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The Role of Inclusive Principal Leadership in Ensuring an Equitable Education for Students With Disabilities



The Need

State education leaders [have committed to ensuring](#) that every student has the opportunity to succeed in the college or career path of their choice, including students with disabilities, who, across the country, continue to fare worse than their peers, as measured by learning and behavioral outcomes.

Despite increased rates of inclusion in general education classrooms, national test scores suggest students with disabilities are losing ground in reading and are not improving in mathematics (Our Kids Count, 2019). In addition, students with disabilities remain [far more likely](#) to be suspended or expelled—a disparity that is even greater for students of color with disabilities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). Disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will likely exacerbate these inequities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, general education teachers and school principals [report being underprepared](#) to effectively serve students with disabilities. Only *12 percent* of a nationally representative sample of school principals and only *17 percent* of general education teachers report feeling well prepared to serve and teach students with disabilities (Galiatsos, Kruse, & Whittaker, 2019; Stelitano, Johnston, & Young, 2020).

This lack of preparation makes it more difficult for students with disabilities to have equitable access to effective instruction and receive the support they need to excel in the general education curriculum (Lai, I., Wood, W. J., Imberman, S. A., Jones, N., & Strunk, K. O., 2020).



The Role of Inclusive Leaders

Inclusive principal leadership is critical to addressing these challenges. Inclusive principals are well prepared to serve students with disabilities and support teachers across general and special education to improve outcomes. They create learning environments where all students, across backgrounds, can excel in school. And they distribute leadership and provide the resources necessary to support and retain effective teachers of students with disabilities.

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP?

The Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO's) National Collaborative on Inclusive Principal Leadership (NCIPL) developed the following definition: "Inclusive principals create strong school cultures and distribute leadership across staff to serve all learners well and ensure all students feel safe, supported, and valued in school. In promoting equity for 'all,' inclusive principals must respond effectively to the potential and needs of each student. Inclusive principals ensure high expectations and appropriate supports so that each student—across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income—can excel in school" (CCSSO, 2020).

Importantly, their focus extends beyond legal compliance. Inclusive school leaders think not just in terms of program requirements and legal regulations but in terms of creating a learning environment that prepares students with disabilities for the college or career path of their choice.



A Collaborative Solution

Recognizing the need to embed inclusive leadership training into the principal pipeline, CCSSO, in 2017 and 2018, convened the National Collaborative on Inclusive Principal Leadership (NCIPL)—a diverse alliance of education partners that includes principal associations, researchers, educator preparation programs, technical assistance centers, and nonprofit organizations. In partnership with the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center and Oak Foundation, the NCIPL developed the resource [*Supporting Inclusive Schools for the Success of Each Child: A Guide for States on Principal Leadership*](#). The guide outlines eight strategies states can take to advance inclusive leadership in partnership with educator preparation programs, districts, and schools.

To facilitate the implementation of these eight strategies, in November 2018, CCSSO launched the Advancing Inclusive Principal Leadership (AIPL) State Initiative in partnership with the CEEDAR Center and Oak Foundation. Through the AIPL, four states—Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and Ohio—receive coordinated support from CCSSO staff, the CEEDAR Center, and NCIPL partners to develop and implement a plan for furthering inclusive leadership across the principal pipeline. This plan includes addressing the areas of principal preparation, evaluation, leadership standards, and on-the-job support.

All four states have developed and are in the process of implementing their plans. Although the strategies differ, these states share the common goal of building knowledge and instructional leadership skills of school leaders so that they can more effectively coach general and special education teachers in their efforts to support students with disabilities. Specifically, the focus is on building the capacity of principals to implement a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), high-leverage practices (HLPs), evidence-based practices, and other inclusive practices.

Although the work is long term, AIPL states have already made substantial strides. For instance, to improve preparation of inclusive leaders, Mississippi adopted new guidelines for leadership preparation programs that align with the [PSEL 2015 and Promoting Principal Leadership for the Success of Students with Disabilities](#) developed by CCSSO and the CEEDAR Center. The state is partnering with the Mississippi Education Leadership Faculty Association to support the implementation of the new requirements. And, in Ohio, the [Ohio Deans Compact](#) is using incentive funding to develop inclusive educator preparation programs at universities across the state. One of its partners, the University of Cincinnati, is developing an inclusive leadership model program to train aspiring principals in establishing inclusive learning environments.

Likewise, AIPL states are working to strengthen professional learning of inclusive leaders to improve school outcomes. [Ohio is developing a common set of leadership resources and tools](#) for schools identified for improvement to build on the state's updated principal standards and its evidence-based professional development program, the Ohio Leadership for Inclusion, Implementation, and Instructional Improvement (OLI⁴). [Georgia also developed an inclusive leadership self-assessment tool](#) to be used by districts and schools and will implement the tool through Georgia's Tiered System of Supports state-level training next school year. And Arkansas is embedding HLPs into existing structures for educator professional development and will pilot professional learning communities among principals and other school staff in select schools to support the development and scale-up of inclusive practices.



Collective Action: Working Across Systems to Strengthen Instruction

All state education agencies, educator preparation programs, and districts can take some actions, especially during this time of distance and blended learning, to strengthen inclusive principal leadership in policy and practice. We offer a few recommendations and resources from CCSSO and the CEEDAR Center to improve supports for principals in leading for equity and inclusion.

- 1. Strengthen instructional leadership.** State education agencies can promote meaningful systems of support, evaluation, mentoring, and coaching at the district level that emphasize instructional and distributive leadership practices for inclusive schools. These practices include MTSS, PBIS, HLPs, universal design for learning (UDL), culturally responsive pedagogy, and other inclusive practices. To emphasize the essential knowledge and skills for inclusive leadership, professional learning providers and educator preparation faculty can use the [CEEDAR School Leadership for Students with Disabilities Course Enhancement Modules](#) to supplement content. They can also use the [A School Leader's Guide to Creating Inclusive Schools](#), developed by the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood, that addresses building leadership knowledge and capacity related to UDL, culturally responsive teaching, and evidence-based literacy instruction for students with disabilities.
- 2. Provide principals with virtual coaching and feedback opportunities to improve teaching practice and ensure all students can access a rigorous grade-level curriculum.** Inclusive principals support their staff in incorporating HLPs for students with disabilities into instruction across general and special education. [High-Leverage Practices in Special Education: A Professional Development Guide for School Leaders](#) provides practical tools for engaging school staff in learning about how these practices can enhance student learning. District leaders can adopt the guide for school leaders and incorporate it into systems of support and evaluation and feedback for leaders and teachers.

- 3. Evaluate existing principal standards and engage in program review and revision to promote inclusive principal leadership.** States have an opportunity to align school leader preservice coursework with the National Educational Leadership Preparation standards and the [Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015](#) (PSEL 2015). To support principals in serving students with disabilities, states can ensure, through leader preparation program review and approval, that coursework and field experiences address the knowledge, skills, and dispositions principals need to lead effective inclusive schools. Leadership programs can use the [PSEL 2015 and Promoting Principal Leadership for the Success of Students with Disabilities](#), along with the [CEEDAR Center Innovation Configuration](#), to evaluate program syllabi and can incorporate these resources into leaders' field experiences.
- 4. Use data to gauge students' access to effective instruction.** Inclusive principals establish data-management systems and processes that provide all educators with meaningful information about access to effective instruction for students with disabilities. Data-based decision making is always important; during COVID-19 school closures, data-based decision making becomes even more important to inform differentiated instruction and support. The core of MTSS is data-based decision making. States, districts, and educator preparation providers can work together to increase principals' knowledge of MTSS as a broader school improvement strategy and as a framework to support school re-entry and recover learning loss. [Promises to Keep: Transforming Educator Preparation to Better Serve a Diverse Range of Learners](#) includes recommendations for aligning principal licensure and certification with the MTSS tiers, and this [CEEDAR Center professional development module](#) provides leader preparation program candidates and current school leaders with an opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to provide multi-tier instruction and interventions designed to meet students' needs.
- 5. Prioritize inclusive leadership to lead systems in times of uncertainty.** Principals set the culture of the school—both in person and at a distance. During times of learning discontinuity, it is important that leaders continue to communicate high expectations for students with disabilities and support teachers across general and special education. States can provide support to districts and schools to help ensure inclusive and equitable learning opportunities during virtual and blended learning environments. The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) published [Supporting Inclusive Practices during School Facility Closure](#), which includes recommendations, strategies, and resources for providing inclusive, continuous learning opportunities for students with disabilities during school facility closures. OSPI also compiled a list of [online professional learning opportunities for educators](#) on supporting students with disabilities. States and districts can follow Washington's lead in prioritizing inclusive leadership during times of uncertainty caused by COVID-19. CCSSO also hosts the [Inclusive Leadership Webisode Series](#) to provide support to states, districts, and educator preparation programs on a variety of topics related to inclusive leadership and has adapted the series to prioritize inclusive school restart and learning recovery.

Conclusion

Every student deserves to attend a school led by a principal with the skills, knowledge, and training to promote equity for all students, including students with disabilities. For too long, principal preparation, evaluation, and support have focused more on compliance than on the leadership practices that help prepare students with disabilities for the college or career path of their choice.

The need for inclusive school leaders has perhaps never been more urgent. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education for all students, students with disabilities face unique challenges in transitioning to remote learning and in their eventual transition back to the classroom.

Some states are already rethinking parts of the principal pipeline, with an eye toward inclusive leadership. With support from CCSSO and in partnership with the CEEDAR Center and Oak Foundation, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and Ohio have made significant strides in preparing aspiring principals and training current principals to be inclusive leaders. There are clear steps other states can take to follow in their paths. By taking these steps, states can make collective progress toward ensuring all students, including students with disabilities, attend a truly inclusive school.

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