

10 Ideas for Improving Results for Students with Special Needs

This summary of Nathan Levenson's 10 best practices for improving special education appeared in The Marshall Memo on November 14, 2016. The source article, "Improving Special Education," was originally published in The District Management Journal, Fall 2016 (Vol. 20, p.12-27).

"No one seems satisfied with the state of serving students with special needs, and for good reason," say Nathan Levenson and Christopher Cleveland in this *District Management Journal* article. "In nearly every school district across the country, the conversation is the same. Parents are concerned that their children aren't well enough prepared to succeed in life, college, and career. Students themselves often feel excluded or frustrated by ever-higher standards that they can't seem to meet. Classroom teachers feel underprepared to address ever-mounting student needs, and special-education teachers feel stretched thin. Despite the hard work of so many caring people and the mounting resources dedicated year after year, disappointment and frustration persist."

But Levenson and Cleveland believe there are steps that can be taken to produce better results. Based on what their organization, District Management Council, has learned from the research and working with special educators across the country, here are their suggestions:

1. Focus on student outcomes, not inputs.

When results are disappointing, all too many districts pour money into more staff, more paraprofessionals, more co-teaching, and more hours of service. "History shows that continuing to add resources and layer in solutions does not yield results," say Levenson and Cleveland. "If the current approach isn't achieving great outcomes, current practice must be reviewed and modified."

2. Focus on effective general education.

According to NAEP data, when general education teachers are effective with Tier I instruction and take responsibility for all students, those with special needs do better. "If we want students to master the general education curriculum," say Levenson and Cleveland, "general education teachers have to be a big part of the solution."

3. Ensure that all students can read.

Low reading skills are at the root of many special education referrals – hence the spike in third and sixth grade when reading deficits make it especially difficult for students to learn math, science, and social studies. “An overwhelming majority of students who have not mastered reading by the end of third grade will continue to struggle throughout high school and beyond,” say Levenson and Cleveland – and that includes behavioral problems. Fortunately, there are specific steps districts can take to increase reading proficiency in the primary grades:

- Setting clear and rigorous grade-level expectations;
- Identifying struggling readers starting in kindergarten;
- Frequently measuring achievement and using the data to improve instruction;
- Giving students at least 90 minutes a day of balanced core instruction;
- Explicitly teaching phonics and comprehension;
- Providing at least 30 minutes a day of additional time for all struggling readers;
- Tightly connecting remediation to core instruction;
- Fielding highly skilled and effective teachers of reading;
- Putting one person in charge of reading curriculum and instruction;
- Making effective use of instructional coaching and professional development.

4. Provide extra instructional time for struggling students every day.

“In many schools, struggling students are provided extra adults, but not extra time,” say Levenson and Cleveland – teaching assistants, paraprofessionals, co-teachers. “Extra ‘help time’ should not be confused with extra instructional time.” To catch up on missing foundational skills, correct misunderstandings, and master current material, these students need at least 30 minutes of additional reading instruction every day at the elementary level, an extra period at the secondary level. In a sample schedule, the authors suggest that students with special needs in math are part of a regular-education classroom for the initial presentation of content, learning from effective instruction and peer questions, and then have an extra period of math support taking the place of Spanish.

5. Ensure that content-strong staff provide interventions and support.

“Districts that have made the most significant gains among struggling students have done so by providing these students, whether or not they have IEPs, with teachers skilled in content instruction during extra instructional time,” say Levenson and Cleveland. They note that special education teachers know pedagogy and are not always expert in math or ELA. Content-strong support (versus generalist support) looks like this: associating students’ incorrect answers with the underlying concept, inferring misunderstandings from incorrect answers, teaching prior, foundational skills, and teaching correct material using two or three different approaches.

6. Allow special educators to play to their strengths.

It's smart for a school to take advantage of particular areas of expertise among teachers – for example, some may be strong in math content, some in specific pedagogical areas (scaffolding, differentiation, chunking), some in social-emotional support, and some in case management.

7. Focus paraprofessional support on health, safety, and behavior needs versus academic needs.

Paraprofessionals can play a vital role with students who have severe disabilities, autism, health needs, and behavior issues. But Levenson and Cleveland don't favor having paraprofessionals provide academic support. They cite evidence that students with special needs do best when they are fully engaged during Tier I instruction and then get extra time with content-strong teachers, RTI interventionists, and other trained specialists focused on academic and other specific needs. When aides are present during core instructional time, it can decrease the amount of instruction a student receives from the classroom teacher, who may believe the student already has an adult's attention. In addition, an aide hovering beside a special-needs student "creates a social barrier, stifling peer interaction and thereby defeating one of the primary benefits of inclusion," say Levenson and Cleveland.

8. Expand the reach and impact of social, emotional, and behavioral supports.

It's hard for teachers to be successful when students can't communicate, connect with others, resolve conflicts, and cope with challenges, say the authors – hence the critical importance of counselors, social workers, psychologists, and behavior specialists. But Levenson and Cleveland have found major differences in how well these professionals are used. In some districts, they spend 75 percent of their time with students while in others they spend only 45 percent; in some districts psychologists spend five days for each initial or three-year evaluation while others complete the same work in 1½ days (staff moving from one district to another quickly adapt to the prevailing standard).

The bottom line: it's possible to expand direct services for students simply by streamlining meetings and paperwork. It's also far more effective, say Levenson and Cleveland, to stop relying on paraprofessionals as hand-holders and crisis interveners and beef up the role of behaviorists, who are expert at diagnosing why a student has a disruptive outburst, providing the student with coping mechanisms, and guiding teachers to avoid triggers. Better that paraprofessionals report directly to behavior specialists and provide ad hoc support to multiple classrooms. If there aren't enough psychologists, social workers, counselors, and behaviorists, a district might forge a partnership with a local nonprofit counseling agency.

9. Provide high-quality in-district programs for students with more severe needs.

If a district has at least three high-need students, it may be more cost-effective to provide special education services within the district, saving long bus rides for students to out-of-district placements and strengthening connections to their town or neighborhood. Of course the key is hiring staff with the right skills and training and providing dedicated leadership.

10. Know how staff spend their time, and provide guidance on effective use of time.

Unlike regular-education teachers, most of whom are working as part of teams with clear curriculum and assessment guidelines, special educators “are typically left to themselves to figure out how best to help their students, how best to juggle the many demands on their time, and how best to schedule services,” say Levenson and Cleveland. “This serves neither the student, the teacher, nor the budget well.” When districts do careful time-and-motion studies, “both staff and administrators are often surprised at how much time is spent in meetings, how much service is provided 1:1 or 2:1 even though IEPs call for small groups, and how much instruction is provided by paraprofessionals.” Often the master schedule is a culprit, forcing teachers to pull students from core instruction in reading or math and preventing grouping of students with similar needs. Once these problems are confronted, sometimes with the help of an outside scheduling expert, much more effective use can be made of everyone’s time.

Implementing these ten suggestions is not an easy process, conclude Levenson and Cleveland. “Districts that have been able to expand and improve services, increase inclusion, and close the achievement gap have generally devoted three or more years to the effort,” they say – including assembling cross-functional teams, involving parents, and wrestling with the budget. There was also a sense of urgency: “While they understood that moving too fast could erode trust and understanding, they also knew that waiting to start would delay helping students in need. Clear goals, careful planning, and lots of communication helped pave the way.”



About the Expert

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Nathan Levenson has spent the last 25 years working to improve the lives of and outcomes for students who struggle. He brings a unique perspective to this mission, having served as a school superintendent, school board member, and consultant to over 250 districts in more than 30 states and around the world. Nate is a frequent speaker and widely recognized expert on the topic of improving special education and is the author of numerous books, including *Six Shifts to Improve Special Education and Other Interventions: A Commonsense Approach for School Leaders*.