

# FROM ABC TO THRIVE

Spelling Out Success in Special Education



the ability  
challenge



**Executive Summary**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's special education leaders face unprecedented challenges: severe teacher shortages affecting 48 states, widening post-pandemic achievement gaps, and mounting compliance pressures. These leaders serve 7.5 million students with disabilities — students who qualify for specialized instruction and support services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) due to conditions that significantly impact their learning, including learning disabilities, autism, emotional disturbances, physical disabilities, and other health impairments. While serving these students, leaders confront a stark reality — only 71% of students with disabilities graduate high school compared to the national average of 87%.<sup>1</sup> The stakes for transformation have never been higher.

**The data tells the story of a key challenge AND an opportunity:**

Leaders serve

**7.5 M**  
students with disabilities

# The Challenge

Among the students receiving special education services in American schools:

**Achievement gaps**  
(average on national assessments<sup>2</sup>)

**40 pts ↓** in reading

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**47 pts ↓** in math

**Attend 4-year College<sup>3</sup>**

19% students with disabilities

40% non-disabled

**Exclusionary Discipline**

**2x** Students with disabilities are at least two times more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline than their non-disabled peers<sup>4</sup>





**Teachers Underprepared**

Only 17% of teachers surveyed feel very well prepared to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.<sup>5</sup>



## The Opportunity

Research shows that effective inclusive educational systems create widespread benefits. In schools with systems for inclusion — where students with disabilities learn alongside their non-disabled peers with appropriate supports and accommodations to access the general education curriculum:

 <p>All students demonstrate improved academic performance across subjects<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>Both students with and without disabilities show enhanced social and communication skills<sup>7</sup></p> 
 <p>Teachers report increased collaboration and professional growth<sup>8</sup></p>	<p>Schools see improved operational efficiency and cost savings<sup>9</sup></p> 

These outcomes highlight how effectively serving students with disabilities elevates the educational experience for every learner.



## Building Excellence through Inclusive Education

The Ability Challenge (ABC) has developed the THRIVE Framework to transform how schools approach special education, moving beyond compliance to create truly inclusive learning environments that benefit all students. Through identifying proven practices like differentiated instruction, data-driven decision making, and collaborative teaching, THRIVE reshapes special education delivery in schools. When implemented effectively, THRIVE's research-backed approach creates a powerful ripple effect throughout the school community. Building more responsive systems for strengthening how teachers collaborate, schools will improve instructional practices — catalyzing movement toward school-wide excellence. For example, when schools commit to inclusive instructional practices and systems, they set the stage for teachers to learn to differentiate instruction effectively and become better equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of all their students. When schools create strong systems for progress monitoring of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, they develop muscles for using data to drive improvement across all programs.

Based on data from hundreds of research studies and input from thousands of practitioners across general and special education, THRIVE outlines:

- Critical mindsets, knowledge, and practices necessary for authentically inclusive school environments;
- Clear indicators of high-quality inclusive programming that bridge special and general education practices; and
- A vision for sustainable systems change that benefits the entire school community.

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*THRIVE's research-backed approach creates a powerful ripple effect throughout the school community.*  
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This white paper presents the THRIVE Framework’s five core elements and offers real school examples to show how THRIVE has been implemented in different settings.

<b>1</b>	<b>Culture of Inclusion</b> This element emphasizes the importance of establishing a school culture that embraces learning differences and promotes the belief that all students can succeed.
<b>2</b>	<b>Student-Centered Curriculum &amp; Instruction</b> The second element focuses on delivering curriculum and instruction that are both evidence-based and culturally responsive.
<b>3</b>	<b>Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates</b> This element ensures that leaders are familiar with special education laws and understand their role in ensuring quality programming.
<b>4</b>	<b>Equitable Systems and Resource Management</b> The fourth element focuses on the allocation of resources in a way that ensures all students have access to the support they need.
<b>5</b>	<b>Meaningful Family Partnerships</b> The final element highlights the role of families as crucial partners in the educational process.

For students with disabilities, the disconnect between current educational systems and their true potential represents not just a missed opportunity for academic success,

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*Yet in addressing this gap through THRIVE, schools discover that the same practices that help their most vulnerable learners succeed also create the conditions for all students to thrive.*  
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but a barrier to their future life outcomes. Yet in addressing this gap through THRIVE, schools discover that the same practices that help their most vulnerable learners succeed also create the conditions for all students to thrive. This paper provides education leaders with the insight and direction to begin creating more inclusive schools, where every student has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.



## Inside the Paper: A Roadmap for Transformation

This White Paper provides a comprehensive exploration of how schools and Districts can move from aspiration to action in creating truly inclusive environments. In addition to an overview of each THRIVE element, readers will find:

- ➔ **In-depth analyses** of the knowledge, mindsets, and practices that define excellence in special education
- ➔ **Case studies** showcasing successful implementation across different school contexts (e.g., middle school, charter network, district office), and
- ➔ **Practical tools** for implementation, including role-specific checklists:
  - ✓ **Classroom-Level** THRIVE Alignment Checklist for Teachers
  - ✓ **Program-Level** THRIVE Alignment Checklist for Special Education Leaders
  - ✓ **School-Wide** THRIVE Alignment Checklist for Principals and District Leaders

The journey from compliance to authentic inclusion isn't easy, but it's both urgent and possible. Through the frameworks, examples, and tools provided in this paper, education leaders will find a clear path forward in transforming how they serve diverse learners. By implementing the THRIVE Framework's research-backed practices, schools can create environments where all students — and the educators who serve them — can truly thrive.



For more information and resources, visit [www.theabilitychallenge.org](http://www.theabilitychallenge.org).

Read the full white paper >

# REFERENCES

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