# FROM ABC TO THRIVE



Spelling Out Success in Special Education



**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 learn-

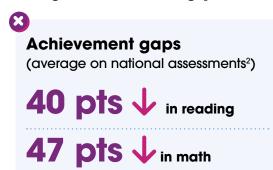
**Leaders serve** 7.5 M students with disabilities

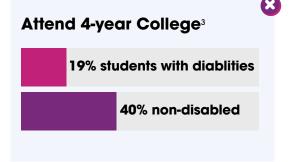
ing, including learning disabilities, autism, emotional disturbances, physical disabilities, and other health impairments. While serving these students, leaders confront a stark reality — only 71% of students with disabilities graduate high school compared to the national average of 87%. The stakes for transformation have never been higher.

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

### The Challenge

Among the students receiving special education services in American schools:





## **Exclusionary Discipline**

Students with disabilities are at least two times more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline than their non-disabled peers4

### **Teachers Underprepared**



Only 17% of teachers surveyed feel very well prepared to teachstudents with mild to moderate learning disabilities.5



## 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:



All students demonstrate improved academic performance across subjects<sup>6</sup>

Both students with and without disabilities show enhanced social and communication skills7





Teachers report increased collaboration and professional growth<sup>8</sup>

Schools see improved operational efficiency and cost savings9



These outcomes highlight how effectively serving students with disabilities elevates the



## **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

THRIVE's researchbacked approach creates a powerful ripple effect throughout the school community.

community. Building more responsive systems for strengthening how teachers collaborate, schools will improve instructional practices — catalyzing movement toward schoolwide 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.





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.

#### **Culture of Inclusion**

This element emphasizes the importance of establishing a school culture that embraces learning differences and promotes the belief that all students can succeed.

#### **Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction**

The second element focuses on delivering curriculum and instruction that are both evidence-based and culturally responsive.

#### **Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates**

This element ensures that leaders are familiar with special education laws and understand their role in ensuring quality programming.

#### **Equitable Systems and Resource Management**

The fourth element focuses on the allocation of resources in a way that ensures all students have access to the support they need.

#### **Meaningful Family Partnerships**

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,

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.

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 <u>www.theabilitychallenge.org.</u>

Read the full white paper >



## REFERENCES

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Students With Disabilities. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved December 9, 2024, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg.
- 2 Hung, M., Smith, W. A., Voss, M. W., Franklin, J. D., Gu, Y., & Bounsanga, J. (2020). Exploring student achievement gaps in school districts across the United States. Education and Urban Society, 52(2), 175-193.
- 3 Newman, L., Wagner, M., Knokey, A. M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., & Wei, X. (2011). The Post-High School Outcomes of Young Adults with Disabilities up to 8 Years after High School: A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). NCSER 2011-3005. National Center for Special Education Research.
- Kristine A. Camacho, Pamela A. Fenning, Reese H. Hyzer, Kaelyn GreenRobinson & Shanna Chakkalakel (10 Jul 2024): Advocating for Disciplinary Reform Through a Systematic Review of School Discipline Laws and State Guidance Across the United States, School Psychology Review, DOI: 10.1080/2372966X.2024.2369496
- Galiatsos, S., Kruse, L., & Whittaker, M. (2019). Forward together: Helping educators unlock the power of students who learn differently. National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood.
- 6 Cole, C. M., Waldron, N., & Majd, M. (2004). Academic progress of students across inclusive and traditional settings. Mental retardation, 42(2), 136-144.
- Fisher, M., & Meyer, L. H. (2002). Development and social competence after two years for students enrolled in inclusive and self-contained educational programs. Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 27(3), 165-174.
- McLeskey, J., Waldron, N. L., & Redd, L. (2014). A case study of a highly effective, inclusive elementary school. The journal of special education, 48(1), 59-70.
- Malhotra, K. P. (2023). Whose IDEA Is This? A Cost-Effectiveness Analysis of the Federal Emphasis on Inclusive Education. Columbia University.



**LEARN MORE AT** 

WWW.THEABILITYCHALLENGE.ORG