

Leaders Unlocking Potential: Strengthening Services for Students with Disabilities

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Meet the Presenters



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*Technical Assistance
Provider*



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*Technical
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Session Objectives

1

Identify and describe the key leadership practices that strengthen services for students with disabilities, including practices that promote a culture of high expectations, collaboration, and high-quality instruction.

2

Use the Principal Navigator tool to build leadership practices and prioritize targeted actions that support the continuous improvement of special education services.

3

Explore and utilize resources from the Lead IDEA Center to support local leaders.

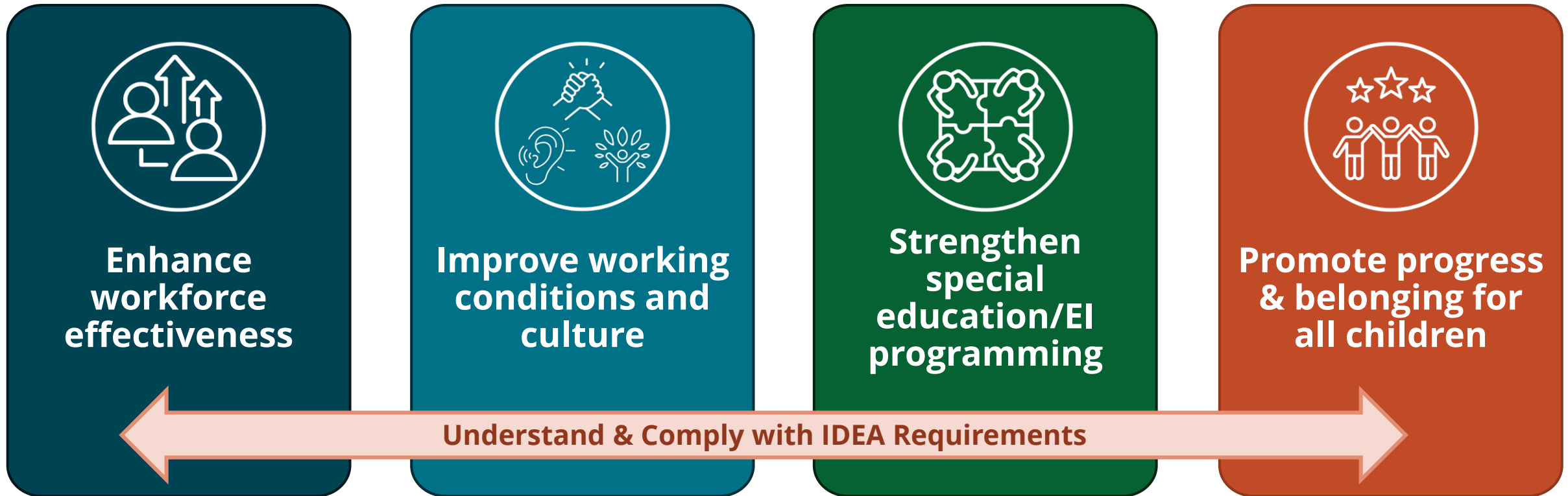


Our Mission

We work with **leaders** to improve systems serving children with disabilities and their families through effective implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

What We Do

Through partnerships with states, districts, and other leadership networks, we implement and scale leadership development that equips early intervention (EI) & school building administrators with the essential IDEA leadership knowledge and skills needed to:



Two Things Are True:

1. Principals play a central role in building effective, data-driven, schoolwide systems that support students with disabilities; *and*
2. Too often, principals lack the support needed to develop & sustain these systems.

Discussion: Which of the Following Challenges Resonate Most With You?

1

General education teachers are **overwhelmed** due to the growing number of students with disabilities in their classrooms.

2

General education teachers **lack a sense of shared ownership** for serving students with disabilities, which is strained by increasing ambiguity around who is responsible for what.

3

Special and general education teachers **rarely have sufficient time to plan** together to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

4

General educators **lack the skills needed to use** data to accommodate or modify instruction that allows students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum.

5

General education teachers are hesitant to include students with disabilities in their classrooms due to their **lack of confidence and skills** to meet their academic and behavioral needs.

The Role of Leadership in Supporting Students with Disabilities

Why Strengthening Services is Crucial for Student Success

What percentage of students served under IDEA Part B were educated in the regular classroom for at least 80% of the school day as of 2024?

What percentage of fourth grade students with disabilities were proficient on the NAEP reading assessment in 2024?

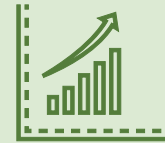
Why Strengthening Services is Crucial for Student Success

The majority (67%) of students ages 5 through 21 served under IDEA Part B were educated in the general education setting for 80% or more of the day (OSEP, 2024).

11% of fourth grade students with disabilities were proficient on the 2024 NAEP for reading (NCES, 2025).



Builds instructional and behavior management skills through professional learning.



Ensures data-based decision-making that promotes progress towards IEP goals.



Reduces inequitable or hindered access to general curriculum.

Leadership Challenges: Research Insights

School leaders often face staff resistance to disability inclusion practices.

(Thompson, 2017; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2016).

School leaders often do not receive training in special education, which can lead to increased pressure and reliance on special educators.

(Billingsley et al., 2021).

Leadership Challenges: Research Insights

School leaders struggle to balance instructional leadership with management and administrative duties.

(Bays & Crockett, 2007).

School leaders do not have proficiency in instructional practices that should be used with students with disabilities.

(Mathews et al., 2023).

Where Are We Now?

A 2021 survey found that less than

12%

of 3,500 school principals feel completely prepared to support the needs of children with disabilities.

Source: [RAND](#)



Key Leadership Practices

Practice 1: Intentionally Cultivate Shared Ownership of the School's Vision

A shared vision is crucial for creating shared ownership and ensuring that children with disabilities have consistent access to the necessary supports and services to achieve meaningful progress.

Align Efforts

Foster
Responsibility

Improve
Coordination

Ensure Access

Key Levers for Providing Access

Eligibility and
Identification

Compliance
and Procedural
Safeguards

Infrastructure
and Resources

Qualified and
Committed
Personnel

Meaningful
Family
Engagement

Responsive
Learning
Environments

Practice 2: Principals Understand and Act on Their Role in Providing Access

As a core member of the IEP team, leaders must develop their understanding of how disability impacts development and learning to identify needs and determine required specialized services.

Development of the IEP

Allocate/approve resources agreed upon during the IEP meeting.



Implementation of the IEP

Support staff through **clearly defined roles and responsibilities**.

Create **collaborative structures** to ensure providers and educators have the **time and support** necessary to implement the IEP.

Practice 3: Principals Lead to Empower Effective Teaching and Service Delivery

High-leverage practices (HLPs) are essential for building and sustaining learning environments where children with disabilities can make meaningful progress and thrive.

Research-Based
and Evidence-
Driven

High-Frequency
and Broad
Applicability

Central to
Development
and Learning

Teachable and
Learnable

Aligned with Marzano and Danielson



What Common Barriers do Principals Encounter When Implementing These Practices?

- Competing Priorities
- Capacity Gaps
- Jargon Overload
- Staff Buy-in
- Time Limitations
- Knowledge Gaps

Building Capacity of Principals

Supporting Students with Disabilities

Introducing the Navigator Tool

- Interactive resource
- Customizable to your needs and resource preferences

Explore



School Stories

- Relatable, application-based scenarios
- Clear action steps to address issues

Toolkits

- Short-, medium-, and long-term solutions
- Possible actions
- Resources to implement strategies
- Videos
- Related IDEA considerations

Lead IDEA Navigator Tools

3 Tools

Today's Focus



Special Educator Retention

Principal Navigator

Principals play a pivotal role in retaining their special educators. Co-developed with the CEDAR Center, the *Special Educator Retention Navigator* highlights 6 pressing retention issues that schools often face and the principal's role in proactively addressing them.

[Visit Navigator](#)



Strengthening Services for Students With Disabilities

Principal Navigator

The *Strengthening Services for Students With Disabilities Navigator* gives principals actionable strategies to improve classroom teaching practices and enhance service delivery for students with disabilities. This tool offers strategies for tackling common challenges and emphasizes the principal's role in setting up a schoolwide system for tracking progress, identifying students who are not meeting IEP goals, and guiding data-driven interventions.

[Visit Navigator](#)



Early Intervention Program Provider Retention

Administrator Navigator

Research shows that early intervention provider shortages are driven by a range of issues, many of which administrators can purposefully address. The *Early Intervention Provider Retention Navigator*, co-developed by the Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Center, highlights pressing retention issues and the local EI program administrator's role in proactively addressing them.



IDEA Leadership Essentials ▾ Self-Directed Learning ▾ Technical Assistance ▾ About ▾ 🔍

Principal Navigator: Strengthening Services for Students With Disabilities

Home > Navigator > Principal Navigator: Strengthening Services For Students With Disabilities

Creating Systems That Ensure Students With Disabilities Learn and Thrive in the Classroom

Are you looking for ways to ensure that students with disabilities benefit from meaningful educational experiences and consistently make progress toward their individualized education program (IEP) goals? You are not alone.

Supporting students with disabilities requires purposeful leadership—leadership that is intentional, collaborative, and grounded in high expectations for every learner. The **Strengthening Services for Students With Disabilities Navigator** gives principals actionable strategies to improve classroom teaching practices and enhance service delivery for students with disabilities. This tool offers strategies for tackling common challenges and emphasizes the principal's role in setting up a schoolwide system for tracking progress, identifying students who are not meeting IEP goals, and guiding data-driven interventions.

SELECT EACH ISSUE BELOW TO:

Read a 3-minute *School Story* that describes the issue in more detail.

Explore a *Toolkit* that offers short-, medium-, and long-term solutions, resources, practical examples, and IDEA considerations.

“Educator responsibilities have substantially changed because students with disabilities are increasingly served in the general education classroom.”

- Bettini et al., 2022 Source [↗](#)

These tools have been co-developed by:



Key Issues: Strengthening Services for Students with Disabilities

1. Missing the Mark: Decisions Without Data

2. High-Intensity Needs: Student Challenges

3. Mine and Yours: Lack of Shared Ownership



Reflection Activity

Explore



Step 1: Take out your device.

Step 2: Go to the Lead IDEA website OR scan the QR code.

Step 3: Choose one issue to explore.

Step 4: Select a strategy connected to that issue and review the actions and resources.

Step 5: Share with a shoulder partner one idea/tool you can use tomorrow.



Reflection Activity

- **Step 1:** Think about a response to the following question. **(1 min)**
 - How can you use the navigator to enhance your leadership capacity?
- **Step 2:** Share and discuss your responses with your elbow partner.
- **Step 3:** Contribute to a facilitated group discussion.

Closing: Opportunities to Engage With Us

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