



FROM ABC TO THRIVE

Spelling Out Success in Special Education

CASE STUDY

MAYA'S STORY:

Improving the Quality of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

When Maya became an Associate Director in her district's newly reorganized Special Education Department, her team was focused on building practices for high-quality Individualized Educational Program (IEPs) development. She had started in a role at the district and then spent some time in school-based leadership roles. Upon stepping back into the district role, she noted a fundamental challenge: "high-quality IEP" held different meanings across the district.

"For whatever reason, it (didn't) seem like there (was) this shared understanding among teachers, individuals, among schools," she explained.

Information about IEP quality seemed to come from informal sources rather than systematic training, leading to inconsistent practices and outcomes. This variation wasn't surprising given the district's size and history of special education support, but it posed significant challenges for ensuring equitable services across schools. Working with her team, Maya was tasked with establishing clear standards and support systems to ensure high-quality services for all students.

Success Indicators

- #19 "Familiarity with Special Education Laws"
- #21 "Clear Roles and Responsibilities for Special Education"

Setting Priorities and Aligning on Vision

Working with ABC in a Leading and Managing Change Professional Learning Community, Maya and her counterpart on the team grounded their transformation

work in systems and structures. They began by clearly defining the role of the new team and establishing communication structures and processes to support improvement.

Through collaborative planning, ABC and the District's leadership team, including Maya, identified two strategic priorities:



building a shared understanding among educators of IEP quality



strengthening support systems

Building Shared Understanding of IEP Quality

Consistent quality requires clear standards and shared understanding. To address varying interpretations of IEP quality, the District developed a systematic approach to professional learning. This included:

- **Providing foundational training on IEP components during monthly PLC meetings**
- Creating common language around quality indicators
- Establishing clear expectations for data use
- Maintaining consistent focus through weekly communications

Success Indicators

#22 "Writing of Clear and Effective Documents"

#25 "Effective Practices for Progress Monitoring"

Strengthening Support Systems

Recognizing that sustainable change requires ongoing support, Maya's team developed a multi-level system that balanced immediate needs with long-term capacity building. This included:

- **Implementing monthly professional development for all special educators**
- Creating weekly updates for building Special Education coordinators

Success Indicators

#23 "Design & Delivery of Programming Tailored to Individual Student Needs"

- Establishing regular case manager check-ins
- **Offering direct support during IEP meetings**

Success Indicators

#24 "Effective IEP Team Meetings"

Impact and Outcomes

The changes led to measurable improvements in IEP quality.

By the end of the year, the quality of IEPs' Present Levels of Performance — one of the most essential foundational components of the document — had increased by 41% and placement documentation had improved by 17%, according to ABC's audit of sample IEPs.

Individual success stories demonstrated the impact of these changes, from veteran educators transforming their approach to new teachers developing sophisticated data collection systems.

Success Indicators

#26 "Regular Compliance Monitoring"

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While the team saw encouraging progress throughout the year, they also identified areas needing continued focus and refinement. Looking ahead, the District plans to further strengthen Present Levels documentation, address areas showing decline, and build the capacity of Special Education coordinators to sustain improvements.

** The names of the partners in these case studies have been changed to protect their privacy and create a safe space for honest dialogue. This anonymity allowed them to openly share both their struggles and successes, including sensitive details about organizational challenges and the sometimes difficult process of finding effective solutions. By maintaining confidentiality, we were able to capture authentic stories that offer valuable insights for others facing similar situations.*