

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the education community to rapidly adjust instructional practices amidst continuously changing circumstances, especially in special education. Educators had to reimagine their definition of FAPE to focus on meeting individual student needs across a variety of contexts and circumstances. Despite the challenges, many educators developed or refined instructional and special education practices that more fully support the learning of all students, including students with disabilities.

Grounded in learning from March 2020 to present¹, this guide supports educators and school leaders in making key shifts toward inclusion within their instructional processes by

- ✓ **planning for flexible and responsive instruction,**
- ✓ **delivering instruction inclusively and efficiently, and**
- ✓ **using data to continuously improve support for all students.**



¹ This resource reflects both direct field-based work with states, school systems and schools as well as extensive dialogue with practitioners across the country.

Planning for Flexible Instruction that Responds to the Needs of All Students

When planning for instruction during the pandemic, educators and school leaders were forced to expand outside of the boundaries of classrooms and school buildings. The challenge of these novel planning approaches nonetheless created new access points to tailored, high-quality instruction for students with disabilities. Going forward, educators and school leaders can streamline the planning process by making the key shifts toward inclusive, responsive instruction described below.

Key Shift

From the start of the planning process, utilize flexible, digital tools to enable all students to deeply engage with high-quality instructional materials.

School Leaders should:

- Select, and provide professional development on, high-quality curricula that offers digital resources and teachers resources to individualize support for students. For example, [Illustrative Mathematics²](#) offers digital resources aimed at supporting distance learning and resources to address unfinished learning.
- Continue school-wide use of learning management systems by funding platforms for all educators, standardizing use of one platform school-wide, and providing training to educators and special education providers.
- Ensure students are supported in using technology to access grade-level learning at school and at home.
 - » Continue to provide all students with technology, including standardized tools for all students (ex. Chromebooks) and assistive technology to support specific learning needs (ex. enlarged screens, microphones, AAC devices).
 - » Provide training on assistive technology to all educators (not just special educators) and provide assistance to families on using (assistive) technology at home.

Educators should:

- Plan for how [teaching and learning will look](#) while utilizing diverse formats (ex. [flipped classrooms](#), virtual courses, [personalized learning tools](#)) to deliver core instruction.
- Continue to use a learning management system to organize curriculum and provide students with direct access to instructional materials and supports, even during face-to-face instruction.
- Build student autonomy in using technology to engage in learning.
 - » Ensure students are prepared to engage in classroom instruction. For example, prepare picture cards or pre-load AAC apps with core content vocabulary.
 - » Ensure students regularly use technology at home to complete homework assignments (ex. using a personalized learning platform at home for extra math practice).

Why It Matters

In the current moment, teachers are dealing with burnout from the cumulative impact of the pandemic, resulting in shortages. At the same time, students, educators, and school leaders have more access to technology and digital instruction than ever before. If educators and school leaders intentionally adopt these novel tools, they can both increase their own efficiency and effectiveness to reduce burnout, and provide much needed individualized support to students with disabilities.

² This is included for illustrative purposes only. For additional information on vetted, high-quality curricula options, please consult [EdReports](#).

Key Shift

Refocus staffing plans from fixed, school-based models to flexible, agile teams that support each student in accessing grade-level learning.

School Leaders should:

- Rather than planning staffing within physical school buildings, use [staffing models that plug in staff to meet student needs](#) across schools, districts, and even state lines. For example, rather than hiring literacy specialists school by school, use virtual instruction and flexible scheduling to allow the specialist to provide services to students across multiple buildings.
- Plan for more efficient and effective related services delivery that aligns to core instruction by scheduling related service providers to join classes, whether in-person or virtually, to support students in accessing grade-level content real-time.
- Use technology to streamline collaborative planning between general and special educators and related service providers across classrooms and buildings (ex. host planning meetings online).

Educators should:

- Explicitly include collaboration with special educators and related services providers when planning for instructional delivery and student work. For example, plan for a special educator to pre-teach content before delivering a flipped classroom module, and for a speech therapist to join the student in a breakout room to practice skills within the virtual core content lesson.
- Use technology to virtually collaborate with special education service providers in planning to address specific student needs. For example, use Google Docs to share lesson plans with service providers and collaborate on aligning individualized support to IEP goals in the context of core instruction.

Why It Matters

Following the rapid shift to virtual instruction during the pandemic, it has become possible to recenter staffing plans around student needs, rather than physical boundaries between schools and districts. When educators and school leaders plan for these agile and flexible staffing models, they increase students' access to support with engagement in rigorous curricula. These efficient models can also better ensure that students continue to receive the support they need in the case of personnel shortages.



Delivering Inclusive and Responsive Instruction

Following unprecedented disruptions to traditional instructional models, instruction during the pandemic has transformed to become more flexible, individualized, and relationship-focused. This newfound focus on personalizing instruction for all students has created new opportunities for students with disabilities to access high-quality instruction. However, the rapid changes required incredibly heavy - and unsustainable - work from educators and leaders. Moving forward, systematizing shifts toward inclusive and responsive instruction greatly expands equity for students with disabilities while efficiently streamlining processes for educators.

Key Shift

Leverage novel instructional structures to individually tailor support to each student's strengths and needs.

School Leaders should:

- Prioritize a **personalized learning** approach school-wide by providing professional development and technical assistance to educators on how to use the resources within high-quality instructional materials to support individual student needs and strengths.

Educators should:

- Using the digital resources provided within high-quality instructional materials, leverage asynchronous structures to provide individualized support to students. For example, use **asynchronous elements** of high-quality instructional materials to address any foundational learning gaps, such as phonics instruction, that might impede grade-level learning.
- Leverage the flexibility of virtual tools to provide personalized learning that supports individual student strengths and needs. For example, in a **station teaching model** for a math class, use an online **personalized learning platform** to provide additional, individualized support.

Why It Matters

The novel instructional approaches that surfaced over the past two years have broadened the opportunity for responsive, individual student support. When these approaches are systematized into core instruction, they become increasingly manageable for educators and school leaders and provide students with disabilities with authentic access to a free and appropriate public education.

Key Shift

Using technology and flexible models, expand opportunities for students to engage in and demonstrate individual learning.

School Leaders should:

- Support teachers to measure student learning through flexible, **multi-modal assessment** tools, rather than only adhering to traditional written assessment.
- Provide training and assistance to teachers in using learning management systems and virtual tools to provide feedback to students on their independent work, even in the context of traditional instruction.
- On a school-wide level, design programs to include flexible methods for demonstrating learning to increase access (ex. **Credit recovery systems with virtual participation**).

Educators should:

- Leverage technology to provide students with multimodal options for work products (ex. Youtube videos or dictation sites in addition to written work) to demonstrate learning across content areas.
- Ensure the **cognitive lift of learning is centered on students** by assigning projects that allow for variation in output and giving students the opportunity to reflect and self-assess.
- Use high- or low-tech approaches to provide feedback as students independently practice skills and build knowledge. For example, teachers can provide real-time feedback on student writing using comments on Google Docs, or use Canvas to voice-record feedback on student work.

Why It Matters

By offering flexible options for students to engage in learning and express understanding, educators and school leaders increase engagement by shifting the cognitive lift of learning to students and expand the opportunities for students with disabilities to demonstrate achievement. This allows teachers to focus on effective instruction while offering inclusive opportunities for all students to succeed.



Key Shift

Even as education returns to school buildings, prioritize relationships with students outside of traditional classroom structures.

School Leaders should:

- Schedule time and provide resources for personal teacher-student and student-student engagement (ex. Virtual lunch buddy programs, one-on-one student-teacher check-ins).
- Prioritize **trust, transparency, and capacity-building** with families through open communication and regular assistance. For example, offer virtual sessions for families on supporting students to use technology at home, or use social media to keep families informed on school events.
- Include full engagement with all students, including those with disabilities, within school-wide criteria for educator effectiveness.

Educators should:

- Offer novel engagement with students through activities like lunch buddies, online clubs, and individual meetings to build trust and fuller engagement with students. For example, some schools intentionally pair students with social-learning needs like students with Autism with a mentor-buddy during lunch.
- Engage with families, both in-person and virtually to collaboratively support students in reaching their goals. For example, use a **classroom social media page** to streamline virtual communication with parents.

Why It Matters

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it abundantly clear that meaningful connection is critical for student success. When educators and school leaders continue to prioritize relationships with students and families outside of the classroom, they ensure that students have their needs met and can fully, meaningfully engage in their education.



Using Data for Continuous Improvement

Amid the major shifts in planning and instructional delivery at the beginning of virtual learning, educators and school leaders grounded themselves in data to measure progress and determine success. A best practice on individual, real-time data on student learning emerged from these practices. Moving forward, educators and school leaders can provide increasingly effective support to students by using regularly-collected data to continuously inform instructional delivery and planning.

Key Shift

Regularly collect data and feedback on student learning, and use this information to pivot daily instruction.

School Leaders should:

- Support teachers in structuring **rapid, real-time measures of student learning** to gather information about student learning and pivot to provide more intensive support as needed.
- Assist teachers in using computer-based assessment systems (ex. **Read Naturally**) that streamline collecting student learning data within the instructional process, rather than requiring data collection as a separate, extra task.
- Guide IEP teams in addressing student support needs in the most inclusive setting possible. For example, a student struggling with literacy who needs deeper support with communication. Rather than immediately pulling the student to a less inclusive setting, more supports such as assistive technology for use at home and school, additional computer-based personalized learning, and speech therapy in a break-out room during a virtual lesson.
- **Prioritize students' feedback** on their academic and socioemotional experience as critical components of creating an inclusive school culture in which all students can learn effectively.

Educators should:

- Leverage **exit tickets** during both synchronous and asynchronous instruction to evaluate student understanding learning in real time, and use this information to make instructional shifts during the lesson or for the next day. For example, provide additional, targeted support by collaborating with a special educator to pre-teach content, using an online learning platform to accelerate learning at home with a school-issued laptop.
- Normalize regularly collecting and acting on feedback from students on their academic (ex. instructional delivery individual learning supports) and socioemotional experiences, using either high-tech (ex. Zoom polls, surveys in Canvas) or low-tech (ex. Paper surveys as exit tickets) options.
- Integrate options for targeted support alongside core instructional planning. For example, the last student feedback survey revealed that some students are struggling to keep up with the pace of the class, while others find it too slow. Using these data, plan to offer supplemental instruction using asynchronous flipped classroom models as needed to keep all students on track.

Why It Matters

Despite the uncertainty of education during the pandemic, educators and school leaders have more tools than ever to gather information on student learning and pivot their instruction in response. By regularly collecting and acting on these data, educators and school leaders can continuously improve support for all students, including students with disabilities.

Want to learn more? Email support@spedstrategies.com for more information.

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