

Key Shift 2: Supporting Individualized Student Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to education systems, especially in special education. Educators, school leaders, and administrators have been tasked to maintain compliance with federal and state special education requirements while confronting day-to-day ambiguity and managing widespread “learning loss.” Despite these challenges, many administrators developed innovative, new practices to center student needs while maintaining compliance with special education policies over the course of the pandemic. These shifts represent an opportunity to reimagine IDEA from physical inclusion in classrooms to a full commitment to supporting the individual needs of all students with disabilities.

Administrators can leverage these learnings from the pandemic to center student needs when they:

- ✓ leverage flexibility within policies to build resilient processes that center student needs,
- ✓ utilize flexibility to provide responsive support for discrete student needs,
- ✓ strategically fund student needs through national and local funding sources, and
- ✓ fully and flexibly engage families as partners in special education.



Key Shift 1: Leverage flexibility within policies to build resilient processes that center student needs.

The pandemic forced special education teams to think creatively about how to meet policy requirements and timelines under rapidly changing circumstances. As a result, schools leveraged flexibility within policies to address student needs in novel ways. When school leaders streamline these practices, they build resilient processes that center student outcomes while ensuring compliance.

School Leaders should:

- Flexibly schedule special education processes to both prioritize student learning and ensure students receive evaluations for critical services as soon as possible. For example, rather than working backwards from timeline requirements to schedule evaluations, treat timelines as “boundaries to work within” and plan evaluations so students do not miss core instruction time.
- Use flexibilities in policy requirements to ensure student needs are met across staffing shortages. For example, clarify which [components of an evaluation](#) must be in-person and which can be virtual, and coordinate staff to carry out each component across contexts, rather than relying on one in-person staff member to complete evaluations.

Why It Matters

In developing new practices to meet policy requirements during the pandemic, school leaders reframed policy compliance from an end-goal in itself to a boundary within which they could focus on student outcomes. Streamlining this approach allows schools to efficiently meet policy requirements and prioritize student outcomes more than ever before.



Key Shift 2: Utilize flexible models to provide responsive support for discrete student needs.

Innovations in instructional delivery and service provision have greatly expanded the continuum of services available to students with disabilities, offering school leaders increased options to support student needs within more inclusive settings than ever before. School leaders can leverage these practices to shift toward increasingly responsive support that directly addresses specific student needs.

School Leaders should:

- Using real-time data and flexible scheduling, leverage service providers to innovatively target discrete student needs. For example, a student who receives counseling services does well in the morning but needs proactive practice with self-regulation to engage in learning in the second half of the day. Instead of receiving services within the typical 30 minute block two times per week, the student could receive ten-minute check-ins each day after lunch.
- Guide IEP teams to think creatively about the most inclusive settings possible to address student support needs. For example, a student with severe health impairments previously received one-on-one instruction but attended virtual core instruction lessons with peers during the pandemic. Moving forward, the student could continue to participate in core instruction by leveraging tools, including assistive technology, for online learning and hybrid participation.

Why It Matters

Educators and school leaders have more tools than ever to gather information on student learning and pivot support in response to specific needs. This shift toward more targeted and individualized support ensures that staff focus their time on the most impactful student needs and that students are fully supported in reaching their goals.



Key Shift 3: Leverage local and national investments to sustainably and strategically fund student needs.

In response to the challenges of education during the pandemic, districts received an unprecedented level of investment through ESSER and increased IDEA funds. To maximize the impact, administrators should use these one-time funds to invest in the infrastructure needed to stand up [evidence-based programs](#) to address the needs of all students. At the same time, administrators should restructure IDEA and other funds to lay the groundwork to [sustain these investments](#) to support the unique needs of students with disabilities for years to come.

Administrators and School Leaders should:

- Using data on student learning, plan to strategically apply funding sources to meet specific needs using evidence-based interventions, rather than recycling past years' line items. For example, data indicates a need to address socioemotional learning (SEL), especially for students with disabilities, but the past year's budget did not include SEL. Use ESSER funds for the initial investment in SEL curricula and aligned professional learning that includes personalized learning resources.
- Plan to use one-time federal funding to make up-front investments that support all students, including students with disabilities. For example, use ESSER to invest in [high-quality curricula](#) that includes tools for personalized learning, and use IDEA funds to fund specific assistive technology that allows students with disabilities to access the curriculum.
- When hiring new staff to provide evidence-based interventions to students who were impacted by learning loss, consider [braiding](#) pandemic relief funding and IDEA formula funds to support the positions. This strategy makes it viable to retain positions after pandemic relief funds expire, and allows flexibility for the most qualified staff to support specific needs of students with disabilities, even if they also work with other students.

Why It Matters

Investment in educational recovery during the pandemic, while massive, does not automatically translate into short-term recovery or long-term improvement in student outcomes. However, when administrators and school leaders strategically apply funding sources to invest in long-term solutions and plan for sustainable funding support, they maximize both the effectiveness of investment to accelerate learning for students with disabilities.



Key Shift 4: Fully and flexibly engage families as partners in special education.

When face-to-face meetings became impossible during the pandemic, schools developed creative and novel methods of communicating with families about their child's progress. Moving forward, administrators can streamline these practices to ensure families of students with disabilities are engaged as full members of the IEP team.

School Leaders should:

- Leverage practices developed during the pandemic to include families as full partners in IEP planning. For example, continue to offer families the choice between **virtual** or in-person IEP meetings to ensure they can participate, and use meeting time to explicitly discuss how families can partner with educators to support students in meeting their goals from home.
- Continue to use and evolve school-wide systems for families to stay updated on their student's progress. For example, rather than only sharing updates during formal meetings, provide quick, regular updates to families via email, text messaging, or a learning management system.
- Systematize school-wide structures for building relationships with families and developing their capacity to support student progress. For example, offer workshops for families on how to prepare for what to expect from a reevaluation that are accessible in multiple languages and formats (ex. both in-person and asynchronous, virtual options).

Why It Matters

All students, including students with disabilities, learn best when families, educators, and school leaders align their support at school and at home. By reimagining opportunities for family engagement within special education processes, school leaders can maintain compliance while fully engaging with families as valuable members of the IEP team, resulting in more robust support for students with disabilities.

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

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