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Governance Brief

Best Practices in Special Education

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Introduction

California's current funding system for public schools, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), provides board members with more flexibility in decision-making at the local level. Recognizing that communities know their students best, the formula allows local educational agencies (LEAs)—school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools—to spend funds in ways that they believe best meet the needs of their students.

This brief focuses on best practices that contribute to positive school outcomes for students with disabilities, including appropriate educational placement. These practices include both those that are legally mandated and those that have been proven effective through research and practical experience.

Improving Outcomes: The Need for Best Practices in Special Education

Schools are responsible for educating all students, yet students with disabilities often underperform on multiple measures when compared to their peers without disabilities. Proportionally, fewer students with disabilities graduate from high school and enroll in two- and four-year colleges than their peers without disabilities, and young adults with disabilities who enroll in college are less likely to receive a bachelor's degree than their peers. Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed as adults, more likely to work part time, and more likely to work in low-wage jobs that offer little opportunity for advancement.¹ Students with disabilities are also more likely to be incarcerated than their peers without disabilities.²

In this brief you will find:

- » Information about the need for best practices in educating students with disabilities
- » Information about the value of a coherent system in educating all students, including students with disabilities
- » Best practices that address legal requirements for special education
- » Additional best practices for instruction, school climate, and teacher support that benefit all students
- » Questions for board members to consider

Yet, there is much LEAs and schools can do to improve outcomes for these students. As researchers have learned more about effective instructional and organizational practices, education leaders have responded by promoting successful strategies, services, and policies. While board members are not responsible for administrative details or implementation of strategies, they can better support their schools and the students they serve when they have a foundational understanding of best practices for students with disabilities.

The Value of One Coherent System

One unintended result of the passage of the landmark Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975,³ was the development of what some see as a dual-education system: special education and general education. The principal reasons for this were: 1) the federal money designated for special education was separate from state general education funds, and 2) IDEA supported specific kinds of services, which generated a separate credentialing system to prepare the educators who wanted to teach students with disabilities.

A principal objective of Congress in the 1970s was to “educat[e] children with disabilities with their nondisabled peers . . . [while] providing the necessary services for making that happen.”⁴ Special education was intended to be the necessary services and supports that students with disabilities needed if they were to receive the full benefit of their education.

As recommended in the 2015 California Special Education Task Force report, the state has moved toward a single system for educating all students, including those with disabilities.⁵ One important aspect of this coherence is that California now includes students with disabilities in its statewide accountability system.

The best practices discussed in this brief are integral to a coherent system of education for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Together, these practices can enable all students to grow and learn and help make it possible for special education and general education to become one seamless, coordinated system.

Practices that Address Legal Requirements for Special Education

Inclusion and Least Restrictive Environment

LEAs are required to ensure that students with disabilities have the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. This is called the least restrictive environment (LRE). At the same time, LEAs must provide students with disabilities the supports and services they need to have the opportunity to meet challenging objectives and access the curriculum. For most students with disabilities, the LRE is the general education classroom.⁶ Removing a student with a disability from the general education environment should happen *only* if the student cannot receive benefit in the general education environment, even with appropriate supportive aids and services.

The benefits to students with disabilities of inclusive classrooms in terms of post-school outcomes—particularly

employment—have been well-documented.⁷ A commonly cited benefit is that inclusive classrooms reflect the diversity of the post-school world, which allows students to learn from and appreciate diversity in backgrounds and perspectives, easing their transition to adult life.⁸ Research has also confirmed higher academic achievement for children with cognitive disabilities who received their instruction in inclusive general education settings.⁹ This may be in part because higher expectations are associated with higher achievement.¹⁰ These classrooms may also employ peer modeling, an effective practice where students learn from each other.¹¹

Educating all students together has been shown to produce better outcomes for students without disabilities as well.¹² Research indicates that this may be in part because teachers must consider a variety of ways to deliver instruction; create opportunities for students to practice skills and develop their understanding of concepts and ideas; and offer different ways for students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do.

Full Continuum of Services

While research confirms that inclusive settings benefit most students with disabilities,¹³ some children will have more opportunities to learn in specialized settings, those that can offer the kinds of intense supports that cannot be provided in a general education classroom. In view of this, the IDEA requires that schools maintain a full continuum of placement options and that “each child’s educational placement must be determined on an individual case-by-case basis depending on each child’s unique educational needs and circumstances, rather than by the child’s category of disability.”¹⁴

The IDEA requires each student to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Parents, educators—and, if able, the child—work together to decide which option is appropriate for the student. These possibilities include instruction in general education classes, special education classes, nonpublic schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions.¹⁵

Early Intervention

Early intervention is a term most often applied to the range of services that are mandated by the IDEA¹⁶ for babies and very young children who show signs of disability or developmental delay, as well as for their families.¹⁷ The understanding of the importance of early intervention emerged from decades of research showing that children’s earliest experiences play a crucial and lasting role in their brain development.¹⁸ High-quality early intervention programs for vulnerable infants and toddlers can reduce the

incidence and severity of future problems in their learning, behavior, and health. The earlier these strategies are used, the better the child's chances of success.

The notion of early intervention can also be used in the context of older children. Commonly referred to as "early intervening services" when applied to older students, the same fundamental principle holds: if there is a problem, the problem is best addressed early—as soon as possible after its identification.

Parent Participation and Family Engagement

Research shows that schools and LEAs with robust family engagement protocols and infrastructures typically have better community reputations and relations than those that do not.¹⁹ These efforts are crucial because multiple studies indicate that students with actively engaged parents perform better academically and are less likely to drop out of school.^{20,21}

All LEAs are required to actively seek parent input when creating Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), including input from parents of children with disabilities, and must incorporate specific programs and strategies for parent involvement in their LCAPs. As part of this effort, California has developed guidelines for LEAs and schools to secure authentic parent engagement.

To engage parents of students with disabilities, LEAs may need to provide targeted outreach and special accommodations. One factor contributing to the need for these extra outreach efforts is the limited amount of time that parents and families of students with disabilities may have to be involved in school-related activities. Other factors may be that these parents and families may not see themselves or their children as being a part of general education, or they believe the existing disability-focused family groups, such as the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), are their sole avenue for participation.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

Children with disabilities sometimes need very specific services. But what the child's parents see as necessary may differ from what school personnel understand to be needed or appropriate. In these instances, the IDEA provides procedural safeguards to parents and their children with disabilities, including the right to engage in a compliance review process and initiate a due process hearing. The IDEA encourages alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and early dispute resolution. The IDEA mandates that a voluntary mediation process be made available to parents and school staff members to

resolve disputes and that the process be conducted by a qualified and impartial mediator who is trained in effective mediation techniques."²² The trained mediator can help both the school and the family to find common ground while increasing communication, improving collaboration, preserving working relationships, and building trust. Several Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs) also have ADR options to assist LEAs and parents to reach agreement on appropriate special education and related services without engaging the due process hearing procedure.

Practices That Are Not Legal Requirements

In this section we discuss best practices for instruction, school climate, and teacher support that are not legal requirements. These practices have been shown to have great benefits to students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) is a systemic approach to leveraging all available resources to focus on using proven practices to educate all students—academically, behaviorally, and emotionally—in a tiered framework.²³ A central goal of MTSS is prevention and early intervention. MTSS strategies include: coordination and alignment of practices, policies, resources, and programs at all levels; ongoing screening and multiple tiers of interventions to provide every child the necessary targeted instruction and supports; an integrated data system to regularly gather data about student progress; continual professional development for teachers and staff on MTSS components; time for teachers to work together through collaborative teams and professional learning communities; opportunities for collaboration among staff across the system; promotion of continuous improvement at all levels (district, school, and classroom) that includes coaching, reflective practice, and program evaluation; and inclusion of parents in the decision-making process for school programs and policy.

Response to Instruction and Intervention

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI²) is a component of MTSS and builds on the Response to Intervention (RtI) model that was codified in the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004. The RtI² process is a systemic approach to instruction designed to benefit every student. An important aspect of RtI² is the ongoing gathering of data to inform decisions about how best to serve struggling students and to determine who is succeeding, who needs—or no longer needs—more help, and whether further evaluation or special education services are necessary. Another essential aspect

of RtI² is that it requires general education teachers, special educators, and specialists to work together for the success of every child, regardless of whether the child has a disability.²⁴

Research supports the effectiveness of RtI²: It “reduced the number of students evaluated for special education services, essentially eliminated the disproportional rate at which ethnic minority and male students were referred for special education evaluations, and substantially reduced the amount of financial resources dedicated to unnecessary special education evaluations.”²⁵

Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning

Key components of differentiated instruction are ongoing formative assessment and adjustment to determine and meet students’ needs. Differentiated instruction includes flexibility in assignments—sometimes tailoring assignments to specific students, adapting to different ways that students learn and absorb material, and providing different ways for students to demonstrate what they know and can do. Differentiated instruction is a proven strategy for finding the “hook” that secures student engagement²⁶—a principal component of school success.

When embedded within the design of a curriculum, this concerted effort to teach with a wide range of student needs in mind merges with a concept known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Based on evidence from neuroscience that no two brains learn alike, the starting point for UDL is “learner variability.” In UDL, all curriculum and materials (goals, assessments, methods, etc.) are first designed for the broadest range of students and then offer flexible options within that curriculum that can support students in any kind of class and for any goal.²⁷

Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning focuses on improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities.²⁸ The process involves the student, parents, and teachers forming a plan and structuring educational opportunities that help children with disabilities to address their own unique challenges and take advantage of strengths, including the family’s cultural and ethnic heritage.²⁹ The most important goals of this approach are to ensure that students’ personal, social, and educational needs are met. A principal tenet of person-centered planning is that the more students contribute to and engage in conversations and planning for what happens after high school and beyond, the more invested and likely they will be to realize success.

Positive School Climate

LCFF identifies school climate as one of the eight state priorities. According to California’s State Board of Education (SBE), “‘School Conditions and Climate’ refers to the character and quality of school life. This includes the values, expectations, interpersonal relationships, critical resources, supports, and practices that foster a welcoming, inclusive, and academically challenging environment. Positive school climate and conditions ensure people in the school community feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe, supported, connected to the school, and engaged in learning and teaching.”³⁰

Positive school climate is recognized as an important target for improving behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes for all students.³¹ In addition, decades of research indicate that a positive school climate improves teacher job satisfaction and retention.³²

School climate is especially important for students with disabilities. A school structure built on inclusive classrooms must develop a climate that values diversity to help students with disabilities in those inclusive settings thrive. Given that students with disabilities are victims of bullying behavior more than any other student group,³³ schools that teach and act on the values of acceptance and inclusivity—which are central to anti-bullying measures—will have a more positive school climate.³⁴

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Challenging student behavior is a barrier to student engagement and achievement, a source of classroom dysfunction, and one of the main reasons that teachers cite for leaving the profession.³⁵ Yet spending school resources on policing, suspending, and expelling students rather than teaching them lasting strategies to improve their behavior has been counterproductive for many students with disabilities.

A tiered model of interventions—Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) creates and sustains school-wide (universal), classroom (targeted), and individual (intensive) systems of response and support. Proactive rather than reactive, PBIS creates a culture that expects appropriate behavior. Schools that implement strong PBIS programs articulate clear, simple messages about what exactly that behavior looks like. They treat appropriate behavior as something to be taught and retaught regularly to help every student succeed socially, emotionally, and academically. When implemented school-wide and with administrative support, PBIS improves school outcomes for all students, not just for those with challenging behavior or emotional disabilities and has

been shown to result in fewer suspensions and discipline referrals.^{36,37}

Restorative Practices

The purpose of restorative practices is reflected in its name: restorative practices seek to restore what was damaged.³⁸ Rather than being punished—written up, suspended, or expelled for a behavioral offense—the offending student might meet with the person or persons harmed, a mediator, and often a teacher or school administrator, and together they find a way to make things right. Schools that integrate restorative practices into school-wide behavioral practices often report dramatic declines in school discipline problems, improved school climate, and gains in student achievement.³⁹ While restorative practices are being implemented in many of California’s schools, in a 2017 survey, teachers indicated the need for more support in how to implement them effectively. It is also likely that all school staff need support to implement restorative practices to achieve the best outcomes for all students.⁴⁰

Social-Emotional Learning

There is extensive brain research indicating that social-emotional issues impact the behavioral problems that plague many schools and classrooms and effect how students learn.⁴¹ The field of social-emotional learning (SEL) also recognizes that new technologies (especially social media), mobility, fragmented family lives, and other stresses make mental health issues especially challenging for children and youth in schools today.

The SEL approach offers numerous research-proven strategies that can be coordinated and aligned⁴² with other tiered structures of support (e.g. RtI², PBIS, and MTSS). A systemic focus on SEL in schools has been proven to diminish behavior problems and symptoms of emotional disturbance among students with disabilities.⁴³ These programs also help to reduce symptoms of depression among all students,⁴⁴ improve students’ respect for diversity and inclusivity,⁴⁵ and reduce bullying.⁴⁶ Moreover, research has shown that SEL can help students improve their academic success as well.⁴⁷

The benefits of SEL extend to teachers and school administrators. Attention to the social-emotional needs of adults leads to “productive, happier teachers who enjoy their colleagues and their time at work,”⁴⁸ while serving as a stay against burnout. SEL also positions teachers to be more productive collaborators⁴⁹—an important and necessary quality as the effective implementation of new state standards and

approaches benefit from teachers working together effectively (see following section).

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are small groups of teachers who share students or content areas within a school or LEA and meet regularly to learn from one another, plan together, create and share a vision together, and reflect on how they are doing and how they can enhance student achievement.⁵⁰ Research shows that when teachers work together to improve their instruction and learn as professionals, both they and their students do better.

PLCs are important for teacher job satisfaction as well. A comprehensive study of California teachers found that an important contributor to keeping teachers in the profession is the “close professional relationships” they develop with their colleagues and “a sense of team among staff.”⁵¹ Teacher PLCs are recommended for securing these close professional relationships.

PLCs provide an ideal framework for the collaboration between general and special educators that is essential for effective inclusive classrooms. And, as many proven practices benefit both students with and without disabilities, the benefits of collaboration between general and special education extends to all students.⁵²

Conclusion

Boards have an opportunity to shape education for all students—including those identified for special education services. A cohesive, multi-tiered structure that focuses on the needs of each student, that provides support and opportunities for continuous improvement for educators, and that incorporates and coordinates proven practices in educating children has the potential to set every student on a path to full participation in economic, social, and civic life.

Questions for Board Members

Board members can help their schools better serve students identified for special education services by answering the following questions:

1. How is our LEA ensuring collaboration between general education and special education?
2. How are students with disabilities performing academically and socially in each of our schools?

3. What are the organizational and instructional practices being implemented in schools where students with disabilities are experiencing the most success?
4. What steps can we take to implement effective instruction and services in schools where students with disabilities are experiencing less success?

Resources

Early Intervention

- » **Why Early Intervention Programs Benefit Kids with Developmental Delays.** Information about early intervention programs from the Child Development Institute. <http://bit.ly/2G3LCI6>
- » **Overview of Early Intervention.** Information in English and Spanish from the Center for Parent Information and Resources. <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/ei-overview/>
- » **California Early Start.** Resource Page by the California Early Intervention Technical Assistance Network. <https://bit.ly/2HhLaT5>
- » **Together, We Make a Difference: California Early Start for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Their Families** (2014). Handbook by the Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention (ICC). <http://bit.ly/2gVWbhC>
- » **Early Intervention.** Website for Zero to Three, which provides information about early intervention in English and Spanish for parents, educators, and policy makers. <http://bit.ly/2ujJTCU>

Family Engagement

- » **Family Engagement in Schools Matters.** Resource developed by the California State PTA. <http://bit.ly/2D6BTXP>
- » **Family Engagement Framework: A Tool for California School Districts** (2014). A family engagement resource for school districts developed by the California Department of Education. <https://bit.ly/2IX6hw1>
- » **Parent Training and Information (PTI) Centers in California.** Parent-directed 501(c)(3) organizations funded through the IDEA and located throughout the state. Each PTI Center offers extensive resources and services for families of students with disabilities from birth through

age 26, including workshops, support groups, advocacy, and referrals. <http://bit.ly/2xwIXPM>

Alternative Dispute Resolution

- » **CADRE: The Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education.** Website for a group that supports the prevention and resolution of disputes through a collaborative approach. <http://cadreworks.org>

Effective Instructional Practices

- » **Instructing Students with High-Incidence Disabilities in the General Education Classroom.** In *Curriculum Handbook*, by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <http://bit.ly/2FgNRo3>
- » **Multi-Tiered System of Supports.** The CDE website with information on MTSS, which includes RtI² and PBIS. The page includes a primer on the MTSS framework and information on the statewide initiative, training, resources, and policy briefs. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/>
- » **Universal Design for Learning (UDL).** The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) website with information about UDL. <http://www.cast.org>
- » **Person-Centered Planning.** Information about the Person-Centered Planning approach to support children and youth with disabilities from PACER's National Parent Center on Transition Planning and Employment. <http://bit.ly/2FJLY1A>

Creating a Positive School Climate

- » **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS).** The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Technical Assistance Center on PBIS is funded through the U.S. Department of Education. It supports schools, districts, and states in building capacity for implementing a multi-tiered approach to social, emotional, and behavioral support for students, including those with disabilities. <http://www.pbis.org/>
- » **School Culture and Climate Topics.** Website with information and resources about school culture and climate from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <http://bit.ly/2D5LuhC>
- » **Improving Social Emotional Skills in Childhood Enhances Long-Term Well-Being and Economic Outcomes.** (2017). Report on social emotional

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- » **Specially Designed Instruction and Related Services for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders.** (2016). List of instructional approaches, services, and definitions of concepts related to students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. Developed by Diana Browning Wright. <https://bit.ly/2Tnl7j7>

Endnotes

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