

FROM ABC TO THRIVE

Spelling Out Success in Special Education



the ability
challenge



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INTRODUCTION

“I don’t feel like I belong at school...”

These words echo through hallways across America, revealing both the challenge and opportunity in special education today. For the 7.5 million students receiving specialized instruction and support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a system shaped by limited expectations and compliance-driven programming has contributed to a high school graduation rate of just 71% — a figure that falls 16 percentage points behind their non-disabled peers. Research shows that the success rate for students with disabilities could and should be much higher, highlighting the persistent achievement gaps that continue to challenge our schools.

The pressing need to transform special education has never been more urgent. Schools face unprecedented staffing shortages, with 48 states reporting critical gaps in special education teachers. The pandemic has widened achievement disparities, particularly for

students with disabilities. Traditional compliance-driven approaches are proving insufficient to meet these mounting challenges and systemic inefficiencies are further exacerbating these gaps. Some schools are breaking free from this pattern, achieving remarkable results by reimagining how they serve diverse learners — and in doing so, discovering that excellence in special education can drive school-wide transformation.

The THRIVE Framework provides a comprehensive approach for transforming how schools serve diverse learners. Based on extensive research and input from thousands of practitioners, THRIVE outlines five core elements of authentically inclusive communities where all students succeed:

- 1 Culture of Inclusion
- 2 Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction
- 3 Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates
- 4 Equitable Systems and Resource Management
- 5 Meaningful Family Partnerships

Through detailed exploration of each element, supported by case studies and practical guidance, this paper demonstrates how schools can turn the promise of inclusion into reality. While the journey from compliance to authentic inclusion isn't easy, the examples and indicators shared here light the path forward. For the millions of students with disabilities in our schools — and the educators who serve them — the time for transformation is now.

A Historical Perspective

While special education law guarantees access to public education for students with disabilities, the promise of true inclusion remains unfulfilled for many learners. The evolution from segregated classrooms to mainstreaming to inclusion represents progress but hasn't yet delivered the transformative change our students deserve. Even as schools work to comply with legal mandates, many struggle to create the conditions where diverse learners genuinely thrive.

The Data Story

The numbers tell a stark story about this gap in opportunities between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers:

- ✘ Students with disabilities score on average 40 points lower in reading and 47 points lower in math on national assessments¹
- ✘ Students with disabilities are at least two times more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline than their non-disabled peers²
- ✘ Only 19% attend 4-year colleges compared to 40% of their non-disabled peers³
- ✘ Over 80% of teachers report feeling underprepared to teach students with disabilities⁴
- ✘ Special education teacher turnover exceeds 15% annually, a rate significantly higher than the 8-10% turnover typically seen among general education teachers⁵

However, schools that successfully move beyond compliance to embrace authentic inclusion see benefits that extend throughout their communities:

- ★ Improved academic outcomes for both students with and without disabilities⁶
- ★ Stronger school culture through enhanced collaboration and shared responsibility⁷
- ★ Higher staff retention and satisfaction⁸
- ★ More engaged family partnerships⁹
- ★ Greater operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness¹⁰

By investing in world class special education programming, these schools demonstrate that supporting diverse learners effectively lifts the entire educational community.

Vision for Change

This white paper provides three essential tools for schools ready to transform special education:



First, we establish a shared vision of excellence in inclusive education. The THRIVE Framework offers a comprehensive, research-backed definition of high-quality programming that moves beyond compliance to focus on knowledge, mindsets, and practices that meaningfully impact student achievement and equity.

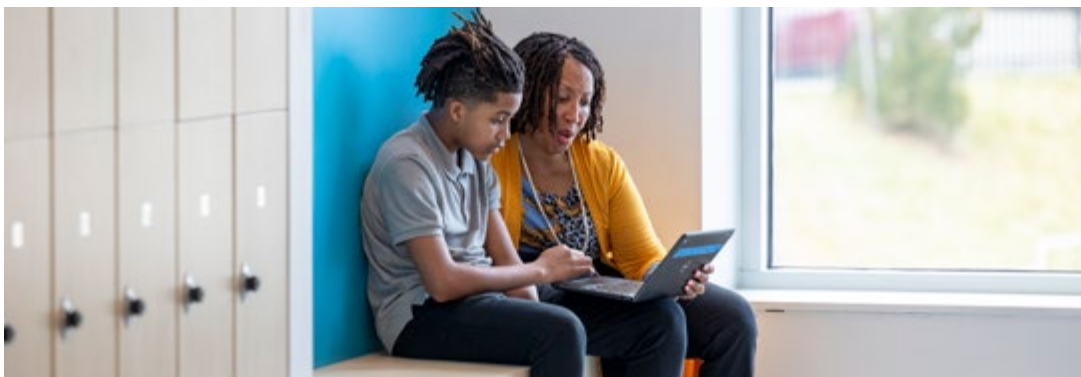
We offer extensive citations throughout to show how the research connects to the THRIVE elements. One way to use this paper is to go directly to the research to dig into the conditions researchers found were necessary to implement these practices with fidelity.



Second, we provide practical guidance for data-driven improvement. By connecting assessment to action, we demonstrate how schools can focus their work on specific areas to address their unique challenges while building on existing strengths.



Finally, we outline strategies for sustainable systems change. Through real examples and implementation guidance, we show how schools, districts, and communities can work together to create lasting improvements in how we serve diverse learners.





A Note About Language

Throughout this paper, we seek to provide clarity and consistency in the terms we use:

We use “**diverse learners**” to encompass students’ neurodiverse qualities, recognizing different learning styles, strengths, and challenges. This includes students with IEPs, 504 plans, undiagnosed disabilities, and those whose disabilities may not require formal accommodations.

We define **disability** as a physical, cognitive, or developmental condition that may impact learning or daily activities, while acknowledging the social model of disability that recognizes how societal barriers can create or amplify challenges.

We use **identity-first language** (e.g., “autistic person”) for disabilities often considered integral to identity, and **person-first language** (e.g., “person with a disability”) when referring to groups or specific services.

We promote **neutral, descriptive language** for specific conditions or learning differences. Recognizing that individual preferences vary, we ask about and respect preferred terminology whenever possible.

Our goal is to foster an inclusive environment that values all learners while promoting dignity and self-determination.

A Note About Case Studies

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.



THE THRIVE FRAMEWORK

At the heart of ABC’s mission to promote accessible education is the THRIVE Framework, a comprehensive, research-based approach designed to guide schools to develop high-quality special education programs.

THRIVE is structured around five core elements, each of which represents a critical component of an effective and inclusive educational program. Success Indicators are the sub-components of each element and represent the research-based mindsets, knowledge, and practices necessary to meet each of the Framework’s five elements.

These elements provide a roadmap for educators and leaders, outlining the knowledge, mindsets, and practices necessary to create authentic inclusion within schools.

Success Indicators

Success Indicators are the sub-components of each element and represent the research-based mindsets, knowledge, and practices necessary to meet each of the Framework’s five elements.

The Five Core Elements of the THRIVE Framework

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. Leaders set and hold staff accountable for a bold, clear, inclusive vision and aligned practices. Educators believe that all students can learn and grow and deeply value an inclusive, collaborative school environment.

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

The second element focuses on delivering curriculum and instruction that are both evidence-based and culturally responsive. Leaders manage the implementation of evidence-based, standards-aligned, culturally-responsive curriculum with clear outcomes and sequenced units of study. Educators facilitate meaningful and supportive relationships with students and deliver instruction that provides access to grade-level content for diverse learners.

Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates

A deep understanding of special education laws and mandates is crucial for ensuring that students with disabilities receive the support they need. This element of the THRIVE Framework ensures that leaders are familiar with special education laws and understand their role in ensuring quality programming. Educators understand how disability impacts learning, know their legal obligations, and collaborate with peers to deliver integrated support that meets each student's needs.

Equitable Systems and Resource Management

Effective management of resources and systems is essential for executing quality special education programs. This element focuses on the allocation of resources in a way that ensures all students have access to the support they need. Leaders allocate resources and put in place effective systems to manage the execution of quality special education programming in their context. Educators are knowledgeable about and implement those systems paying close attention to data and adjusting courses as needed.

Meaningful Family Partnerships

The final element highlights the role of families as crucial partners in the educational process. Leaders prioritize building meaningful partnerships with families and provide resources to staff to make those partnerships happen. Educators enter into effective, reciprocal relationships with families centered on empathy and cultural competence.

The THRIVE Impact

The THRIVE Framework is more than just a set of guidelines; it is a transformative approach that has been proven to enhance the quality of special education programs. Schools that implement these elements consistently report significant improvements in student outcomes, particularly among those from marginalized communities. By focusing on inclusivity, evidence-based practices, and strong partnerships, THRIVE empowers schools to meet the needs of diverse learners and create environments where all students can thrive.

In the following sections, we will delve deeper into each of these elements, providing a detailed exploration of the knowledge, mindsets, and practices that define them. We will also draw on current research and case studies to illustrate how THRIVE can be effectively implemented in schools.



ELEMENT 1

Culture of Inclusion

“In many schools, the ‘us vs. them’ mentality is very present when it comes to special education—where general education and special education teachers are operating in separate silos. But when a culture of inclusion is developed, that divide starts to disappear. We see educators shift from viewing special education students as ‘someone else’s responsibility’ to embracing them as ‘our’ students—part of the whole school community. This shift is key to creating environments where every student, regardless of ability, feels supported and empowered to succeed.”

— Sarah Sandelius, Founder, The Ability Challenge



INTRODUCTION

The transformation from isolation to collaboration captures the heart of authentically inclusive schools. While many talk about inclusion, THRIVE Element 1 shows how to weave it into a school's very DNA, creating environments where every student belongs and every educator shares responsibility for their success.

School culture acts as the soil from which student growth emerges — it requires intentional enrichment. When leaders nurture inclusive mindsets and practices, they create conditions where all students and staff flourish. This element guides schools in cultivating that fertile ground, ensuring that inclusion moves beyond buzzword to become daily reality.

KEY COMPONENTS OF A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

To build and maintain a culture of inclusion, school leaders and educators should focus on the following key indicators:

Knowledge & Mindsets

1. **Belief that Serving Exceptional Learners is a Collective Responsibility**

In a truly inclusive school culture, the responsibility for educating diverse learners is shared among all educators, not just those directly involved in special education. This collective approach fosters a supportive network where general education teachers, special education professionals, and support staff work together seamlessly. This collaboration ensures that students receive consistent, high-quality support across all settings.¹¹

2. **Belief that All Students Can Learn and Grow**

A foundational principle of inclusive education is the belief in the potential of all students, regardless of their abilities. This belief is deeply rooted in the concept of growth mindset, which emphasizes that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication and hard work. Schools that embrace this mindset are committed to creating learning environments that are responsive to the diverse needs of students, ensuring that every learner is engaged, challenged, and supported in their growth. By fostering a growth mindset, these schools focus on providing the necessary support and opportunities for all students to thrive academically and socially, encouraging them to see challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as obstacles.¹²

.....
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.....

3. Belief that an Inclusive School Environment Benefits All Students

Inclusion is not only beneficial for students with disabilities, it enriches the entire school community. An inclusive environment promotes understanding and acceptance, fostering a sense of belonging among all students. This inclusive culture helps to break down barriers, allowing all students to learn from one another and develop essential life skills such as empathy, collaboration, and respect for diverse perspectives and identities.¹³

4. Understanding of the Leaders' Role in Shaping Culture

School leaders are key to establishing and maintaining a culture of inclusion as they set the tone for the schools and districts they lead. They must understand that their leadership style, decisions, and communication are crucial in setting the tone for inclusivity throughout the school. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that their vision for inclusion is clearly articulated and that all staff members are held accountable for upholding this vision in their daily practices.¹⁴

5. Understanding of the Components of Effective Change Management Focused on Inclusion

Through deliberate change management, leaders can shift their school from isolated pockets of inclusion to a culture where inclusive practices permeate every aspect of school life.

Leaders must intentionally transform their school culture to become truly inclusive. This requires them to:

- Design and execute a clear change management strategy
- Engage all stakeholders in the transformation process
- Anticipate and address resistance proactively
- Monitor implementation consistently
- Embed inclusive practices into daily operations

Successful leaders approach this transformation systematically. They create urgency around inclusion, build coalitions of support, and celebrate early wins. They also recognize that sustainable change requires ongoing attention — continuously gathering feedback, adjusting approaches, and reinforcing new inclusive practices until they become the norm.¹⁵



Practices

6. Creation of a Bold, Clear Vision for Inclusion

A clear and compelling shared vision for inclusion is essential for guiding the school's efforts. This vision should articulate the school's commitment to creating an environment where every student is valued and supported. It should be reflective of all community members and be communicated consistently across the school community, ensuring that all community members understand their role in achieving this vision.¹⁶

7. Implementation of an Action Plan for Making or Sustaining Inclusive Change

Turning vision into action requires a structured plan, informed by promising change management practices, that details the specific steps needed to create and sustain an inclusive culture. This action plan should outline clear goals, attend to necessary knowledge and skill development, assign responsibilities, and set aligned timelines and benchmarks. Regular review and adaptation of the plan ensure that it remains responsive to the evolving needs of the school community while celebrating the successes along the way.¹⁷

8. Implementation of Practices for Mitigating Bias

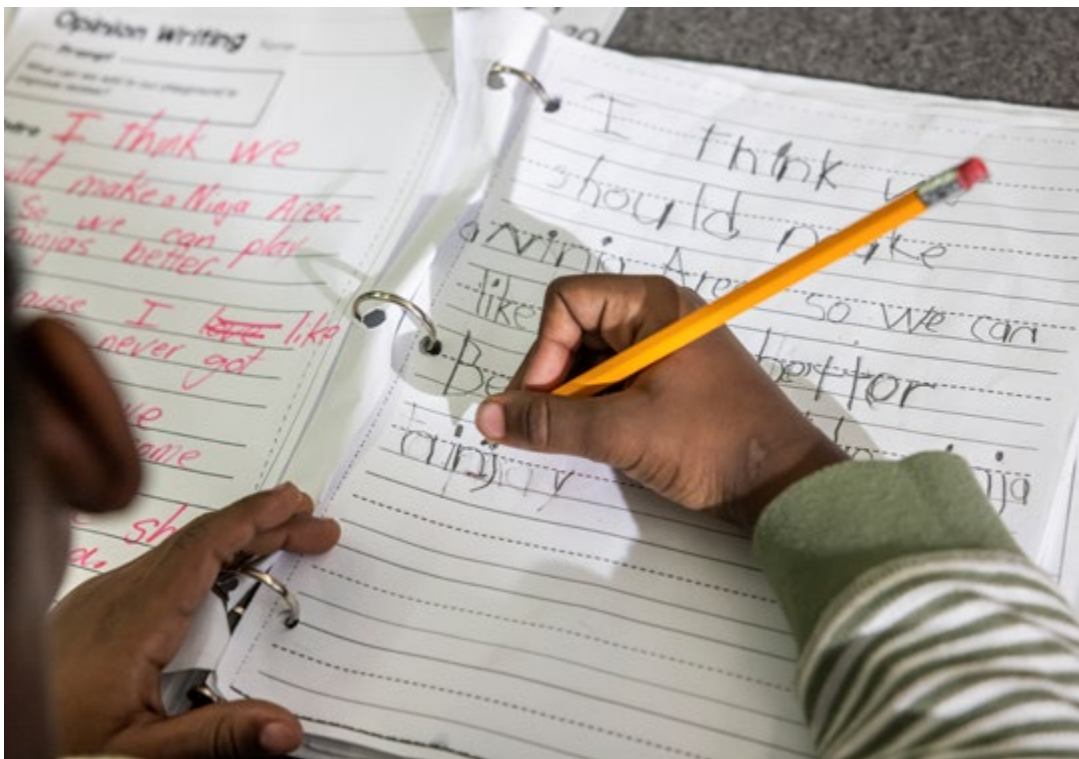
Bias, whether overt or subtle, can undermine efforts to create an inclusive environment. Schools must implement practices that actively work to identify and reduce bias. This can include ongoing professional development focused on equity and inclusion, as well as reflective practices that encourage staff to examine their own biases and adjust their behaviors and attitudes accordingly.¹⁸

9. Effective Formal & Informal Collaboration

Collaboration is at the heart of a successful inclusive culture. Schools should promote both formal structures, such as team meetings and co-teaching models, and informal interactions that encourage the sharing of ideas and strategies. Effective collaboration ensures that all educators are aligned in their efforts to support diverse learners, creating a cohesive and inclusive educational environment.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Element 1 of the THRIVE Framework emphasizes that a strong culture of inclusion forms the foundation for equitable education. By fostering shared beliefs about student potential, implementing bias-mitigating practices, and maintaining structured collaboration, schools can create an environment where all students feel valued and enabled to succeed.



CASE STUDY

PAUL'S STORY:

Building School Culture where All Students Belong



The Challenge

Paul's experience as a new Principal illustrates how fostering a culture of inclusion can begin to transform a school community. Paul confronted significant challenges at his diverse middle school, where 28% of students had IEPs or 504s, and over half qualified for free/reduced lunch. Most striking among these challenges was a 25-point gap in reading proficiency between the overall student population and students qualifying for free/reduced lunch.



Strategic Priorities

Working with ABC, Paul partnered with his leadership team and district peers to identify three key initiatives to transform their school culture:

- Developing a student advisory model to build belonging
- Implementing collaborative planning for inclusive instruction
- Advancing anti-racist instructional practices

Through these initiatives, the school engaged staff and families in creating meaningful change.



THRIVE-Aligned Practices

Paul's team implemented several key practices that aligned with the THRIVE Framework:

- Created a systematic design process that engaged 100% of staff and families in developing the new advisory structure
- Restructured existing PLC time to enable meaningful collaboration between general educators, special educators, and ELL teachers
- Developed clear protocols to guide planning sessions and ensure instruction works for all learners from the start



Impact and Outcomes

The work was focused and intentional, leading to significant school transformation. A new advisory structure ensured that every student had a consistent adult advocate. Collaborative planning between general educators, special educators, and ELL teachers strengthened access to differentiated instruction for all learners. The school moved toward what Paul describes as "a more anti-racist educational community that deconstructs barriers to remedy culture so that we have equitable practices that lead to equitable outcomes for all learners."

[Read the full case study >](#)

ELEMENT 2

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

“In our partnerships with schools, we’ve seen time and time again that something powerful happens when educators design instruction around individual learners. When teachers have the right tools and systems to reach every student, the entire classroom community flourishes.”

— Sarah Sandelius, Founder, The Ability Challenge



INTRODUCTION

Student-centered instruction transforms schools. While traditional approaches often leave diverse learners behind, THRIVE Element 2 empowers educators to craft learning experiences that engage every student, regardless of their learning style, background, or abilities.

Imagine a classroom where every learner feels challenged yet supported, working at their optimal level while moving toward ambitious shared goals. This isn't just an ideal — it's what happens when educators master the art of student-centered instruction. Through evidence-based, culturally-responsive practices, teachers create dynamic learning environments where all students discover their potential.

KEY COMPONENTS OF STUDENT-CENTERED CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

To implement and sustain a student-centered curriculum, school leaders and educators should focus on the following key indicators:

Knowledge & Mindsets

10. Knowledge of Evidence-Based Instructional and Assessment Practices for Diverse Learners

Educators must master instructional strategies and assessment practices that effectively support diverse learners. This expertise drives the design and delivery of instruction that ensures access for all students, especially those with diverse learning needs. Knowing methods for adapting and accommodating assessments is also crucial to ensuring students have multiple pathways to demonstrate their learning. When teachers use data to inform these practices, they ensure that instruction is not only aligned with standards but also responsive to the individual progress of students.²⁰

11. Strengths-Based Understanding of Student Potential

Every student brings inherent strengths and potential to succeed. When educators deeply embrace this truth, they transform learning experiences. A strengths-based approach spotlights what students can do and how they can grow, rather than focusing on perceived limitations. This mindset empowers educators to create challenging, engaging experiences that nurture each student's unique capabilities, grounded in a presumption of competence.²¹

Practices

12. Use of Clear Teaching Outcomes

Clear, measurable outcomes aligned with academic standards drive effective instruction. These outcomes create a roadmap that both teachers and students can navigate together. When educators focus on specific goals, they power student achievement forward. This clarity especially helps students who process information differently or struggle with attention — they can easily redirect and rejoin the learning journey without missing key content.²²

13. Use of Standards-Aligned, Inter Dependent Units of Study

Strong curriculum weaves together standards-aligned units where learning in one area strengthens understanding in another. Every educational opportunity should push students toward meeting state standards — the same rigorous expectations that govern high school graduation and open doors to post-secondary success. This integrated approach combines academic skills with social-emotional growth, preparing students for success both in and beyond the classroom.²³

14. Use of Data to Make Instructional Decisions

Meeting diverse learning needs demands data-driven instruction. Strong educators constantly gather and analyze formal and informal student performance data to shape their teaching. This information powers decisions about flexible grouping, concept reinforcement, pre-teaching needs, and other instructional adjustments. By staying responsive to data, teachers ensure instruction remains adaptive, targeted, and effective at accelerating student growth.²⁴

15. Use of Intentional Differentiation and Specialized Instruction for Diverse Learners

Teachers transform learning when they skillfully adapt teaching strategies to connect with different student learning styles, abilities, and interests. This mastery of differentiation sits at the heart of student-centered instruction. For students with disabilities, teachers provide specially designed instruction — targeted approaches that remove specific disability-related barriers to unlock access to the general curriculum. Through differentiation and specialized support, every student gains meaningful access to grade-level content and opportunities for success while preserving the rigor of academic standards.²⁵

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16. Use of Collaborative Approaches to Instruction

When educators join forces in the classroom, instruction reaches new levels of excellence and inclusion. Schools maximize the impact of all staff by clearly defining roles for each adult — from instructional aides to push-in specialists to co-teachers. Strong collaborative teaching pairs this clarity of roles with dedicated planning time, ensuring all educators unite their expertise to meet diverse student needs and further hone their own instructional practices.²⁶

17. Effective Planning and Co-Planning

Research proves that dedicated co-planning time drives better student outcomes. Effective planning brings general and special educators together in structured collaboration, guided by clear protocols that center student data and instructional strategies. This teamwork creates shared ownership for developing differentiated lessons and materials while seamlessly integrating specialized instruction into the general curriculum. Success grows through ongoing assessment and adjustment based on how students respond.

Through intentional planning practices, educators can create cohesive learning experiences that support all students in accessing grade-level content.²⁷

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.....



18. Fostering Supportive Relationships and Learning Environments for Students

Strong relationships and supportive environments fuel student success, especially for diverse learners. Research links positive teacher-student connections directly to improved academic outcomes and deeper engagement. Effective learning spaces provide both physical and emotional safety, where every student feels valued and supported. Teachers actively build these relationships by:

- Facilitating positive peer connections
- Teaching culturally and linguistically responsive social skills
- Establishing clear routines and expectations
- Maintaining high expectations paired with appropriate support
- Incorporating student voice and choice

These nurturing environments enable all students to thrive, creating spaces where students with disabilities can leverage their unique perspectives and talents while building meaningful connections within their learning community.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Element 2 of the THRIVE Framework highlights that effective student-centered curriculum and instruction are essential for meeting diverse learning needs. Through evidence-based practices, intentional differentiation, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative teaching approaches, schools can ensure all students have meaningful access to grade-level content and opportunities for growth.

ELEMENT 3

Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates

“The most powerful shift we see in schools isn’t just learning what the law requires — it’s discovering how these mandates can be leveraged to create extraordinary learning experiences. When leaders and educators deeply understand what special education requires, they stop seeing it as a checklist and start seeing it as a foundation for innovation.”

— Sarah Sandelius, Founder, The Ability Challenge



INTRODUCTION

The powerful insight on the previous page marks the difference between schools that merely comply with special education mandates and those that leverage them to transform student educational experiences. THRIVE Element 3 challenges educators to master these mandates as tools for change, building programs that genuinely serve all students.

Picture special education mandates as architectural blueprints - they don't just outline basic requirements, they provide the foundation for building remarkable learning experiences. When leaders and educators truly grasp these mandates, they unlock creative solutions, forge stronger team collaboration, and craft individualized support that propels student success. Leaders catalyze this transformation by nurturing deep understanding across their teams, ensuring every stakeholder contributes meaningfully to an integrated support system.

.....
Disabilities uniquely shape how students engage with curriculum and instruction. When educators grasp these impacts, they craft targeted strategies that help students overcome barriers to learning and access their full potential.
.....

KEY COMPONENTS OF SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF SPECIAL EDUCATION MANDATES

To build and maintain a shared understanding of special education mandates, school leaders and educators should focus on the following key indicators:

Knowledge & Mindsets

19. Familiarity with Special Education Laws

Leaders and educators with fluency in special education laws like IDEA are positioned to transform their understanding into powerful programming. This foundational knowledge empowers them to create legally sound programs that truly serve student needs. Beyond simple compliance, deep knowledge of these laws enables educators to advocate effectively for resources, design innovative solutions within legal frameworks, and ensure students receive all entitled services and protections.²⁹

20. Basic Understanding of the Impact of Disabilities on Learning

Disabilities uniquely shape how students engage with curriculum and instruction. When educators grasp these impacts, they craft targeted strategies that help students overcome barriers to learning and access their full potential. This understanding

drives decisions about accommodations, modifications, and specialized instruction while helping educators recognize and nurture individual strengths. By deeply understanding how disabilities affect learning processes, educators can proactively address barriers and create inclusive learning environments.³⁰

21. Clear Roles and Responsibilities for Special Education

Every team member must know precisely how they contribute to student success. From special educators to classroom teachers to administrators, this clarity drives coordinated, high-quality support for students with disabilities. Well-defined roles eliminate gaps in service delivery, reduce redundancy, and ensure efficient use of expertise. When teams understand their responsibilities, they collaborate more effectively and maintain consistent focus on student needs.³¹

Practices

22. Writing of Clear and Effective Documents

Strong IEPs and other similar documents (e.g., Section 504 Plans under the ADA or robust psychoeducational evaluations) serve as the cornerstone for student success. These documents demand clarity, comprehensiveness, and careful tailoring to individual needs. When teams craft effective documentation, they align their efforts and consistently meet student needs. Quality documents include data-driven statements of current performance, specific, measurable goals, detailed service descriptions, clear accommodation plans, and comprehensive progress monitoring strategies. This documentation guides daily instruction while ensuring legal compliance.³²

23. Design and Delivery of Programming Tailored to Individual Student Needs

Each student's unique challenges drive their educational programming. Beyond meeting mandates, educators design and deliver a comprehensive set of services as described in their IEP that tackles specific learning barriers while building on individual strengths. Successful programs blend research-based practices with deep understanding of individual student needs, creating personalized learning pathways that challenge and support every learner. This tailored approach ensures that legal requirements become launching points for innovative, effective instruction.³³

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24. Effective IEP Team Meetings

IEP meetings unite stakeholders in planning transformative educational programs. Through structured collaboration, teams amplify every voice and create actionable plans that align with legal requirements while serving student needs. Productive meetings build trust between school staff and families, establish clear goals and responsibilities, and generate solutions that work in both classroom and home environments. This collaborative approach ensures that every team member contributes meaningfully to student success.³⁴

25. Effective Practices for Progress Monitoring

Intentional, targeted progress monitoring illuminates student growth toward IEP goals. Schools collect and analyze targeted data systematically, enabling quick adjustments to instruction and support. Successful monitoring combines carefully chosen measures, consistent implementation, and collaborative analysis. By tracking progress regularly and meaningfully, teams can celebrate successes, identify challenges early, and adjust supports to maximize student growth. This dynamic approach transforms progress monitoring from a compliance task into a powerful tool for continuous improvement.³⁵

26. Regular Compliance Monitoring

Leaders maintain excellence by regularly verifying their alignment with special education laws. Effective systems track key indicators, flag potential issues early, and guide proactive solutions. IEP Teams, typically facilitated by case managers, conduct regular review to maintain high standards while identifying opportunities to enhance service delivery. By weaving compliance monitoring into routine operations, schools create sustainable systems that support continuous improvement.³⁶

27. Integrated Provision of Related and Other Services

Related services like speech therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, and physical therapy amplify student success when seamlessly woven into classroom instruction. The responsibility for integration falls primarily to school leaders, who create systems and schedules that enable service providers and classroom teachers to work as unified teams. Rather than pulling students out for isolated therapy sessions, effective schools push services into natural learning environments whenever possible.

Coordinating these supports within the educational program demands thoughtful scheduling, clear communication channels, and regular collaboration among all providers. School leaders establish structures that help specialists and teachers share strategies, align goals, and track student progress together. This intentional integration ensures students receive cohesive support that builds skills across settings while maximizing engagement in core instruction.

When services align with classroom learning rather than operating separately, students make stronger connections and faster progress toward their educational goals. This unified approach transforms related services from isolated interventions into powerful tools that enhance daily learning experiences.³⁷

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CONCLUSION

Element 3 of the THRIVE Framework establishes that a shared understanding of special education mandates is critical for program quality. By developing clear knowledge of legal requirements, implementing consistent documentation practices, and maintaining effective monitoring systems, schools can move beyond basic compliance to deliver truly individualized support that helps students thrive.

CASE STUDY

MAYA'S STORY:

Improving the Quality of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)



The Challenge

As an Associate Director of Special Education, Maya and her team discovered a fundamental challenge: “high-quality IEP” held different meanings across the district. This variation led to inconsistent practices and outcomes for students with disabilities. Information about IEP quality seemed to come from informal sources rather than systematic training, creating significant disparities in service delivery across schools.



Strategic Priorities

Working with ABC, Maya and her team focused on two key initiatives:

- Building a shared understanding among educators of IEP quality
- Strengthening support systems for sustainable improvement
- Creating consistent standards for documentation and service delivery

In this work, the team worked to establish clear standards and support systems to ensure high-quality services for all students



THRIVE-Aligned Practices

Maya’s team implemented several key practices that aligned with the THRIVE Framework:

- Established regular professional development sessions for case managers focused on foundational IEP components
- Created common quality indicators and clear expectations for data use in IEP development
- Implemented regular case manager check-ins and direct support during IEP meetings



Impact and Outcomes

The changes led to measurable improvements in IEP quality. Individual success stories demonstrated the impact - from veteran educators transforming their approach to new teachers developing more sophisticated data collection systems. Overall, in the first year, Present Levels of Performance documentation increased by 41%, and placement quality improved by 17%.

[Read the full case study >](#)

ELEMENT 4

Equitable Systems and Resource Management

“The schools making the biggest impact aren’t necessarily those with the most resources — they’re the ones who have mastered the art of getting the right supports to the right students at the right time. When leaders build truly responsive systems, we see extraordinary transformations in how students learn and grow.”

— Sarah Sandelius, Founder, The Ability Challenge



INTRODUCTION

Leader mindsets can transform how schools allocate their most precious resources — time, talent, and tools. While many schools strive for surface-level fairness, THRIVE Element 4 guides leaders in building systems that respond dynamically to student needs. Principals, special education directors, and instructional leaders work together to analyze data, align staffing, and create flexible structures that channel the right resources to the right students at the right time.

District and school leaders drive this work by designing responsive systems that adapt as student needs evolve. Rather than rigid one-size-fits-all approaches, they create frameworks that help teams make informed decisions about everything from staffing assignments to scheduling to program design. This strategic approach ensures resources flow to where they can make the greatest impact.

KEY COMPONENTS OF EQUITABLE SYSTEMS AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

To establish and sustain equity in resource management, school leaders and educators should prioritize the following indicators:



Knowledge & Mindsets

28. Understanding the Relationship Between Tiered Systems of Support and Special Education

Leaders and educators must deeply understand how multi-tiered systems of support intersect with special education services. These parallel support structures often create confusion when not thoughtfully aligned. Effective leaders map interventions across both systems, eliminate redundant services, and ensure smooth transitions between tiers. They then ensure that each member of their community understands how these systems play out from day-to-day. This strategic integration maximizes the impact of limited resources while creating clear pathways of support for struggling students.³⁸

Practices

29. System for Identifying and Delivering Services to Students in Need of Intervention

Strong schools build comprehensive systems to identify struggling students early and match them with appropriate support, whether through multi-tiered systems, response to intervention, or special education. Student support teams meet regularly to review academic, behavioral, and social-emotional data, plan targeted interventions, and monitor progress. This systematic approach ensures quick identification of needs and timely adjustment of supports. When teams coordinate intervention delivery thoughtfully, students receive consistent, effective support that adapts as their needs change.³⁹

.....
Strong schools build comprehensive systems to identify struggling students early and match them with appropriate support, whether through multi-tiered systems, response to intervention, or special education.
.....

30. Equitable and Efficient Staffing and Resource Allocation

Principals and district leaders distribute staff and resources based on actual student needs rather than simple formulas. They consider student learning profiles in each classroom, teacher expertise, assistive technology, classroom materials, and available support staff when making assignments. This nuanced approach ensures resources align with student needs. Leaders regularly assess the impact of their allocation decisions, shifting resources as student populations and needs evolve.⁴⁰

31. Whole School Schedules Designed to Facilitate Collaboration and Inclusion

Schedulers and school leaders craft whole school schedules that make inclusion and collaboration possible, ensuring that teachers have ample opportunities to work together to coordinate instruction and share strategies that work for diverse learners. Intervention blocks integrate smoothly with core instruction, while push-in services weave throughout the day. When schedules prioritize inclusion and collaboration, teachers can work together seamlessly to support all learners.⁴¹

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Schedulers and school leaders craft whole school schedules that make inclusion and collaboration possible, ensuring that teachers have ample opportunities to work together to coordinate instruction and share strategies that work for diverse learners.
.....

32. Continuum of Placements that Honors Least Restrictive Environment

Federal law requires schools to educate students with disabilities alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. This principle of “least restrictive environment” (LRE) drives how special education leaders design their continuum of placements — the range of settings where students might receive services. The continuum typically progresses from full inclusion in general education with support services, to partial pull-out programs, to more specialized settings for students requiring intensive intervention.

Special education directors and principals collaborate to create this graduated system of supports, ensuring each level maintains meaningful access to general education curriculum while providing appropriate specialized instruction. Rather than viewing placement as a fixed decision, effective leaders regularly evaluate student progress and adjust settings as needs change. This dynamic approach upholds both the spirit and letter of the law — maximizing opportunities for inclusion while ensuring every student receives the support they need to succeed.⁴²

33. Tracking and Use of Data for Continuous Improvement of Systems

School leadership teams transform data into action through carefully designed improvement cycles. Special education directors and principals partner with teachers to identify key metrics that illuminate both system health and student growth. These teams examine not just compliance data, but deeper indicators like the effectiveness of co-teaching partnerships, the impact of push-in services, and patterns in student response to interventions. By analyzing implementation data alongside student

outcomes, leaders can pinpoint which resource allocation strategies drive student success.

Regular data review cycles bring together diverse perspectives — from classroom teachers to specialists to administrators. These collaborative analyses help teams spot trends early, from emerging student needs to gaps in support systems. When data reveals areas for growth, leaders engage staff in problem-solving and resource reallocation. This dynamic approach ensures systems continuously evolve to serve students more effectively while maintaining an unwavering focus on equity.⁴³

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*By analyzing
implementation data
alongside student
outcomes, leaders can
pinpoint which resource
allocation strategies
drive student success.*
.....

34. System for Child Find, Referral and Evaluation for Special Education

Special education directors and school leaders establish clear processes for identifying and evaluating students who may need services. For example, under IDEA, Child Find requires schools to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities from birth through age 21 who may need special education services, regardless of whether they are enrolled in public school, private school, or not in school at all. These systems ensure timely, comprehensive evaluations that lead to appropriate service delivery. Regular monitoring of referral patterns helps schools identify potential gaps in their support systems. This proactive approach helps schools meet their legal obligations while serving student needs effectively.

Through these coordinated systems and thoughtful resource management, schools create the conditions where every student can thrive. This strategic approach transforms equity from an aspiration into daily reality.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Element 4 of the THRIVE Framework underscores the importance of equitable systems and resource management in creating a fair and inclusive educational environment. By strategically allocating resources, employing data-driven decision-making, and maintaining flexible systems, schools can ensure that all students receive the support they need to reach their full potential.

CASE STUDY

JACKIE'S STORY:

Ensuring Accessible Instructional Practices



The Challenge

When Jackie's charter network partnered with ABC, they were focused on eliminating the disconnect between their written commitment to inclusion and classroom practices. Data revealed two critical challenges: ineffective co-planning processes during Collaborative Planning Meetings and co-teaching that rarely moved beyond the "one teach/one assist" approach.



Strategic Priorities

Working with ABC, Jackie and her team identified key initiatives:

- Strengthening co-planning processes
- Improving co-teaching through school-based coaching

The network began tackling their challenge by concentrating on enhancing building leaders' coaching and feedback to teachers.



THRIVE-Aligned Practices

The network implemented several key practices that aligned with the THRIVE Framework:

- Conducted review of existing rubrics through an inclusion lens
- Established quarterly co-observation cycles with Special Education Coordinators and ABC coaches
- Implemented targeted training for specialists to build capacity around formal and informal collaboration



Impact and Outcomes

These efforts ultimately led to improvements in student outcomes. One campus reduced achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their general education peers to just under 10 percentage points in second and third grades. Most notably, students with disabilities outperformed their general education peers by 4 percent in third grade. As Jackie reflects, "It is one thing for us to know what we believe and write it down on paper. It is a whole other thing to make it come to life in a classroom."

[Read the full case study >](#)

ELEMENT 5

Meaningful Family Partnerships

“In our strongest partner schools, there’s been a profound realization — that families aren’t just stakeholders to be informed, but rather invaluable partners who bring deep expertise about their children. When schools truly embrace this partnership, we see remarkable gains in student success.”

— Sarah Sandelius, Founder, The Ability Challenge



INTRODUCTION

While many schools limit family involvement to occasional conferences and IEP meetings, THRIVE Element 5 envisions deeper partnerships where families and educators collaborate as equal partners in student success.

When schools build authentic family partnerships, they tap into an invaluable resource — the deep knowledge and fierce advocacy that families bring to supporting their children’s education. Family engagement coordinators, teachers, and administrators work together to create welcoming environments where every family feels valued, regardless of their background or circumstances. This intentional relationship building creates a foundation for the kind of collaboration that truly moves student achievement forward.

KEY COMPONENTS OF MEANINGFUL FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

To develop and sustain strong family partnerships, school leaders and educators should focus on the following key indicators:

Knowledge & Mindsets

35. Belief in the Value of Engaging with Parents and Families as Partners

Teachers and administrators must recognize families as the foremost experts on their children. Beyond simply keeping parents informed, effective educators actively seek family input on educational decisions, honor their insights about student needs, and create multiple pathways for meaningful engagement. When schools truly value family expertise, they gain powerful allies in supporting student growth.⁴⁵

36. Belief that Parents and Families Want the Best For Their Children

Effective leaders and educators start from the premise that every family wants their child to thrive. Teachers and administrators demonstrate this belief by meeting families where they are, providing flexible engagement opportunities, and celebrating family efforts to support learning. This strengths-based approach helps schools tap into families’ natural motivation to see their children succeed.⁴⁶

37. Belief in the Value of Engaging with Empathy

Strong family partnerships grow from genuine empathy. Teachers and school leaders build trust by understanding family circumstances, respecting cultural differences, and responding to family needs. This empathetic approach creates safe spaces where families feel comfortable sharing concerns and collaborating on solutions. When educators approach every interaction with compassion and understanding, they break down barriers that often prevent meaningful family engagement.⁴⁷

38. Understanding Cultural Competence

Educators must understand how culture shapes family engagement. School teams develop awareness of their own cultural perspectives while learning about the diverse communities they serve. This growing cultural competence enables more authentic connections with all families. By recognizing and valuing different cultural approaches to education and family involvement, schools create truly inclusive environments where every family feels welcomed and understood.⁴⁸

.....
School teams develop awareness of their own cultural perspectives while learning about the diverse communities they serve.
.....

Practices

39. Effective and Regular Communication with Families

Schools that thrive create multiple channels for ongoing dialogue with families. Teachers and administrators move beyond one-way information sharing to engage in meaningful exchanges about student progress, needs, and goals. Regular check-ins, responsive communication systems, and culturally appropriate outreach methods ensure all families stay connected to their child's education.⁴⁹

40. Family Training and Development

Schools equip families with tools to support learning at home. Parent coordinators and teachers offer workshops, resources, and coaching that build family capacity to reinforce school-based learning. These opportunities respond to family interests and needs while acknowledging families' expertise about their children. When schools invest in family learning, they multiply their impact on student success.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Element 5 of the THRIVE Framework highlights the importance of meaningful family partnerships in creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment. By valuing family engagement, communicating effectively, and involving families in decision-making, schools can build strong partnerships that enhance learning and well-being for students, especially those with diverse learning needs.



WRAPPING IT UP

As we conclude this exploration of the THRIVE Framework, it is important to recognize that the the journey towards creating educational environments that lift up every student is both continuous and evolving. The five elements outlined—Culture of Inclusion, Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction, Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates, Equitable Systems and Resource Management, and Meaningful Family Partnerships—represent what’s possible when schools commit to authentic inclusion. This isn’t just an aspirational vision — it’s an achievable reality, as demonstrated by the schools profiled in our case studies.

Paul’s leadership in fostering a culture of inclusion, Jackie’s dedication to student-centered instruction, and Maya’s strategic approach to special education show us what’s possible. But they didn’t get there alone. Transforming special education requires expert guidance, proven frameworks, and systematic support.

★ Getting Started: THRIVE-Aligned Resources

Along with this white paper, we've provided practical self-assessment guides to help you evaluate where you stand today:

- **Classroom teachers** can use our checklist to align their daily practices with THRIVE principles
- **Special education leaders** can evaluate and strengthen their program-level systems
- **School and district administrators** can assess and enhance their schoolwide inclusive practices

These “quick-start guides” break down what excellence looks like at each level of the system. By reviewing these concrete indicators, you can identify both strengths and critical gaps that need immediate attention.

★ Taking Action: Your Path to THRIVE

The journey from your current reality to the THRIVE vision may require a trusted partner with proven approaches. ABC provides the comprehensive support you need to make lasting change:

- **Assessments & Audit** services provide an honest evaluation of where you stand and what it will take to reach your goals;
- **Leader Development** offers coaching and communities of practice that build your capacity to drive sustainable transformation;
- **Educator Training** equips your team with the mindsets and skills needed for authentic inclusion; and
- **Tools & Resources** turn theory into action, supporting implementation at every step.

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The challenges facing special education today — from staffing shortages to widening achievement gaps — demand immediate action. Don't wait or try to piece together solutions on your own. The cost of maintaining the status quo is simply too high.

Let ABC guide your journey from aspiration to action. Together, we can create truly inclusive schools where all students thrive.

Ready to begin? Visit www.theabilitychallenge.org to learn more about partnership opportunities that can transform your special education programs today.



THRIVE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOLS

- ✓ Is Your Classroom THRIVE-Aligned?
- ✓ Is Your Special Education Program THRIVE-Aligned?
- ✓ Is Your School or District THRIVE-Aligned?

IS YOUR CLASSROOM THRIVE-ALIGNED?

This checklist is designed to help teachers determine how closely their current classroom practices are aligned with The Ability Challenge's THRIVE Framework for inclusive education. For more information, visit [HTTPS://THEABILITYCHALLENGE.ORG/OUR-APPROACH](https://theabilitychallenge.org/our-approach).

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Your classroom is THRIVE aligned if:

Culture of Inclusion

- You demonstrate and explicitly teach that supporting diverse learners is everyone's responsibility (e.g., peers helping peers, celebration of differences, class agreements)
- All students participate fully in classroom activities and routines (e.g., materials are physically accessible, learning spaces are flexible, and technology is available)
- You collaborate regularly with a variety of colleagues to support student learning
- You actively address bias and promote inclusive language and practices
- You gather and respond to student feedback about their learning needs

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

- Each lesson has a written objective that you discuss with students at the start and end of class
- When teaching new content, you combine verbal explanations with visual aids, models, and hands-on activities
- You offer flexible options for students to demonstrate learning (e.g., writing, typing, recording audio/video, creating visuals)
- You use data from regular formative assessments to adjust instruction
- You implement evidence-based practices for differentiation and specialized instruction
- You ensure students with disabilities can access grade-level content through appropriate supports (e.g., graphic organizers, word banks, breaks, integration of universal design)
- You regularly check student understanding through exit tickets, quick writes, or other brief assessments

Shared Understanding of Special Education Needs

- You understand and consistently implement accommodations, modifications, and learning support as outlined in IEPs and 504 plans
- You maintain clear documentation of student progress toward IEP goals
- You know how specific disabilities impact learning and adjust instruction accordingly
- You participate actively in the IEP process and team meetings
- You know your legal responsibilities in supporting students with disabilities

Equitable Resource Management

- You maximize support staff roles (co-teachers, paraprofessionals, service providers) effectively
- You follow school procedures for identifying and supporting struggling students
- You collect and share meaningful data about student progress and intervention effectiveness
- You request a special education evaluation when you suspect a student may have a disability
- You integrate related services into classroom routines when possible

Meaningful Family Partnerships

- You communicate proactively with families about student progress using their preferred method
- You ask families about strategies that work at home and incorporate them when possible
- You share specific examples of student work and learning with families
- You respond promptly to family concerns and requests for information
- You approach family partnerships with cultural awareness and empathy

IS YOUR SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM THRIVE-ALIGNED?

This checklist is designed to help leaders determine how closely their current special education program and practices align with The Ability Challenge's THRIVE Framework for inclusive education. For more information, visit [HTTPS://THEABILITYCHALLENGE.ORG/OUR-APPROACH](https://theabilitychallenge.org/our-approach).

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Your special education is THRIVE aligned if:

Culture of Inclusion

- You have a clear vision that serving students with disabilities is everyone's responsibility
- School policies and practices actively promote inclusive education as a core value
- You have created a structured time for collaboration between special and general education teams
- You regularly assess and address bias in programming decisions
- Your leadership team models inclusive practices and holds staff accountable for implementation

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

- All Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are designed to ensure meaningful access to grade-level content
- You have systems for monitoring the quality of specialized instruction across settings
- Co-teaching, push-in support, differentiated instruction, and other evidence-based practices are clearly defined and consistently implemented across classrooms
- Progress monitoring data is regularly reviewed to adjust instruction and programming

Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates

- All staff understand their legal responsibilities under IDEA and Section 504
- Clear processes exist for IEP development, implementation, and progress monitoring
- Regular training keeps staff updated on special education requirements and promising practices
- Quality control systems ensure compliant and effective special education documents
- Service delivery is tracked and monitored to ensure IEP implementation

Equitable Systems and Resource Management

- Resources (e.g., (staff, technology, materials) are allocated based on student needs and program goals
- Related services are integrated into classroom routines when appropriate
- Staffing models maximize collaboration and support for inclusive practices
- Clear systems exist for intervention, referral, and evaluation
- School schedules facilitate co-planning and professional development

Meaningful Family Partnerships

- Families regularly and actively engage in IEP development and program decisions
- Multiple channels exist for regular, two-way communication with families
- Family training opportunities are offered on special education topics
- Translation services are readily available for multilingual families
- Family feedback is regularly collected and used to improve programming

IS YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT THRIVE-ALIGNED?

This checklist is designed to help principals and school leaders determine how closely their schoolwide practices are aligned with The Ability Challenge's THRIVE Framework for inclusive education. For more information, [HTTPS://THEABILITYCHALLENGE.ORG/OUR-APPROACH](https://theabilitychallenge.org/our-approach).

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Your school is THRIVE aligned if:

Culture of Inclusion

- You have established a clear, inclusive vision that staff members understand and implement
- Staff share core beliefs: all students can learn, serving diverse learners is everyone's responsibility, and inclusion benefits all students
- School policies consider and address the needs of diverse learners before decisions are made
- Your school structure supports regular collaboration between general and special education teams
- Students with disabilities participate fully in school life, from classroom activities to leadership roles
- Your school regularly gathers and acts on feedback from students, staff, and families to improve practices

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

- Your leadership team or others provide teachers with coaching, modeling, and professional development to differentiate instruction effectively
- You hold teachers accountable for ensuring that students have access to grade-level content through scaffolded instruction, accommodations, and collaborative teaching
- Your school provides collaborative teachers with clear roles and planning time
- You prioritize and model examining student data by subgroup, classroom, and grade level to make instructional decisions

Student-Centered Curriculum & Instruction

- Your school implements an evidence-based, standards-aligned curriculum
- You hold teachers accountable for ensuring that all lessons have clear learning goals that students understand

Shared Understanding of Special Education Mandates

- All staff understand their legal responsibilities under IDEA and Section 504
- Your school has systems to ensure compliance with IEP development, timelines, and implementation
- Regular training helps staff understand how disability impacts learning and instructional practice
- The leadership team demonstrates commitment to students with disabilities as integral members of the school community
- Your school regularly reviews the quality and impact of special education documents and services

Equitable Systems and Resource Management

- Resources are allocated based on student needs and aligned with the school's inclusive vision
- Data is used to identify and continuously address gaps in resource distribution or program implementation
- Special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and service providers are effectively integrated into the school team
- The whole-school schedule supports collaboration and inclusive practices
- Your school has clear processes for struggling students to access responsive support and intervention (e.g., multi-tiered systems of support, special education, etc.)

Meaningful Family Partnerships

- Families of students with disabilities are engaged as partners in their child's education
- You provide accessible resources and communication tools to keep families informed about their child's progress
- There are opportunities for families to contribute feedback and participate in decision-making processes
- The school hosts workshops or events to educate families about inclusive practices and their rights under IDEA
- Family feedback is regularly collected and used to improve programming



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The implementation of data-driven instruction is particularly crucial for diverse learners. Differentiation and individualization, informed by systematic data collection and analysis, lead to increased student motivation and achievement across ability levels. Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.

- 25** Studies indicate that when implemented with fidelity, differentiated instruction leads to improved outcomes across diverse student populations. Valiandes, S. (2015). Evaluating the impact of differentiated instruction on literacy and reading in mixed ability classrooms: Quality and equity dimensions of education effectiveness. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 45, 17-26.

Effective SDI requires collaboration among professionals to ensure educational programs and related services are properly designed and implemented to meet each student's unique needs. This collaborative approach brings together varied expertise and perspectives about students, leading to more comprehensive and effective instructional planning. McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., Lewis, T., Maheady, L., Rodriguez, J., Scheeler, M. C., Winn, J., & Ziegler, D. (2017). High-leverage practices in special education. Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.

- 26** Distinct co-teaching approaches include one teach/one observe, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, teaming, and one teach/one assist - each requiring explicit definition of adult roles. Their research demonstrates that when roles are clearly defined and responsibilities are thoughtfully distributed, student engagement and learning outcomes improve. Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010). Co-teaching: An illustration of the complexity of collaboration in special education. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20(1), 9-27.

- 27** When educators identify and leverage each team member's unique strengths in the collaborative process, they can better help students reach "previously unattained levels of personal excellence." This approach transforms traditional hierarchical relationships into true partnerships focused on student success. Lopez, S. J., & Louis, M. C. (2009). The principles of strengths-based education. *Journal of College and Character*, 10(4).

- 28** Analysis of teacher-student relationships shows that positive connections have a significant impact on academic achievement and engagement, with effects being particularly strong for students with disabilities and those at risk for school failure. Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(4), 493-529.

⁴ Schools implementing systematic approaches to creating supportive learning environments show significantly better outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly when combining high expectations with appropriate emotional and social support systems. 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.

- 29** The connection between legal knowledge and program implementation is well-documented. Administrators with strong understanding of special education law were better equipped to ensure high-quality access to general education contexts for students with disabilities. DeMatthews, D. E., Kotok, S., & Serafini, A. (2019). Leadership preparation for special education and inclusive schools: Beliefs and recommendations from successful principals. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 14(1), 11-32.

- 30** Teachers with deeper understanding of how specific disabilities affect learning were more likely to implement appropriate accommodations and modifications. Brownell, M. T., Kiely, M. T., Haager, D., Boardman, A., Corbett, N., Algina, J., Dingle, M. P., & Urbach, J. (2014). Literacy learning cohorts: Content-focused approach to improving special education teachers' reading instruction. *Exceptional Children*, 80(4), 454-475.

Teachers' beliefs about disability and their understanding of learning differences strongly predicted their instructional practices and effectiveness in inclusive classrooms. Teachers with more sophisticated understanding of disabilities were more likely to take responsibility for all students' learning and implement more effective inclusive practices. Jordan, A., Schwartz, E., & McGhie-Richmond, D. (2009). Preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(4), 535-542.

- 31** When staff members understand their specific roles within the broader special education framework, they are more likely to collaborate effectively and take ownership of their responsibilities. Sharp, K., Jarvis, J. M., & McMillan, J. M. (2020). Leadership for inclusive special education: A qualitative exploration of SENCo leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(4), 446-462.

Leaders should consider utilising inclusive styles of management, replacing hierarchical structures with leadership teams (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; McMaster, 2015). Effective school leadership enables shared responsibility, vision, and consistency within the school community, which is vital for the successful implementation of inclusion (Poon- McBrayer & Wong, 2013).

- 32** Research shows that the clarity and specificity of IEP goals significantly influenced both service delivery and student outcomes. Additionally, it has been found that well-written IEPs led to more consistent implementation of services and better progress monitoring. Blackwell, W. H., & Rossetti, Z. S. (2014). The development of individualized education programs: Where have we been and where should we go now? *SAGE Open*, 4(2), 1-15.

- 33** Effective teachers take responsibility for all students' learning by adapting their teaching methods and materials to meet individual needs. Research shows that when teachers believe in their ability to teach all students and understand how to modify instruction, students with disabilities achieve better outcomes. Jordan, A., Schwartz, E., & McGhie-Richmond, D. (2009). Preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(4), 535-542.

- 34** When IEP teams used systematic approaches to review data, define clear objectives, and assign specific responsibilities during meetings, the resulting services were more likely to be implemented with fidelity. Blackwell, W. H., & Rossetti, Z. S. (2014). The development of individualized education programs: Where have we been and where should we go now? *SAGE Open*, 4(2), 1-15.
- 35** Progress monitoring has value when used across all students: those at risk for academic problems, those already identified as in need of special education, and those in general education. Shapiro, E. S. (2008). Best practices in setting progress monitoring goals for academic skill improvement. *Best practices in school psychology V*, 2, 141-157.
- 36** A moderate correlation was found between the overall level of compliance and the overall level of evidence of transition practices, indicating that as the level of compliance increases, so does the number of transition practices evident in the IEP. While it may not be the most important factor for academic success, it is an important component for effective schoolwide practices more generally. Landmark, L. J., & Zhang, D. (2013). Compliance and practices in transition planning: A review of individualized education program documents. *Remedial and Special Education*, 34(2), 113-125.
- 37** In a study of 32 schools implementing inclusive practices for students with severe disabilities, researchers found that effective related service providers emphasized context-based service delivery aligned with classroom routines and activities, in contrast to traditional isolated clinical models. The study identified key features of successful services including ongoing communication with teachers and integration of therapeutic goals into daily activities. Hunt, P., Soto, G., Maier, J., Müller, E., & Goetz, L. (2004). Collaborative teaming to support students with augmentative and alternative communication needs in general education classrooms. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 20(3), 194-208.
- 38** Research examining multitiered systems of support (MTSS) finds that while these prevention-based frameworks show promise for delivering coordinated interventions and ongoing progress monitoring, significant work remains in creating truly integrated systems that effectively serve students with disabilities across educational, health, and independent living domains. Miller, B., Taylor, K., & Ryder, R. E. (2019). Special Topic: Learners With Disabilities - Introduction to Special Topic: Serving Children With Disabilities Within Multitiered Systems of Support. *AERA Open*, 5(2), 1-3.
- 39** Comprehensive tiered support systems, like Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), have been adopted nationwide to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. These systems provide structured frameworks that allow schools to deliver interventions at varying levels of intensity, supporting the diverse needs of students effectively. Zhang, J., Martella, R. C., Kang S., & Yenioglu, B. Y. (2023). Response to Intervention (RTI)/Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): A Nationwide Analysis. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 7(2)
- 40** Equitable resource allocation, particularly in special education, requires that leadership focus on promoting inclusion through strategic staffing, resource management, and policy leadership. Effective leadership ensures that students with diverse needs have access to qualified personnel, assistive technologies, and inclusive environments. Leaders must allocate resources based on student needs to foster equity and provide necessary support." Villaver, M. T., Mugadza, J., Kilag, O. K. T., Uy, F. T., & Jordan, R. P. (2024). Leadership in Special Education: Promoting Inclusion and Equity. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of Research for Innovation, Sustainability, and Excellence*, 1(4), 3.
- 41** Andrea Clay, Elizabeth Chu, Audrey Altieri, Yvette Deane, Alex Lis-Perlis, Armando Lizarraga, Lauren Monz, Jalil Muhammad, Denise Recinos, Julia A. Tache & Margo Wolters, *About Time: Master Scheduling and Equity*, (2021).

Available at: https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/public_research_leadership/10

- 42** The concept of a continuum of placement options has been deeply reviewed in the courts. However, the core idea that students must be educated in the least restrictive environment (with their non-disabled peers) remains a fundamental component of delivering a free and appropriate public education. Reiner, K. (2018). Least restrictive environments: Where segregated, self-contained special education classrooms fall on the continuum of placements and why mainstreaming should occur with same-age peers. *Mich. St. L. Rev.*, 743.
- 43** The act of engaging a range of actors from across the educational organization in defining and analyzing metrics provided opportunities to shift attention, resources, and shared values. Bush-Mecenas, S. (2022). “The business of teaching and learning”: Institutionalizing equity in educational organizations through continuous improvement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(3), 461-499.
- 44** A structured system for identifying, referring, and evaluating students for special education and intervention, even at the secondary level, ensures that all students who need support are recognized and provided with appropriate interventions. Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235.
- 45** When teachers understand families and communicate and build relationships with them, students benefit. Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., Chu, A., & Weiss, H. B. (2011). *Teaching the teachers: Preparing educators to engage families for student achievement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

The continuity of family involvement at home appears to have a protective effect on children as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children’s learning and educational progress, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education. Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Annual Synthesis, 2002.

Parent involvement consistently ranks as one of the top three drivers for building successful special education programs (61% of schools identify it as key), alongside positive school culture (77%) and staff collaboration (70%). *The Ability Challenge*. (2019). *Opportunity Accelerated: Exploring the Connections Between Data Collection, Special Education Programming, and Improved Student Outcomes*. www.theabilitychallenge.org

- 46** To develop effective family-school partnerships in special education, educators must believe that parents want the best for their children. This belief is fundamental to fostering positive collaboration, leading to better academic and behavioral outcomes for students receiving special education services. RIOS, K. (2024). *WORKING WITH PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: BEST PRACTICES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS*. *Teaching Students with Disabilities: Best Practices for Student Success*, 448.
- 47** Research indicates that building trust and respectful relationships between schools and families, particularly through empathetic engagement, is vital for meaningful collaboration and improved student achievement. Empathy helps create positive connections, which are crucial in establishing trust, mutual respect, and collaboration between educators and families to support students’ academic success. Osher, David & Sprague, J. & Weissberg, Roger & Axelrod, J. & Keenan, S. & Kendziora, Kimberly & Zins, J.E.. (2007). A comprehensive approach to promoting social, emotional, and academic growth in contemporary schools. *Best Practices in School Psychology*. 5. 1263-1278.
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and effective collaboration. Kalyanpur, M., Harry, B., & Skrtic, T. (2000). Equity and advocacy expectations of culturally diverse families' participation in special education. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 47(2), 119-136.

- 49** Regular, reciprocal communication between teachers and families significantly impacts student outcomes in special education. Communication, when culturally responsive and clear, builds mutual respect and trust, fostering stronger partnerships that lead to improved educational success for students with special needs. Jensen, K. L., & Minke, K. M. (2017). Engaging families at the secondary level: An underused resource for student success. *School Community Journal*, 27(2), 167-191.
- 50** Well-designed family training programs can enhance the overall well-being and success of children with special needs in educational contexts. Van Noorden, L. (2024). Evaluation of a Two-Tiered Coaching Programme for Parents of Young Autistic Children. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.



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