NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

EQUITY FOR ALL LEARNERS: INCLUSION AT EVERY LEVEL

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INTRODUCTION

All students deserve a high-quality education that prepares them for future success. To realize this vision, all students with disabilities must have equitable access to the full rigor of grade-level instruction. However, districts, schools, classrooms, and families often encounter significant challenges in enacting the systems, structures, support and development needed to ensure equitable access for all learners. With best intentions, these groups often unintentionally exacerbate persistent inequities. Inclusive education provides a model for providing high-quality equitable educational programming that improves access and opportunities for all learners.

WHAT IS AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Inclusive education is a culture and practice grounded in the premise that each student is a learner who is capable of participating in grade-level standards, alongside their same-age peers. Rather than focusing on a particular program or placement, inclusive education provides students with disabilities with equitable, rigorous access to the general education curriculum and individualized support throughout their educational experience.

"Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organization, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion."[1]	"Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students...with an equitable and participatory learning experience".[2]

In inclusive schools, district and school leaders leverage funding, staffing, schedules, special education services, and teacher collaboration to ensure demonstrable academic progress for all learners.[3] Educators and service providers embrace a culture of shared accountability and responsibility. In this sense, inclusive education:

- **Empowers the voice of students.** An inclusive education intentionally builds relationships between district staff, school leaders, and students with disabilities. In an inclusive educational setting, schools identify the capacity, interests, needs

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[1] Harvard Graduate School of Education & Abt Associates. 2016. "A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education." https://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Adapted from: CCSSO. n.d. "WHY INCLUSIVE PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP MATTERS." CCSSO Inclusive Principals Guide. Accessed December 16, 2021. https://ccssoinclusiveprincipalsguide.org/why-inclusive-leadership/.

and unique strengths that students with disabilities bring and leverage these to engineer an aligned classroom environment.

- **Empowers the voice of families**. Inclusive educational environments connect with families about what is and is not working well. Schools proactivley survey families about their needs and desires for their child/children. Inclusive schools dig deep into the concerns and challenges that families often face when supporting their children and offer aligned resources and support.
- **Empowers the voice of educators.** Inclusive schools connect with educators and related services providers to fully understand mindsets, challenges, and identify the type of support all providers require in meeting the needs of students.

WHY IS AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SO IMPORTANT?

A large body of research has shown that students with disabilities learn the most when they are taught in inclusive settings with access to key resources: grade-level learning, strong instruction, and teachers with high expectations. Specifically, research demonstrates that:

- "Students with disabilities who spent a larger proportion of their school day with their non-disabled peers **performed significantly better on measures of language and mathematics** than students with similar disabilities who spent a smaller proportion of their school day with their non-disabled peers."
- "Students with disabilities in fully inclusive placements were almost **5x more likely to graduate on time** than students in segregated settings."
- "A study of students with an intellectual disability or multiple disabilities found that included students were nearly **2x as likely as their non-included peers to enroll in post-secondary education**."[4]

In addition to improved outcomes for students with disabilities, research suggests that inclusive education offers the promise to improve outcomes for all students. By supporting individual and unique needs of each student, teacher efficacy increases for both general and special education teachers. A recent study found that, "Teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion are more likely to **adapt the way they work to benefit all of their students** (Sharma et al., 2008)."[5] This correlation between inclusive education and improved instructional practices demonstrates that inclusive education improves access to high-quality instruction for all students.

Inclusive education also assists in solving long standing challenges in special education teacher shortages. Through the implementation of inclusive models, the capacity to support the needs of students with disabilities is shared across all educators and

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[4] Harvard Graduate School of Education & Abt Associates. 2016. "A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education." https://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf.
[5] Ibid.

therefore reduces the overall burden often placed on special education teachers to support every unique needs that students with disabilities might present. Recent research cites that, "Positive effects were most common in studies where support for students with disabilities in the inclusive classrooms was well-managed through **adaptive instruction and the collaborative consultation and cooperative teaching of special and general education teachers.**"[6] By sharing accountability for student learning across all educators, special education teachers are able to serve in more consultative roles and therefore expand their capacity to support more students and teachers.

HOW IS AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IMPLEMENTED?

In order to effectively implement inclusive education, districts, schools, classrooms and families must work in concert with one another.

- **Districts** must develop, implement, and improve existing structures that integrate inclusion rather than promote a separate process. Leadership that promotes a strong vision for alignment between general and special education ensures that districts can allocate resources, select high-quality instructional materials, and ensure that school leaders have autonomy to make staffing and scheduling decisions that support inclusion.
- **Schools** must play a crucial role in ensuring that students within their buildings have access to the support they need to be successful. School leaders must have the mindset that all students are highly capable, foster a community centered on collaboration, organize staffing and schedules that prioritize student needs, and ensure teachers are supported in making instructional decisions that develop a sense of belonging for all learners.
- **Classrooms** must welcome all learners by effectively facilitating academic and social-emotional success for all learners through the implementation of instructional strategies, accommodations, and modifications that address learner variability and ensure grade-level learning. General education teachers, special education teachers, related service providers, specialists, interventionists and students must build trusting, collaborative relationships among each other to facilitate sound instructional decision making.
- **Families** must feel invited and informed by the process of individualized instruction in order to effectively advocate for their learner(s). Districts, schools and classrooms should clearly explain the tools and resources available to families in order to effectively meet the needs of their learner(s).

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[6] Ibid.

To effectively implement inclusive education, we believe that districts, schools, classrooms and families must believe that:

- All students are capable of achieving grade-level learning with the right support(s).
- All educators are responsible for ensuring students with disabilities achieve grade-level learning.
- All special education services should be designed to promote access and progress in grade-level learning.
- All educators can be successful in supporting students with disabilities with the right support(s).

HOW CAN THIS GUIDE BE USED TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Nebraska school districts are required to build Continuous Improvement Plans (CIP) that integrate all other plans for improvement including Targeted Improvement Plans (TIP) aimed at improving outcomes for students with disabilities in alignment with general education improvement strategies. This guide is designed to provide districts, school leaders, educators and families with evidence-based strategies that support inclusive services for students with disabilities that can be leveraged throughout the CIP and TIP planning process. Ultimately, schools can effectively cultivate a culture that values and embodies inclusive education through an annual, iterative process of **planning**, **allocating funding**, **staffing/scheduling**, and **implementing** specialized service delivery that integrates into the CIP and TIP planning process. Incorporating this cycle, in concert with CIP and TIP planning, districts, school leaders, educators, and families can overcome barriers and create equitable educational experiences for all students.

PLANNING FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

"PLANNING" DEFINED

Each year, district leaders, school leaders, educators, and families engage in a collaborative process of reflection to guide future planning that continuously improves access, opportunities, and outcomes for all learners. The goal of this planning should be to empower student, family and educator voices in the planning process for the upcoming school year so that each stakeholder feels seen, heard and valued. This planning process begins in early spring and continues through the end of the current school year.

PLANNING KEY ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Through collaborative reflection, strategic planning can work in service of inclusive education. The key actions below help district leaders, school leaders and educators implement inclusive education in the **planning** phase.

District	• Collect and [analyze](#) student and school performance data on an ongoing basis through an equity-driven lens. Focus on sub-group performance through disaggregated data to understand opportunities to target in the upcoming school year. • Collaborate with organizations providing [high-quality instructional materials](#) and [professional learning](#) that are aligned to the identified opportunities from the equity-driven analysis. • Reflect on the current use and effectiveness of [Nebraska Multi-Tiered System of Support (NeMTSS).](#) Enact a universal screening process early for all students each school year. • Define and reflect on accountability systems to ensure they prioritize learning and growth towards grade-level mastery for all learners, especially those that are historically underperforming. • Reflect on central office special education practices to see if they present barriers to inclusive practice at the school level. Actively remove barriers by aligning adjustments to identified needs. For example, if speech therapists are centrally scheduled without school input, they might be pulling students out of core content instruction to receive services. • Set meaningful and aligned goals and develop a corresponding year long action plan for the upcoming school year based on trends in historical performance. • Identify technology that explicitly increases accessibility for students with disabilities.
School	• Collect and [analyze](#) building level student and school performance data on an ongoing basis through an equity-driven lens. Focus on sub-group performance through disaggregated data to understand opportunities to target in the upcoming school year. • Meet with all educators to understand their strengths, interests, and opportunities for growth, and develop [aligned coaching plans](#) that maximize human resources across the school.

	- Revisit school-based accountability systems to ensure they prioritize learning and growth towards grade-level mastery for all learners, especially those that are historically underperforming. - Revisit the roles and responsibilities of general and special education personnel to increase clarity, as needed. - Collaborate with district leaders on setting meaningful and aligned goals and a corresponding year long action plan for the upcoming school year. - Examine existing and widely-used technology resources with the intention of integrating assistive technology into general technology planning. - Create opportunities for educators to receive training and support to effectively implement specialized support, high-quality instructional materials, assistive technology, and other supports for students with disabilities. - Plan for frequent opportunities to build trust, solicit feedback, and understand the needs of families.
Classroom	- Develop a deep understanding of individual students through observation, IEP information, and communication with students and their families. - Research and evaluate the effectiveness of technology that can be leveraged to maximize the accessibility of high-quality instruction. - Set meaningful, aligned and individualized goals for student academic and social-emotional skill development for the upcoming school year. - Get to know colleagues by developing deep and trusting relationships. - Reflect on strengths and opportunities for improvement to set goals related to skill development. - Develop curricular materials with the understanding of how to use a provided curriculum, instructional strategies, accommodations, and modifications that positively impact the learning of individual students.

PLANNING SUMMARY

In planning to build a culture and community that values inclusive education, district leaders, school leaders, and educators are demonstrating their belief that **all students are capable of achieving grade-level learning with the right support**.

This mindset ensures that:
- All educators engage in shared responsibility for the learning growth and development of all learners.
- Families feel connected to and valued by the school community.
- All learners have a network of support that deeply values their unique strengths and needs.

ALLOCATING FUNDING FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

"ALLOCATING FUNDING" DEFINED

As the planning phase begins to wrap-up, district leaders, school leaders, and educators move into the phase of allocating funding. By making strategic decisions related to how funding is allocated at the district, school and classroom level, school systems can drive the implementation of inclusive education. The phase of allocating funding takes place in the winter or early spring in preparation for the upcoming school year.

ALLOCATING FUNDING KEY ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Below are the key actions that district leaders, school leaders and educators can take to prioritize inclusion in the **allocating funding** phase.

District	- Reflect on the previous year's budget in order to make decisions that ensure all funding streams (formula funds such as Title funding, IDEA funding, and Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) funds as well as additional competitive funding sources) are maximized to have the broadest impact in the school setting. - Examine budgets and expenditures to identify areas of redundancy or identify misaligned programs e.g. implementing one intervention with Title funding, and a separate or completely opposite intervention from a different competitive grant source. - Ensure resource alignment and integration by reducing duplication and promoting efficiency and integration of resources. - Adopt a student-centered funding model that uses a weighted student formula to allocate education dollars based on students' needs. - Creatively braid funding sources to expand the use of traditionally based personnel.

	● Maximize the use of high-cost funds to have the broadest impact in the school setting. ● Allocate funding to purchase High-Quality Instructional Materials and provide aligned Professional Learning that are aligned to the year long goals and action plan. ● Prioritize professional learning on instructional and specialized support strategies. ● Reflect on gaps in current district-level personnel to identify additional roles that need to be added. ● Purchase technology (devices and software) that explicitly increases access to core instruction for students with disabilities. ● Increase budget transparency so that schools have the information they need to make sound decisions related to funding. ● Build trust with the community and other key stakeholders by seeking input and providing transparency into how funds are used to best serve the needs of all students.
School	● Identify and reflect on current personnel to identify educators who are under- or over-utilized and make aligned adjustments. For example, the schedule of a speech therapist who is assigned lunch duty for 2 hours during the kindergarten ELA block could be adjusted to better meet the needs of learners, or an occupational therapist who is scheduled across three different campuses in one day could be adjusted to spend more time at an individual campus. ● Reflect on gaps in current school-based personnel to identify additional roles that need to be added. ● Lower the teacher-student ratio through creative hiring. ● Connect funding priorities to the identified year long goals and action plan and set strategic benchmarks to evaluate effectiveness of decisions.
Classroom	● Research and advocate to attend professional learning opportunities to equip educators to increase access to high-quality instructional materials through assistive technology. ● Advocate for the purchase and integration of intervention programs and/or instructional materials that support core instruction. ● Advocate for the purchase and integration of common technologies that have the broadest impact to provide access

	points to learning for all students.
	● Engage in continuous learning about how technology can be used to increase accessibility for students with disabilities.

ALLOCATING FUNDING SUMMARY

In allocating funding to create a school system that embodies inclusive education, district leaders, school leaders and educators demonstrate their belief that, **with the right support, all educators can be successful in supporting students with disabilities.**

By embodying this mindset, schools ensure that:
- Educator efficiency is reinforced by the reduction of redundancy in role(s).
- Families feel supported by the school community through increased transparency related to how funding is allocated.
- All learners have access to intentional and aligned resources that meaningfully support their success.

STAFFING/SCHEDULING FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

"STAFFING/SCHEDULING" DEFINED

Once funding is allocated to ensure all learners receive the support they need, district leaders, school leaders, and educators can begin to conceptualize a staffing and scheduling model that drives inclusive education. Staffing and scheduling takes place in late spring and summer in preparation for the upcoming school year.

STAFFING/SCHEDULING KEY ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Below are the key actions that district leaders, school leaders and educators should take in the **staffing/scheduling** phase.

District	● Through internal and external professional development, develop a principal understanding of <u>effective staffing and scheduling</u> that prioritizes all student needs. ● Value and provide principal autonomy on staffing/scheduling decisions to ensure cultural and community relevance. ● Leverage the established year long goals and action plan to support strategic decisions on staffing/scheduling. ● Perform an audit of school schedules across the district to inform decisions about how to reallocate resources.
School	● Use collected and analyzed data to schedule students with the greatest support needs first.

	- Engage in a continuous cycle of feedback from staff and students to make scheduling adjustments that support the needs of students. - Protect core instructional time when designing schedules for instruction and related services. - Create a staffing plan that is aligned to the established year long goals and action plan and prioritizes the use of the highest-quality staff to provide support to the students who need it most. For example, use highly qualified teachers to provide intervention support instead of having a teacher assistant provide intervention support. - Strategically use teacher assistants and paraprofessionals by ensuring they are given adequate training and support before providing any instructional based support to students. - Provide planning time and professional learning on the alignment of instructional materials to grade-level standards and the points of rigor students must master. - Protect routine planning time for related service providers, special education and general education teachers. For example, speech therapists could provide consultative support to teachers during instructional planning focused on integrating speech therapy goals into grade-level instruction. - Create and implement an intervention block in the instructional schedule that provides targeted and timely support to students. - Create and implement clearly defined roles and responsibilities across general education and special education personnel. Consider the role of interventionist. - Provide strategic ongoing supervision and mentoring for general educators, special educators and related service providers. - Communicate any changes in staffing and/or larger school schedules to families in advance to support students with upcoming transitions.
Classroom	- Commit to collaboration time with colleagues and families who work with the same learners to seek input on instructional decision making. - Utilize collected data to provide targeted instruction in flexible, small groups during an intervention block. - Utilize evidence-based strategies to intensity and individualize intervention throughout the instructional week.

	- Provide feedback to school leadership on how schedules might be improved to meet individual student needs. - Ensure predetermined daily class schedules are consistently followed to ensure support personnel and related service providers have the opportunity to align services for maximization of student learning. - Communicate any short-term changes in the daily schedule to families and students in advance to support students with any upcoming transitions.

STAFFING/SCHEDULING SUMMARY

By staffing and scheduling in a way that prioritizes inclusive education, district leaders, school leaders and educators demonstrate the belief that **all educators are responsible for ensuring students with disabilities achieve grade-level learning.**

By embodying this mindset, school communities ensure that:
- Educators have guaranteed, protected time to continuously impact the learning of all students.
- Families understand the experience their learner(s) have in school and can advocate for any changes that would support their strengths or needs.
- Students experience personalized and targeted instruction at the right dose and at the right time during the instructional week.

IMPLEMENTING SPECIALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

"IMPLEMENTING SPECIALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY" DEFINED

District and school leadership teams play a critical role in providing educators and service providers with necessary structures and exemplary models of implementing inclusive education programs. Across individual school sites, educators and related support staff are vital to the success of implementing an inclusive education program. A high-level of ongoing collaboration is required across the district, school, and classroom levels to ensure that inclusive education is realized. The implementation phase takes place beginning in late summer and continues through the entirety of the school year.

IMPLEMENTING SPECIALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY KEY ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Implementing special education services effectively requires equitable input and collaboration between district and school leaders, teachers, service providers and

families. Below are the key actions that district leaders, school leaders and educators should take in the **implementation** phase.

District	• Implement an MTSS process that is aligned to the year long goals and action plan and supports inclusion by ensuring all students receive the highest quality instruction and targeted timely support. • Examine and improve identification processes to ensure student evaluations provide valuable information to the IEP team on how to best support individual students in accessing grade-level learning. • Provide opportunities and strategies for school leaders to problem solve when challenges to implementation arise. • Identify successful schools and use them as a proof point for other school leaders and educators.
School	• Examine and consolidate current support structures to streamline a single schoolwide support team that collaborates to support struggling students. Designate team members with expertise across disciplines to monitor student outcomes and make adjustments. • Ensure decision-making related to the IEP is grounded in collected and analyzed academic and social-emotional data. • Identify and highlight strong examples of effective inclusive practices across staff members. • Encourage educators and support staff to observe colleagues who have been identified as having strengths in focus areas. • Ensure general education teachers understand how to integrate critical components of a student's individualized education program (IEP) into daily instructional planning. • Provide specialized support training to general education teachers to support the unique needs of students with disabilities that fall outside the scope of content pedagogy. • Provide curriculum-aligned professional learning to special education teachers that builds their capacity to support students with disabilities in accessing grade-level content. • Focus observations and coaching to support teachers in ensuring all students, including students with disabilities, engage with the most rigorous components of the lesson. • Prioritize ongoing supervision and mentoring for general educators, special educators and related service providers.

	● Provide explicit training to paraprofessionals about any medical, assistive technology, or instructional support they are expected to provide to students with disabilities.

Classroom	● Develop targeted support through integrated plans that address individual learners academic, behavioral, and social-emotional strengths and needs.
	● Develop IEPs that facilitate mastery of grade-level content.
	● Select instructional materials aligned to grade-level standards, and ensure students with disabilities participate in grade-level instruction, daily.
	● Utilize high yield instructional strategies to ensure engagement for all learners.
	● Collaborate between general education and special education teachers to co-construct lessons that remove barriers to learning by addressing learner variability through flexible methods and choice.
	● Leverage technology to maximize the accessibility of high-quality instruction. Communication devices or other assistive technology is integrated into academic settings and throughout the school day.
	● Clarify how to meet classroom procedures and expectations across general and special education teachers and related service providers.
	● Prepare a learning environment, in collaboration between special and general educators, that reflects the why, what and how of learning:
	   ○ Design the space to match the learning goal.
	   ○ Offer resource areas accessible to all.
	   ○ Integrate digital resources and materials.
	   ○ Highlight the learning processes in the environment.
	   ○ Ensure access to target goals in the learning environment.[7]
	● Foster deep and trusting peer-to-peer relationships to support collaboration in the learning process.
	● Set and track progress to individual professional development goals based on general and special educators' reflection on their practice.
	● Continually assess and monitor student progress toward

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[7] CAST. 2018. "Top 5 UDL Tips for Learning Environments." CAST.org.
https://www.cast.org/binaries/content/assets/common/publications/downloads/cast-5-learning-environs-2016.pdf.

	grade-level mastery, and collaborate between general and special educators to adjust instructional plans and support to improve student success.

IMPLEMENTING SPECIALIZED SERVICE DELIVERY SUMMARY

By designing and implementing specialized services effectively, district leaders, school leaders, and educators demonstrate the belief that **all special education services should be designed to promote access and progress in grade-level learning.**

The result of implementing specialized service delivery is that all learners have:
- access to and are empowered to make choices in the learning environment related to engagement, understanding and expression, and
- the opportunity to express their understanding in a variety of ways based on their interests, strengths and needs.
- Educators who communicate and celebrate their ongoing learning growth.

By promoting access and progress in grade level learning, families feel
- connected to and informed by all educators who work with their learners, and
- valued through collaboration on decision making related to their learner.

CONCLUSION

When districts, schools, classrooms, and families collaboratively work together to plan, fund, staff, schedule, and implement inclusive educational programing, they make massive strides toward equitable education for students with disabilities. As barriers to access are removed and inequities in opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities shrink, schools truly become drives of equity for all learners.