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High Leverage Practices for Special Education Teachers
Developed by the High Leverage Practices Writing Group[1]
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Collaboration High Leverage Practices

Preamble

Effective special education teachers collaborate with a wide range of professionals, families and caregivers to assure that educational programs and related services are effectively designed and implemented to meet the needs of each student with a disability. Collaboration allows for varied expertise and perspectives about a student to be shared among those responsible for each student's learning and well-being. This collective expertise provides collaborators with a more comprehensive understanding of each student's needs, and this knowledge is used to more effectively plan and implement instruction and services that benefit the student.

Teachers use respectful and effective communication skills as they collaborate with others, considering the background, socioeconomic status, culture and language of the families and the professionals with whom they work. They focus collaborative activities on designing each student's instructional program to meet clearly specified outcomes and collecting data and monitoring progress toward these outcomes. Effective and purposeful collaboration should enlist support from district and school leaders, who foster a collective commitment to collaboration, provide professional learning experiences to increase team members' collaborative skills, and create schedules that support different forms (e.g., IEP teams, co-teachers, teachers and families, teachers and paraprofessionals) of ongoing collaboration.

1. **Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.**

Collaboration with teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff is necessary to support students' learning toward measureable outcomes and to facilitate students' social and emotional well-being across all school environments and instructional settings (e.g., co-taught). Collaboration with individuals or teams requires the use of effective collaboration behaviors (e.g., sharing ideas, active listening, questioning, planning, problem-solving, negotiating) to develop and adjust instructional or behavioral plans based on student data, and the coordination of expectations, responsibilities, and resources to maximize student learning.

2. **Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.**

Teachers lead and participate in a range of meetings (e.g., meetings with families, IEPs, IFSPs, instructional planning) with the purpose of identifying clear measurable student outcomes and instructional and behavioral plans that support these outcomes. They develop a meeting agenda, allocate time to meet the goals of the agenda and lead in ways that encourage consensus building through positive verbal and non-verbal communication, encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives, active listening, and soliciting feedback.

3. **Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.**

Teachers collaborate with families about their child's needs, goals, program, and progress over time and assure they are informed about their rights as well as special education processes (e.g., IEPs, IFSPs). Teachers should respectfully and effectively communicate considering the background, socioeconomic status, language, culture, and priorities of the family. Teachers advocate for resources to help students meet instructional, behavioral, social, and transition

goals. In building positive relationships with students, teachers encourage students to self-advocate, with the goal of fostering self-determination over time. They also work with families to self-advocate and support their child's learning.

Assessment High Leverage Practices

Preamble

Assessment plays a foundational role in special education. Students with disabilities are complex learners who have unique needs that exist alongside their strengths. Effective special education teachers have to fully understand those strengths and needs. Thus, these teachers are knowledgeable regarding assessment and are skilled in using and interpreting data. This includes formal, standardized assessments that are used in the identification of students for special education services, the development of their Individualized Education Programs, and to inform their ongoing services. Formal assessments such as statewide exams also provide data regarding whether students with disabilities are achieving state content standards and how their academic progress compares to students without disabilities. Teachers are also knowledgeable regarding and skillful in using informal assessments, such as those used to evaluate students' academic, behavioral, and functional strengths and needs. These assessments are used to develop students' Individualized Education Programs, design and evaluate instruction, and monitor student progress. As reflective practitioners, teachers are also continuously analyzing the impact and effectiveness of their own instruction. Finally, teachers are knowledgeable regarding how context, culture, language, and poverty might influence student performance, navigating conversations with families and other stakeholders, and choosing appropriate assessments given each student's profile. This is an especially important consideration, given the over-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students and those from high poverty backgrounds in special education.

4. Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student's strengths and needs

To develop a deep understanding of a student's learning needs, special educators develop a comprehensive learner profile through the use of a variety of assessment measures and sources (information from parents, general educators, and other stakeholders) that are sensitive to language and culture, to: (a) analyze and describe students' strengths and needs and (b) analyze their school-based learning environments to determine potential supports and barriers to their academic progress. Teachers should collect, aggregate, and interpret data from multiple sources (informal and formal observations, work samples, curriculum based measures, FBA, school file, analysis of curriculum, information from families, and other data sources). This information is used to create an individualized profile of the student's strengths and needs.

5. Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs

Teachers interpret assessment information for stakeholders including other professionals, families, and students themselves, and involve them in the assessment, goal development, and goal implementation process. Special educators must understand each assessment's purpose, help key stakeholders understand how culture and language influence interpretation of data generated, and be able to use data to collaboratively develop and implement an individualized education and transition plan that includes: goals that are standards based, appropriate accommodations and modifications, fair grading practices, and transition goals that are aligned with student needs.

6. Use student assessment, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.

Once special education teachers develop instructional goals, they evaluate and make ongoing adjustments to students' instructional programs. Once instruction and other supports are designed and implemented, special education teachers have the skill to manage and engage in ongoing data collection using curriculum-based measures, informal classroom assessments, observations of student performance and behavior, self-assessment of classroom instruction, and discussions with key stakeholders (students, families, and other professionals). Teachers study their practice to improve student learning, validate reasoned hypotheses about salient instructional features, and enhance instructional decision-making. Effective teachers retain, reuse, and extend practices that improve student learning and adjust or discard those that do not.

Social/Emotional/Behavioral High Leverage Practices

Preamble

Effective special education teachers establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment to support student success. To do this, they employ several practices that are critical in promoting student social and emotional well-being. First, effective teachers focus on increasing appropriate behavior by adopting an instructional approach and explicitly teaching social skills and offering multiple opportunities to practice appropriate social behaviors across the school day followed by positive specific feedback. Second, they implement evidence-based practices to prevent social/emotional behavioral challenges and provide early intervention at the first sign of risk. Third, effective teachers provide increasingly comprehensive, supports through a team-based problem solving strategy, to match the intensity of student challenges guided by behavioral assessment. Finally, they implement all behavioral supports, even those in response to significant problem behavior, in a caring, respectful, and culturally relevant manner. Effective teachers recognize that academic and behavioral support strategies are more effective when delivered within the context of positive and caring teacher and student relationships.

7. Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment.

Teachers should establish age-appropriate and culturally responsive expectations, routines and procedures within their classrooms that are positively stated and explicitly taught and practiced across the school year to build and foster positive relationships. When students demonstrate mastery and follow established rules and routines, teachers should provide age appropriate specific performance feedback in meaningful and caring ways. By establishing, following, and

reinforcing expectations of all students within the classroom, teachers will reduce the potential for challenging behavior and increase student engagement. While establishing learning environments, teachers should build mutually respectful relationships with students and engage them in setting the classroom climate (e.g., rules and routines), be respectful and value ethnic, cultural, contextual, and linguistic diversity to foster student engagement across learning environments.

8. Teachers provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior.

The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior, and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. Effective feedback must be strategically delivered and goal directed, i.e., feedback is most effective when the learner has a goal and the feedback informs the learner regarding areas needing improvement and ways to improve performance. Feedback* may be verbal, non-verbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). The teacher should provide on-going feedback until the learner reaches their established learning goal.

Same feedback conditions are also recommended for academic behavior.

9. Teach social behaviors.

Teachers should explicitly teach appropriate interpersonal skills, including communication, and self-management, aligning lessons with classroom and school-wide expectations for student

behavior. Prior to teaching, teachers should determine the nature of the social skill challenge. If students do not know how to perform a targeted social skill, direct social skill instruction should be provided until mastery is achieved; if students display performance problems, the appropriate social skill should initially be taught, then emphasis should shift to prompting the student to use the skill and insuring the "appropriate" behavior accesses the same or a similar outcome (i.e., is reinforcing to the student) than the problem behavior.

10. Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans.

Creating individual behavior plans is a central role of all special educators. A key to successful plans is to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) anytime behavior is chronic, intense, or impedes learning. A comprehensive FBA results in a hypothesis about the function of the student's problem behavior. Once the function is determined, a behavior intervention plan is developed that a) teaches the student a pro-social replacement behavior that will serve the same or similar function, b) alters the environment to make the replacement behavior more efficient and effective than the problem behavior, c) alters the environment to no longer allow the problem behavior to access the previous outcome, and d) includes on-going data collection to monitor progress.

Instruction High Leverage Practices

Preamble

Teaching students with disabilities is a strategic, flexible and recursive process as effective special education teachers use content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge (including evidence based practice), and data on student learning to design, deliver, and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. This process begins with well-designed instruction. Effective special education teachers are well-versed in general education curricula and use appropriate standards, learning progressions and evidence based practices in conjunction with specific IEP goals and benchmarks to prioritize long- and short-term learning goals and plan instruction. This instruction, when delivered with fidelity, is designed to maximize academic learning time, actively engage learners in meaningful activities, and emphasize proactive and positive approaches across tiers of instructional intensity.

Teachers use the best available evidence, professional judgement and knowledge of individual student needs. Teachers value diverse perspectives and incorporate student' background, culture, and language to make instructional decisions. Their decisions result in improved student outcomes across varied curriculum areas and in multiple educational settings. They use teacher-led, peer-assisted, student-regulated, and technology-assisted practices fluently, and know when and where to apply them. Analyzing instruction in this way allows teachers to improve student learning and their professional practice.

11. Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.

Teachers prioritize what is most important for students to learn by providing meaningful access to, and success in, the general education curriculum. Teachers use grade level standards, assessment data and learning progressions, students' prior knowledge, IEP goals and benchmarks to make decisions about what is most critical to emphasize, and develop long- and short-term goals accordingly. They understand essential curriculum components, identify critical prerequisites and foundations, and assess student performance in relation to these components.

12. Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.

Teachers help students to develop important concepts and skills that provide the foundation for more complex learning. Teachers sequence lessons that build off each other and make connections explicit in both planning and delivery. They activate students' prior knowledge and show how each lesson "fits" with previous ones. Planning involves careful consideration of learning goals, what is involved in reaching the goals, and allocating time accordingly. On-going changes (e.g., pacing, examples) occur throughout the sequence based on student performance.

13. Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.

Teachers assess individual student needs and adapt curriculum materials and tasks so that students can meet instructional goals. Teachers select materials and tasks based on student needs, use relevant technology, and/or make modifications by highlighting relevant information, changing task directions, and decreasing amounts of material. Teachers make strategic decisions on content coverage (essential curriculum elements), meaningfulness of tasks to meet stated goals, and criteria for student success.

14. Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.

Teachers explicitly teach cognitive and metacognitive processing strategies to support memory, attention, and self-regulation of learning. Learning involves not only understanding content but using cognitive processes to solve problems, regulate attention, organize thoughts and materials and monitor one's own thinking. Self-regulation and metacognitive strategy instruction is integrated into lessons on academic content through modeling and explicit instruction. Students learn to monitor and evaluate their performance in relation to explicit goals and make necessary adjustments to improve learning.

15. Scaffold instruction.

Scaffolds are temporary supports provided to students so they can successfully complete tasks that they cannot yet do independently and with a high rate of success. Teachers select powerful physical, visual, verbal and/or written scaffolds, carefully calibrate them to students' needs in relation to learning tasks, use them flexibly, evaluate their effectiveness, and gradually remove them once students gain increased independence and understanding. Some scaffolds are planned prior to lessons and some occur as lessons unfold in response to student performance.

16. Uses explicit instruction.

Teachers make content, skills and concepts explicit by showing and telling students what to do or think while solving problems, enacting strategies, completing tasks, and/or classifying concepts. Teachers use explicit instruction when students are learning new material and/or complex concepts and skills. They strategically choose examples and non-examples and language to facilitate student understanding, anticipate common misconceptions, highlight essential content

and remove distracting information. They model and scaffold steps or processes needed to understand content and concepts, apply skills, and complete tasks successfully and independently.

17. Use flexible grouping.

Teachers assign students to homogeneous and heterogeneous groups based on explicit learning goals, monitor peer interactions, and provide positive and corrective feedback to support productive learning. Teachers use small learning groups to accommodate learning differences, promote in-depth academic-related interactions, and teach students to work collaboratively. They choose tasks that require collaboration, issue directives that promote productive and autonomous group interactions, and embed strategies that maximize learning opportunities and equalize participation. Teachers promote simultaneous interactions, use procedures to hold students accountable for collective and individual learning, and monitor and sustain group performance through proximity and positive feedback.

18. Use strategies to promote active student engagement

Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies that result in active student responding. Active student engagement is critical to academic success. Teachers must initially build positive student-teacher relationships to foster engagement and motivate reluctant learners. They promote engagement by connecting learning to students' lives (e. g., knowing students' academic and cultural backgrounds) and using a variety of teacher-led (e.g., choral responding and response cards), peer-assisted (e. g., cooperative learning and peer tutoring), student-regulated (e.g., self-management), and technology-supported strategies shown empirically to increase student

engagement. They monitor student engagement and provide positive and constructive feedback*
to sustain performance.

 *see HLP 8 for more information on feedback.

19. Use assistive and instructional technologies.

Teachers select and implement assistive and instructional technologies to support the needs of
students with disabilities. They select and use augmentative and alternative communication
devices and assistive and instructional technology products to promote student learning and
independence. They evaluate new technology options given student needs, make informed
instructional decisions grounded in evidence, professional wisdom, and students' IEP goals and
advocate for administrative support in technology implementation. Teachers use the Universal
Design for Learning (UDL) framework to select, design, implement, and evaluate important
student outcomes.

20. Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.

Effective teachers use specific techniques to teach students to generalize and maintain newly
acquired knowledge and skills. They use numerous examples in design and delivery of
instruction that require students to apply what they have learned in other settings. They promote
maintenance by systematically using schedules of reinforcement, providing frequent material
reviews and teaching skills that are reinforced by the natural environment beyond the classroom.
Students learn to use new knowledge and skills in places and situations other than the original
learning environment and maintain their use in the absence of ongoing instruction.

21. Provide intensive instruction.

Teachers match the intensity of instruction to the intensity of the student's learning and behavioral challenges. Intensive instruction involves working with students with similar needs on a small number of high priority, clearly defined skills and/or concepts critical to academic success. Teachers group students based on common learning needs, clearly define learning goals and use systematic, explicit, and well-paced instruction. They frequently monitor students' progress and adjust their instruction accordingly. Within intensive instruction, students have many opportunities to respond and receive immediate, corrective feedback with teachers and peers to practice what they are learning.

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