support students with disabilities, and have access to their IEP goals.

When it is not possible to staff groups with these educators, assign and train tutors based on the following characteristics:

- Positive mindsets about the capacity and talents of students with disabilities
- Relationship-building and pedagogical skills
- Demonstrated willingness to collaborate with certified classroom teachers
- Willingness to receive and apply feedback

Priority 4: COLLABORATION IS CRITICAL

Mindset: Students with disabilities can learn from tutors who have the right skills and mindsets, even if they don't have special education certification.

Tutors must collaborate with other stakeholders in order to effectively personalize and accelerate instruction for students who have unique learning needs. Families should be engaged so that they can both share expertise about their child and stay informed about progress and potential ways of supporting their child's individual needs. It is critical that school leaders carve out time and space for teachers and tutors to collaborate so that tutoring content is aligned to the curriculum and the instructional materials being used in class. Students with disabilities - and all students. Weekly teacher-tutor collaboration should consider the following:

Share Progress



Tutors and teachers should share data regularly (i.e. mastery, strengths, challenges, preferences) to develop deep and shared awareness of students and the approaches that best support them. When done well, this helps to break down the silos between special and general education, and prepares students with disabilities to be successful during daily instruction. Failure to do so risks misalignment between classroom instruction and tutoring, gaps in teacher/tutor awareness of student progress or needs. School leaders can support collaboration by:

- Designing opportunities for tutors to share student progress in tutoring with teachers to inform classroom instruction, and vice versa.
- Creating a culture where data-sharing focuses on goals, progress, and engagement, not on a student's disability status.

Leverage Expertise



For programs using tutors with less experience, tutors can learn from the teachers with whom they collaborate. Some tactical strategies can include:

- Inviting tutors to observe and support regular and special education classroom instruction
- Creating anchor charts with helpful strategies students can draw from during tutoring sessions
- Offering tutors bi-weekly or monthly trainings, including case study analysis, student work analysis, and strategy instruction

Ensure Family Alignment



Parents of students with disabilities have a unique lens into student needs that can be helpful for tutors. Families should be engaged as part of "the team" so that tutors can gain additional context about how to best support the students whom they are working with. (NSSA, 25)

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