National Association NASET of Special Education Teachers

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Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

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Special Education Legal Alert

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This month's update identifies two recent court decisions that respectively illustrate specialized ADA and IDEA issues. For related publications and special supplements, see **perryzirkel.com**

On September 4, 2025, a federal district court in Michigan issued an unofficially published decision in *J.A. v. Royal Oak Park School District*, addressing various FAPE issues under the IDEA. The child in this case had several diagnoses, including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), reactive attachment disorder, and sensory dysregulation disorder. During elementary school, he had a series of IEPs. His percentile scores in reading and math were very low, and his challenging behaviors included aggression, eloping, and yelling curse words in class. For 2022–23, the IEP team agreed to a mainstreamed placement at the district's large middle school, as the least restrictive environment (LRE) before to resorting to the district members' suggestion of a full-time, center-based special education program. At the annual IEP meeting in April 2023, the team proposed placement at the district's full-time special education center. Disagreeing, the parents moved the matter to a due process hearing. In September 2023, the administrative law judge (ALJ) issued his decision, ruling in favor of the district for most issues. However, he concluded that the district engaged in predetermination of the child's placement at the April IEP meeting. As relief, the ALJ ordered a new IEP meeting, including an independent IEP facilitator to assure meaningful parental participation in reaching the placement decision. Consequently, the ALJ found it unnecessary to address whether the center-based placement represented FAPE in the LRE. In October 2023, parties participated in the ALJ-ordered meeting but without agreement and without the district offering any other placement options. The parents unilaterally placed their child in a private placement and appealed the adverse rulings of the ALJ to the federal court.	
The parents contended that the IEP failed to appropriately provide for extracurricular activities—here for the weightlifting club, the soccer club, and school dances—and this failure amounted to denial of FAPE.	The court agreed that the IEP should have included provision for extracurricular activities, but this violation was only technical because the district (a) provided an aide, as needed, for the weightlifting club, (b) only denied him further participation in the soccer club when his conduct became dangerous, and (c) did not have the aide available for only one of the school dances, which was too limited for denial of FAPE.
The parents also argued that the IEP was insufficient in relation to his sensory issues.	The court deferred to the ALJ's conclusion that the IEP's provisions for a 1:1 aide, a multiply revised BIP, and access to the sensory room met the *Endrew F.* standard.

The parents' various other substantive FAPE claims included insufficient FASD training.	Again, the court concluded that the parents did not meet their burden to show that the ALJ's conclusion about the reasonable sufficiency of FASD training was wrong.
The parents sought the remedy of tuition reimbursement or delegating the placement choice to an independent evaluator.	Although sympathetic to the parents' plight, the court concluded that the ALJ implicitly rejected the parents' proposal for delegating the placement decision and, at the time of his decision, lacked the information to apply the standards for tuition reimbursement.
This case illustrates the problem of reaching an effective resolution of a thorny situation via the prolonged process of judicial appeal.	

On September 11, 2025, a federal district court in Pennsylvania issued an unpublished decision in *Mobley v. Laboratory Charter School*, addressing the issues of FAPE and compensatory education. In late August 2022, upon first enrolling their child in the charter school in grade 3, the parents informed the school of his various diagnoses, including autism, ADHD, post-traumatic stress disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder. The school quickly responded with an individual safety plan for the child. After a month of behavioral issues, including aggression to peers, destruction of property, and eloping from class, the school held an intervention meeting with the parents. In October, the school obtained consent and conducted an initial evaluation under the IDEA. In early December, upon issuance of the evaluation report, the IEP team determined that the child was eligible for special education under the primary classification of emotional disturbance (ED) and secondary classification of other health impairment (OHI). In early January 2023, the school issued the initial draft of the IEP. The parents were dissatisfied with the failure to identify and address autism. Upon their request in February 2023, the school funded an independent educational evaluation (IEE). Completed in June 2023, the IEE identified autism as the primary classification, with ED as secondary and OHI as tertiary. On September 7, 2023, the parents filed for a due process hearing, and the IEP team met and agreed that the child needed a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and behavior intervention plan (BIP). The revisions in the draft IEP, which the parents received in early November, were limited to new academic goals, without revised present education levels and without the FBA-BIP or any change in the behavioral goals and services. During this entire period, the child's elopements continued. After a prone-restraint incident in February 2024, the parents changed the child's enrollment to the Philadelphia public schools. In March 2024, the hearing officer issued the decision, ruling that the charter school denied FAPE to the child but limiting the relief to four specified IEEs, including an FBA. Concluding that the parents did not meet their burden of proof, the hearing officer denied their request for compensatory education. Both sides appealed.

The charter school contended that the hearing officer erred in finding various prejudicial (i.e., harmful to the child or parents) procedural violations.	The court identified various procedural violations, including insufficient evaluations and generic draft IEPs not tailored to the child's behavioral-emotional needs, but found it unnecessary to determine the

	requisite harm due to independent denial of substantive FAPE.
The charter school also argued that the child made appropriate progress based on his report-card grades.	Observing that grades are not alone conclusive, the court ruled that the draft IEPs did not meet the applicable substantive standards in this jurisdiction, including but not limited to the lack of an FBA-BIP and meaningful progress.
While admitting that they did not meet their burden for the qualitative approach, the parents argued that the hearing officer erred by not ordering compensatory education.	Because Pennsylvania recognizes both the qualitative (i.e., "but for" the denial of FAPE) and the quantitative (i.e., hour-for-hour or day-for-day) approaches to compensatory education, the court sent the case back to the hearing officer to either reconsider or explain why the quantitative approach is not appropriate in this case.
Although its answers are not necessarily generalizable to other jurisdictions, this decision illustrates the not-clearly-settled issues under the IDEA of the boundary between procedural and substantive FAPE, the legal entitlement for FBAs-BIPs, and the applicable approach for calculating compensatory education.	

Buzz from the Hub

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-september2025/

Transforming Inclusive Education Through Inclusion Indicators

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) partnered with Think Inclusive and the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education (MCIE) to bring a series of episodes on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings.

Listen to their latest episode, *Transforming Inclusive Education Through Inclusion Indicators*, **here.**

New to Special Education? Start here!

This resource page from PEATC, the Parent Training and Information (PTI) center in Virginia, offers resources and support for families navigating the special education system. It includes guides, templates, fact sheets, and tools to help parents understand evaluations, IEPs, 504 Plans, and their rights under the law. Some of the resources and information are specific to state of Virginia.

Access all the resources here.

For your state specific information, contact the PTI that serves your state. Search for the PTI **here**.

Thriving Kids Podcast

The *Thriving Kids Podcast* by the **Child Mind Institute** and hosted by Dr. Dave Anderson, clinical psychologist and expert in children's mental health, delivers practical tools, clear answers, and real talk for the toughest parenting questions. Every episode breaks down the challenges of raising kids today-whether its anxiety, behavior struggles, or big emotions—with evidence-based advice and zero judgment.

Listen to their latest podcast episode, *How to Support Your Teen Through the Tough Years*, **here**.

In My Shoes – Youth Point of View on Workplace Accommodations

This 2-page handout by PTI Nebraska shares young adults' perspectives on workplace accommodations and why accommodations matter. It also shares how the young adults used the resources from the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) to help them explore different accommodations.

Access the handout here.

Supporting vs Enabling: How to tell what's helping and what's not when a child has emotional or learning challenges

Good parenting means being supportive without being enabling. But it can often be hard to tell the difference. This is especially true when a child is struggling with a mental health or learning issue. This article, from the **Child Mind Institute**, helps parents distinguish between supporting and enabling a child with learning or emotional challenges.

Read the article here.

Update from the U.S. Department of Education

https://www.ed.gov/

Birth to Grade 12 Education-Reources
https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education

Available Grants
https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/apply-grant/available-grants

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Announces New Members and Names Next Chair of the National Assessment Governing Board
September 30, 2025

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon named Tennessee Representative Mark White as Chair of the National Assessment Governing Board. Secretary McMahon also announced the appointment of two education leaders.

U.S. Department of Education Awards Over $153 Million in American History and Civics Seminars Grants
September 29, 2025

The U.S. Department of Education announced over $153 million in new grant awards through the American History and Civics Seminars Program.

U.S. Department of Education Announces 161 Students to be Honored as 2025 U.S. Presidential Scholars
September 26, 2025

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon announced the 2025 U.S. Presidential Scholars, recognizing 161 high school seniors for their accomplishments in academics, the arts, and career and technical education fields.

U.S. Department of Education Releases Secretary McMahon's Meaningful Learning and Workforce Readiness Supplemental Priorities
September 25, 2025

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon announced her sixth and seventh proposed supplemental priorities for the U.S. Department of Education's discretionary grants: Meaningful Learning as well as Career Pathways and Workforce Readiness.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Release of Record $500 Million for Charter Schools Programs

September 24, 2025

The U.S. Department of Education today announced the release of $500 million to the Charter Schools Programs, marking the largest investment in the program ever.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Earliest FAFSA Form Launch in Program History

September 24, 2025

Today, the U.S. Department of Education announced that the 2026–27 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form is online and available, marking the earliest launch in the program's history.

U.S. Department of Education Issues Guidance to States on Ed-Flex Option to Encourage Local Innovation

September 17, 2025

The U.S. Department of Education sent a letter to chief state school officers reminding them that they may apply for authority under the Ed-Flex Act to waive certain federal requirements that apply to districts and schools.

U.S. Department of Education, AFPI, TPUSA, Hillsdale College, and Over 40 National and State Organizations Launch America 250 Civics Coalition

September 17, 2025

The U.S. Department of Education, alongside the America First Policy Institute, Turning Point USA, Hillsdale College, and more than 40 leading national and state-based organizations today announced the launch of the America 250 Civics Coalition.

U.S. Department of Education Releases Secretary McMahon's Patriotic Education Supplemental Priority

September 17, 2025

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon announced her fifth proposed supplemental priority for the U.S. Department of Education discretionary grants: prioritizing patriotic education.

U.S. Department of Education Ends Funding to Racially Discriminatory Discretionary Grant Programs at Minority-Serving Institutions

September 10, 2025

Today, the Department announced that it will end discretionary funding to several Minority-Serving Institutions grant programs that discriminate by conferring government benefits exclusively to institutions that meet racial or ethnic quotas.

Secretary McMahon Statement on New Nation's Report Card Scores for Grades 8 and 12

September 9, 2025

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released the following statement in response to the public release of the scores from the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for 8th grade science and 12th grade reading and mathematics.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor Take Next Steps in Implementing Their Workforce Development Partnership

September 8, 2025

ED and DOL announced they have taken historic steps to integrate the federal government's workforce portfolio through its innovative partnership announced a few months ago.

U.S. Department of Education Bolsters Office of the Ombudsman to Improve Consumer Education and Increase Transparency for Student Borrowers

September 5, 2025

ED's Office of Federal Student Aid announced that it is expanding the mission and work of the Office of the Ombudsman to focus on providing information to students and families on the benefits and risks of federal student loan borrowing.

The Power of Observation: Witnessing Inclusive Practices Drive Academic, Communication, and SEL Growth in Public and Special Schools

By Dr. Deborah Boldt

Abstract

This study examined inclusion in public and special education schools for ten years, focusing on placement settings such as full inclusion, partial inclusion, full segregation, and pull-out models aligned with individualized goals. Studying how these diverse educational environments influence student growth and support aims to give a nuanced understanding of how learners develop across different service delivery models. By examining educator practices and learner characteristics among these environments, the research identifies critical factors that address academic, communication, behavioral, and social-emotional learning (SEL) needs. The study highlights the critical need for collaborative professional development that unites general and special education teachers around a shared framework for understanding learner diversity. By fostering common ground through inclusive practices, educators can better align instruction to support the academic, behavioral, communication, and social-emotional needs of all students in all settings. This shared approach will result in systematic improvements that promote equitable opportunities, strengthen collaboration, and establish sustainable practices to enhance outcomes for diverse learners.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning, inclusive education, professional development, cross-collaborative learning, special education, and TEACCH Model.

Introduction

In today's educational landscape, the role of educators is rapidly expanding to address the complex, multidimensional needs of students. Academic instruction alone is no longer sufficient; educators must also foster students' communication abilities, guide their behavioral development, and nurture their social and emotional learning (SEL). These areas are interconnected, forming the foundation for a supportive, equitable, and high-impact learning environment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

Social and Emotional Learning is particularly vital, as it equips students with critical life skills such as emotional regulation, relationship building, and responsible decision-making. Evidence suggests that when SEL is embedded in daily instruction, students show improvements not only in behavior and emotional well-being but also in academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). At the same time, fostering communication and behavioral growth supports students in becoming more engaged, self-directed learners who can thrive within collaborative, inclusive classrooms (Zins et al., 2004).

To ensure all students succeed, schools must also adopt inclusive educational design approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), that remove barriers and promote access for every learner. UDL encourages flexible teaching methods, diverse learning materials, and personalized support that meet students where they are (Meyer et al., 2014). When SEL and UDL are integrated into teacher practice, the result is a comprehensive framework that empowers educators to support whole-child development across academic, behavioral, and interpersonal domains.

Equipping educators with the knowledge, tools, and mindset to implement inclusive and responsive practices is essential. Professional development that intentionally brings together special and general education teachers to co-construct approaches to social-emotional learning (SEL), communication, behavior, and inclusive instructional design is not an ancillary effort; it is foundational. This collaborative work fosters a unified educational approach that transforms classrooms into equitable, supportive environments where all learners are empowered to grow and thrive.

Aligning Theory with Inclusive Practice

Inclusive education requires understanding both the environments students learn in and how they develop within those settings. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights how students are influenced by layered systems: family, school, community, and culture, which shape learning and behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory adds that students also learn by observing others, developing self-efficacy, and regulating their actions (Bandura, 1986). Together, these theories explain how inclusive classrooms that offer strong environmental support and positive role models can foster engagement, communication, and responsible decision-making. They provide a strong foundation for creating learning environments where all students, especially those with special needs, can thrive.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how multiple layers of environmental influence shape student development and academic success. The theory emphasizes that a student's behavior and learning outcomes are not isolated but rather embedded within interacting systems ranging from immediate settings such as family and school (microsystem), to broader cultural values and policies (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This model is particularly relevant to students with special needs, whose educational experiences are profoundly influenced by inclusive classroom practices, school policies, and family support systems. Inclusive environments that value diversity and adapt teaching strategies to meet varied needs enhance the microsystem, ultimately promoting a sense of belonging and academic engagement for all learners.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory complements Bronfenbrenner's model by explaining the internal mechanisms through which students learn and adapt within their environments. Central to this theory are concepts such as observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism, where a student's behavior, personal beliefs, and environment continuously influence each other (Bandura, 1986). That said, exposure to positive role models, supportive peers, and educators who reinforce adaptive strategies can help students with special needs develop stronger self-regulation, enhance communication skills, and build responsible decision-making. When inclusive classrooms prioritize modeling, scaffolding, and feedback, students with diverse learning profiles gain the tools and confidence needed to participate meaningfully in academic activities.

Inclusion is not only a matter of equity but a catalyst for academic and social development. Research has shown that inclusive settings benefit both students with and without disabilities by fostering empathy, collaboration, and respect for individual differences (Hehir et al., 2016). Through the combined lens of Ecological Systems Theory and Social Cognitive Theory, inclusion becomes a dynamic interplay of environmental support and personal development. Creating environments that support differentiated instruction, accessible materials, and social-emotional learning ensures that all students, especially those with special needs, can thrive academically and socially. These theories underscore the importance of designing systemic supports and intentional teaching practices that affirm every student's right to learn and participate fully.

Educational Settings Examined

To better understand these variations in practice, this study includes systematic observations of instructional and support strategies across three distinct public and special school settings. Each school represents a different model of delivering services to students with diverse learning needs, ranging from full inclusion to more segregated or pull-out support structures. By focusing on how general and special education teams work within these models, the study seeks to uncover not only observable practices but also the underlying systems, routines, and professional relationships that contribute to inclusive and equitable education. The primary goal is to identify consistent patterns, highlight strengths, and recognize areas for improvement in how educators work together to support the academic, behavioral, communication, and social-emotional development of all students. The following section offers a detailed contextual overview of Schools A, B, and C, describing their organizational structures, inclusion models, and the specific settings in which observational data were collected.

School A. At multiple points of observation, a distinctive pattern emerged, shaped by the school's composition as a specialized setting serving exclusively special education students. In this context, collaboration was not always imperative, as teachers frequently managed individualized instruction aligned with specific student needs. Although some collaborative efforts occurred, teachers generally worked independently, managing their own classrooms. Lesson design and strategy sharing were seldom collaborative across K–12, reinforcing a pattern in which professional practice remained largely isolated rather than team-based. To address this, staff were provided opportunities for microlearning, with the content determined through data, surveys, and the building leadership team, ensuring professional growth remains responsive to both teacher and student needs.

In School A, observations highlighted how structured approaches shaped instructional practices. Although the TEACCH model, structured routines, and visual aids were consistently implemented, instructional practices remained more individualized than collaborative. The TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children) program is a structured teaching approach designed to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A core principle of structured teaching emphasizes the creation of predictable and organized environments that help students understand expectations and routines through visual schedules, clear instructions, and individualized work systems. By tailoring instruction to each student's needs, TEACCH enhances communication, social skills, and independence, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational setting. The observation documented how the framework supported the effective integration of accommodations into classroom instruction to address diverse learning needs, including task modifications, enhanced visual supports, and sensory-based strategies. These efforts reflected a strong commitment to supporting student success within a structured teaching environment. However, planning and implementation typically occurred independently, with limited evidence of collective input or coordinated decision-making among staff. Opportunities for shared problem-solving, alignment of instructional strategies, or joint lesson design were seldom observed. As a result, while students benefited from individualized support, the absence of systematic co-planning reduced the potential for a cohesive, team-based approach that could strengthen instructional consistency and integration among classrooms.

Behavior management, however, reflected greater consistency. Staff applied clear, predictable expectations across settings and reinforced positive behavior through verbal praise and visual symbols. This alignment, though, stemmed from individual practices rather than a deliberate, unified system. The adoption of the Zones of Regulation in 2024–2025 introduced a structured method for helping students manage their emotions; however, implementation appeared classroom-specific rather than coordinated through shared planning.

Observations revealed that collaboration among educators often lacked the depth needed to connect academic, behavioral, and communication supports into unified instructional practices. Each year, staff were assigned to collaborate for 36 hours and complete Teacher-to-Teacher reports. While these structures could have supported joint lesson planning, alignment of behavior strategies, data sharing, and modeling of augmentative communication tools across settings, collaboration most often addressed immediate needs. As a result, exchanges functioned as short-term problem solving rather than sustained instructional planning. Monthly team meetings offered another opportunity for collaboration, yet discussions primarily centered on individual student goals and progress monitoring instead of comprehensive lesson development.

Social-emotional learning was reinforced through ongoing professional development sessions that emphasized strategies for building emotional awareness and regulation. Teachers consistently incorporated emotion symbols and zone posters into daily instruction, using them as visual supports to help students identify and manage their feelings. They also modeled appropriate emotional responses during interactions, providing students with real-time examples of self-regulation and empathy. Despite these consistent efforts, the integration of SEL remained primarily confined to individual classrooms, with limited opportunities for cross-collaboration or shared planning among educators. Leadership at School A was supportive and visible, encouraging idea-sharing and allowing teachers flexibility to try new methods. In most cases, however, co-planning or co-teaching did not take place in a structured manner, and instructional efforts were often conducted independently. This lack of collaboration reduced opportunities to align strategies, share expertise, and build cohesive supports that could have enhanced student outcomes.

In sum, School A demonstrated strong, structured teaching practices, consistent behavior supports, and reliable SEL tools. Yet these strengths stemmed more from individual initiatives than coordinated collaboration. In a special school setting, the degree of collaboration often depended on staff culture and the quality of relationships among colleagues. Leadership and the building leadership team provided opportunities for collaboration through professional development and microlearning, but staff involvement remained minimal even when encouraged. The absence of structured co-planning time further contributed to instructional efforts occurring in isolation, weakening the potential for cohesive strategies across classrooms and grade levels. As a result, promising practices often remained fragmented rather than forming a unified, school-wide approach that could better support all learners.

School B. At School B, which served grades K-5, instructional practices were observed to provide evidence for research examining inclusive approaches implemented by general and special education teachers. K-5 planning sessions included both general and special education teachers, allowing level 1 special education teachers to co-teach and co-plan in general education classrooms. Despite this, two extended core teachers were unable to participate in full due to scheduling conflicts and coverage issues. When co-teaching occurred, differentiated instruction was evident, leveraging the expertise of special education teachers; yet, new teachers demonstrated less understanding of effective differentiation compared to veteran colleagues.

The research examined collaborative practices, accommodations, and modifications, emphasizing how inclusion among staff and students enabled general and special education teachers to work together to meet the needs of all learners. Accommodations and modifications were generally present in the general education setting, with special education teachers modeling and guiding implementation. Veteran teachers and those with special education experience were more adept at effectively incorporating accommodations, while general education teachers often relied on the expertise of special education staff.

Classroom roles were clearly defined, with general and special education teachers collaboratively determining responsibilities, although staffing shortages and behavioral challenges sometimes limited full participation. By working together, staff built a culture of professional accountability and continuous improvement that extended beyond individual classrooms, contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive learning environment. Shared tools, routines, and visuals were adapted individually by teachers, with veteran staff more consistently utilizing these supports.

In the area of behavioral collaboration, staff held differing views on behavioral data collection and sensitivity to student behavior, often leading to inconsistent practices. Paras, trained by strategists, primarily handled behavioral data collection, and while some staff shared unified approaches and strategies, consensus was generally lacking, resulting in fragmented language and strategies among settings. Communication support practices also varied; augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices were inconsistently used, primarily supported by special education teachers and paras, with general education staff lacking in-depth training. A variety of factors affected collaboration between adults, with four of five staff members able to engage regularly, and one teacher restricted by time constraints. Classrooms were not consistently communication-rich environments, as staff knowledge of AAC was limited, and reliance on paras and strategists remained high.

In terms of social-emotional collaboration, details regarding explicit emotional support practices, adult modeling, and shared social-emotional learning (SEL) tools were less defined, suggesting an area for further development. Individual relationships, shared planning times, and grade-level pairings all played crucial roles in fostering a culture of collaboration within School B. While some teachers and teams set shared goals and utilized common planning structures, others did not engage at the same level. Administrative support was described as fluid and responsive, with leadership available and willing to offer guidance. However, the normalization of inclusive practices varied significantly among staff, largely depending on individual mindsets and comfort levels with inclusion. Overall, these observations highlight the complex dynamics of adult collaboration and system practices at School B, providing critical insights into areas of strength and growth in fostering inclusive and collaborative educational environments.

Training primarily focused on ensuring students' IEP goals were met, while instruction on enhancing inclusive practices for integrating students with special needs into general education settings remained limited. Additionally, new teachers often had to hit the ground running, entering the classroom without a clear understanding of how special education services function within a public-school setting, which further highlighted the need for targeted professional development. Observations indicated a tendency to focus narrowly on fulfilling IEP minutes, with less emphasis on consistent classroom presence and instructional support. In some cases, special education staff were not readily available during moments when students seemed to need assistance, revealing a disconnect between service delivery and daily classroom engagement.

In summary, School B demonstrated a foundational framework for inclusive instruction, with some structures in place to promote shared teaching practices and student support. While planning opportunities were extended to include both general and special education teachers in grades K-5, challenges such as inconsistent participation from extended core staff and uneven levels of differentiation limited the full impact of these efforts. The presence of accommodations and modifications was acknowledged, yet their consistent and effective use varied based on teacher experience and follow-through. Although roles were more clearly defined than in other settings, instructional responsibilities were occasionally hindered by staffing limitations and behavioral disruptions. Behavioral and communication systems reflected a mix of coordinated and fragmented practices, with paraeducators

and strategists often filling gaps left by inconsistent general education engagement. AAC tools and SEL strategies were inconsistently applied, suggesting the need for further integration and training. Leadership was generally accessible and supportive, yet inclusive practices were not uniformly embedded throughout the staff. Overall, School B presented both strengths and limitations in its implementation of inclusive education, offering valuable insights into how systemic support, teacher preparation, and collaborative consistency influence the effectiveness of inclusive learning environments.

School C. At School C, a K-6 setting where special education services were delivered primarily through a resource room model, instructional practices were observed to inform research on inclusive educational approaches. Co-planning was limited to special education staff, with no evidence of co-teaching or collaborative instructional planning between general and special education teachers. Differentiation of instruction was observed exclusively within special education classrooms; general education staff did not provide information on the frequency or application of differentiated strategies. At the start of each school year, general education teachers were given paper copies of students' IEP goals, accommodations, and modifications, along with testing guidelines. While accommodations and modifications were addressed in greater detail during IEP meetings, there was limited follow-up from general education teachers regarding their implementation or effectiveness. Despite receiving a chart of accommodations, general education teachers did not provide feedback or suggest alternatives during IEP discussions. During the observation, accommodations and modifications were rarely seen in general education classrooms. When fidelity checks were proposed, leadership hesitated, often relying only on verbal affirmation rather than evidence.

In classroom roles, general education teachers did not assign defined roles to special education teachers, and inclusion efforts did not consistently align with students' IEP goals. When present, special education staff were limited to a supporting role, functioning in a "one teaches, one assist" model rather than full instructional partners. General education teachers were provided with strategies, routines, visuals, and tools by their special education counterparts, yet these supports were not actively used or acknowledged. Receptiveness during collaboration sessions did not translate into observable practice. In one case, a student met a reading goal with the aid of assistive technology or adult prompting; however, inconsistent teacher-student rapport raised concerns about the student's independent capabilities. Behavioral collaboration showed similar disconnects. Special education teachers managed behavior goals and data collection, frequently compensating for general education staff who failed to submit behavioral rubrics on time. General education teachers expressed verbal concern about future transitions but lacked documented input or early identification of behavioral needs. Joint reinforcement of behavior strategies was not evident, and differences in educational backgrounds appeared to impact consistency. Special education teachers created most behavior plans and shared strategies, but these were not widely adopted in general education settings.

Crisis response efforts further reflected a siloed approach. General education teachers often deferred entirely to special education staff or the principal when de-escalation was required, and paraeducator roles in these moments were unclear or ineffective. Communication supports were also fragmented. AAC devices were used primarily in special education settings, but were not embedded through subjects or consistently used in general education environments. Despite training provided by the Speech and Language Pathologist, there was no evidence of sustained implementation of AAC tools in inclusive classrooms. While special education teachers documented current practices weekly, general education teachers contributed little feedback and did not consistently participate in problem-solving or celebrations of progress. Meetings were scheduled around general education PLCs, limiting special

education teachers' availability due to their instructional obligations. Leadership support for special education teachers' participation in collaborative time was minimal unless it was directly related to specially designed instruction or compensating for missed sessions.

A communication-rich environment was not evident. In the first year, collaboration occurred once monthly, and general education teachers received IEP progress updates but did not share classroom-based strategies to support students. In the subsequent year, special education teachers-maintained logs of collaboration efforts, but participation from general education teachers remained limited. Documentation showed that unless IEP goals were met, general education teachers rarely initiated communication with special education staff. In terms of social-emotional learning, no evidence was collected on formal emotional support practices. While special education staff provided occasional modeling and support, no common SEL language or tools were observed in various settings. Structural support for collaboration was largely absent. Co-planning and PLC time did not include special education staff, and shared goal setting was not documented. Although special education teachers expressed interest in participating in general collaboration efforts, such as child find meetings, leadership emphasized the need to make up missed instructional time instead. Support from the administration varied during the observation period: communication was generally good, but follow-up on specific issues was inconsistent due to time, even when assistance was available. This inconsistency sometimes left staff uncertain about next steps, limited collaborative problem solving, and reduced the effectiveness of instructional planning and implementation. As a result, practices were occasionally fragmented rather than fully integrated across classrooms and grade levels. Inclusive practices were not normalized across grade levels, and observations throughout the observation did not reflect a school-wide commitment to inclusion.

In conclusion, observations at School C revealed significant gaps in inclusive practices, collaborative planning, and shared instructional responsibility between general and ten special education staff. While special education teachers demonstrated consistent efforts to support students through differentiated instruction, behavioral strategies, and communication tools, these practices were not consistently adopted or reinforced within general education settings. Limited co-planning, minimal use of provided resources, and inconsistent implementation of accommodations and modifications hindered the effectiveness of inclusive education. Furthermore, a lack of structured collaboration time, uneven leadership support, and fragmented communication contributed to a siloed approach rather than a unified system of support. This study highlights the crucial need to strengthen systems, provide professional development, and ensure leadership-driven expectations for inclusion across all educational environments.

Findings

Across the three schools, observations revealed varied levels of collaboration, co-teaching, and inclusive practice, with notable contrasts in how general and special education staff engaged with one another. At School A, while structured teaching, behavior supports, and SEL tools were consistently implemented, they were largely driven by individual educators rather than through coordinated planning or co-teaching efforts. Similarly, School C exhibited a siloed model in which special education teachers were active in differentiated instruction and behavioral support, but their efforts were not meaningfully integrated into general education classrooms. In contrast, School B showed more deliberate efforts to foster inclusive practices through shared planning and clearer role definitions, particularly between general and special education teachers. However, these practices were inconsistent and heavily influenced by teacher experience, scheduling logistics, and the presence of supportive leadership. In all three settings, inclusive tools such as AAC, SEL strategies, and accommodations were present but unevenly

implemented, often lacking systemic reinforcement. These findings underscore the importance of structured collaboration time, consistent leadership support, and professional development to bridge the gap between policy and practice in inclusive education.

Themes

Individualized vs. Collective Practice. Across the three schools, the structure of shared responsibility for instruction and support differed considerably, with each site demonstrating varying levels of consistency and coordination. At School A, teachers primarily worked in isolation, with one leading instruction while others provided support without coordinated planning. At School B, co-teaching roles were more clearly defined in K-5 classrooms, but scheduling conflicts and new staff's limited experience with differentiation weakened consistency. At School C, general education teachers often deferred to special education staff, who assumed most responsibility for instructional support, behavior, and accommodations, reinforcing a "one teaches, one assist" dynamic rather than shared ownership. In reference to observations, Schools A, B, and C indicate that co-planning and co-teaching were generally limited and inconsistent. At School A, teachers were provided opportunities and flexibility in their lesson approaches, which supported individualized instruction and reflected the early stages of implementing the TEACCH approach, with potential for greater collaboration and growth over time. School B demonstrated some co-planning and co-teaching in K-5 classrooms, particularly with special education staff, but participation was inconsistent due to scheduling conflicts, and newer teachers were less adept at differentiation strategies. At School C, co-planning was restricted to special education staff, with no collaboration observed with general education teachers. Opportunities for joint instructional planning varied by each school's system and level of least restrictive environment (LRE). In the inclusive setting, co-teaching allowed more collaboration, though practices differed across classrooms. The partial inclusion model offered some joint planning, but it was often informal and inconsistent. In the most restrictive setting, where intensive behavioral supports and the TEACCH model guided instruction, planning was structured yet individualized, with little cross-classroom collaboration.

Disconnect in Special and General Education. Observations revealed limited integration between general education and special education staff. At School A, a specialized school serving only students in special education, teachers leveraged their expertise to implement the TEACCH framework effectively while providing structured and individualized instruction. Teachers demonstrated expertise through effective implementation of specialized practices; at the same time, collaborative lesson design and co-teaching were infrequent, suggesting room for growth. At School B, planning sessions did include both groups of teachers, but inconsistent participation by extended core staff and uneven implementation of accommodations highlighted ongoing divides. At School C, the disconnect was more pronounced, with co-planning restricted to special education teachers and minimal uptake of accommodations, behavior strategies, or AAC tools by general education staff. Throughout three schools, accommodations and modifications were unevenly applied, often dependent on individual teacher experience. The teachers in School A incorporated accommodations within their instruction, specially designed instruction and the TEACCH framework, meeting each student's individual needs, but they largely worked in isolation rather than collaboratively. School B demonstrated accommodations and modifications in general education classrooms, guided by special education staff; however, veteran teachers implemented them more effectively than newer or general education teachers. At School C, accommodations were rarely observed in general education settings, despite documentation and IEP guidance being provided to teachers, with limited follow-up or feedback on effectiveness. This evidence indicates that systemic supports for consistent implementation are lacking, leaving student access to accommodations variable.

Addressing this persistent disconnect between general and special education is essential to ensure consistent implementation of supports, foster cohesive instructional practices, and ultimately promote equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. Incorporating the expertise of special education teachers into collaborative planning and instruction not only strengthens inclusive practices but also enriches the overall educational environment by equipping all staff with specialized strategies that benefit diverse learners (Friend, 2007).

Differences in Data. Data use and accountability varied considerably across the three schools, with some settings demonstrating greater attentiveness to student progress than others, highlighting distinct challenges in the implementation of behavioral and communication supports. At School A, staff-maintained consistency in behavior management, but practices were largely individual-driven, with limited coordination among teachers. SEL strategies, including Zones of Regulation, were applied independently within classrooms, and academic instruction emphasized life skills such as functional literacy, money management, and daily living tasks. These lessons were often delivered in isolation, with minimal integration into broader classroom routines or cross-staff planning. As a result, opportunities to align behavioral supports, social-emotional learning, and academic skill development were limited, reducing the potential for students to generalize skills across settings. Observations highlighted that while individual staff members were attentive to student progress in discrete areas, the lack of coordinated systems prevented a fully cohesive approach to supporting both academic and social-emotional growth. School B exhibited fragmented practices due to disagreements over behavioral data collection, with paraprofessionals and strategists carrying the majority of the documentation responsibilities. Additionally, AAC data and communication supports were inconsistently implemented, particularly in general education classrooms, reflecting a lack of shared understanding and consensus among staff. At School C, special education staff oversaw behavior data and IEP progress monitoring, but general education teachers rarely contributed to rubrics or provided feedback, resulting in minimal collaboration and limited use of shared data to inform instruction. Across all three schools, behavioral and communication supports were applied inconsistently and often depended on individual staff members, highlighting the absence of systematic, coordinated approaches. These observations indicate that without clear protocols, collaborative structures, and shared accountability, data use for behavior and communication support remains fragmented, reducing its effectiveness in guiding instruction and promoting equitable student outcomes. In School C, behavior plans, crisis responses, and AAC use were primarily managed by special education staff, with general education teachers minimally engaged, resulting in siloed support systems. Findings suggest that coordinated approaches to behavior and communication support are limited, and reliance on individual initiative leaves gaps in student support.

Overall, the differences in data use and accountability across the three schools highlight a significant disadvantage for students who rely on consistent and coordinated support. When behavioral and communication data are fragmented or left primarily to special education staff, opportunities for shared problem-solving and aligned instructional responses are diminished. These inconsistencies create gaps in monitoring student progress, weaken the reliability of data-driven decision-making, and reinforce silos between general and special education staff. Research emphasizes that coordinated data systems and shared accountability improve instructional alignment, foster collaboration, and lead to stronger outcomes for students with disabilities (Cook & Odom, 2013; Hattie, 2012; Sailor, 2017). Establishing unified systems for collecting, sharing, and acting on data is therefore essential to strengthen collaboration, ensure accountability, and provide students with more cohesive and equitable support across all environments.

In summary, observations showed that the absence of clear district protocols for assessment, progress monitoring, and documentation frequently undermined fidelity and consistency in data collection. Consequently, teachers often lacked reliable information to guide instruction and, at times, provided responses that generated confusion rather than clarity. Collaborative practices among classroom teachers, special education staff, and administrators were limited, and centralized data systems were inconsistently utilized, resulting in gaps as students transitioned across grades. District-level oversight and review processes were minimal, further reducing consistency and accountability. These observations indicate that, without structured systems and coordinated practices, promising instructional strategies remained isolated rather than integrated, limiting the ability of data to reliably inform instruction, promote equitable learning, and enhance student outcomes at every stage.

Dependence on Individual Educator Initiative Over Systemic Practice: Across the three schools, inclusive practices and student support were largely dependent on individual teacher effort rather than embedded systemic processes. In School A, teachers implemented structured routines, behavior supports, and SEL strategies mostly independently. School B demonstrated that success in co-planning, differentiation, and the use of accommodations was influenced by teacher experience and initiative, with newer staff often relying on the guidance of veteran colleagues. School C showed the heaviest reliance on individual initiative, as special education staff-maintained student support while general education teachers engaged minimally. Collectively, these patterns underscore the critical need for systemic structures, professional development, and leadership-driven expectations to ensure consistent and collaborative implementation of inclusive practices.

Leadership support for inclusive practices varied across the schools, shaping the degree of systemic collaboration. Due to the nature and structure of a special school, School A's administration encouraged collaboration among teachers, but few structured opportunities were available for joint planning. As a result, teachers often worked independently, limiting collaboration and the sharing of strategies across classrooms. This lack of coordinated planning reduced consistency in instructional practices and constrained the potential benefits of collective expertise, particularly for students with complex learning and behavioral needs. School B reflected responsive and accessible leadership; however, inclusive practices were inconsistently embedded and often depended on individual teacher mindsets. School C exhibited fluctuating leadership support, providing guidance but minimal structured collaboration and follow-through, particularly when inclusion efforts conflicted with instructional time. These observations suggest that although leadership may be supportive, the absence of formal structures and accountability limits the widespread adoption of inclusive practices.

The reliance on individual educator initiative rather than systemic practice presents a clear disadvantage across all three schools. When inclusive practices depend primarily on personal effort, they risk becoming inconsistent, unevenly applied, and unsustainable over time. Such variability not only limits the effectiveness of instructional strategies but also undermines equity for students who may experience different levels of support depending on the teacher. Structured systems, shared accountability, and leadership-driven expectations are essential; in their absence, promising practices remain isolated rather than integrated into a cohesive framework that benefits all learners.

Next Steps

This section conveys the next steps to strengthen instructional coherence and equity, highlighting how schools and districts can provide consistent, high-quality learning experiences for students with diverse needs. Embedding systematic differentiation, professional development, data-driven decision-making, and cross-collaboration allows educators to monitor progress, apply evidence-based

practices, and leverage the expertise of special education teachers across settings. These coordinated efforts at the school, district, and state levels create inclusive, high-quality learning environments where all students can achieve academic, social, and functional success.

Strengthen alignment of accommodations, modifications, and instructional strategies across classrooms and districts. Strengthening the alignment of accommodations, modifications, and instructional strategies across classrooms and districts is essential for providing consistent and equitable learning experiences, particularly for students with complex learning and behavioral needs. Research emphasizes that aligning instructional practices with education quality standards enhances student engagement, motivation, and achievement (Meng, 2023). However, inconsistent implementation of accommodations or modifications fragments learning experiences and reduces the effectiveness of interventions, especially for students requiring specialized support. Furthermore, when students transition from one building to another, inconsistent practices disrupt skill development and slow progress. As a result, students may experience gaps in learning, inequitable access to instruction, and diminished academic and social outcomes. In contrast, special schools that target intensive behavior management and implement structured frameworks such as the TEACCH model demonstrate that a coordinated, school-wide approach provides both individualized support and systemic consistency. By implementing clear behavioral expectations, predictable routines, and structured visual supports, teachers create classroom environments that focus on students achieving academic and social growth across all classrooms (Gustafsson et al., 2023). Additionally, TEACCH's structured teaching components, including visual schedules, work systems, and task organization, meet evidence-based criteria and contribute to a predictable, manageable learning framework (Kliemann, 2014; Reichow et al., 2007). Therefore, schools seeking to improve academic and behavioral outcomes should adopt a unified framework that integrates TEACCH principles with systematic instruction (Collins, 2022) and participate in regular cross-school professional learning communities to ensure fidelity of implementation. Ultimately, leadership must provide coaching and embed these elements systemically to reduce variability in student outcomes and foster a more inclusive, collaborative environment.

Beyond collaboration at the district level, states can further enhance consistency and equity in instruction for students with complex needs by promoting statewide alignment of practices. State education agencies can create professional learning networks, provide shared resources, and implement standardized frameworks for accommodations, behavioral supports, and alternative assessments to ensure schools apply evidence-based practices with fidelity. One example, states can offer unified training modules, coaching support, and accessible data-tracking systems, helping districts maintain continuity as students transition between schools and regions. By taking these steps, states can reduce variability in student outcomes, strengthen cross-district collaboration, and create inclusive learning environments that support all learners and teachers.

In summary, strengthening alignment across accommodations, modifications, and instructional strategies requires moving beyond isolated teacher practices toward intentional, system-wide coherence. When schools and districts embed structured frameworks, provide ongoing professional development, and establish accountability for consistent implementation, they create learning environments where all students, particularly those with complex needs, are supported equitably. In other words, alignment not only minimizes disparities in student outcomes but also bridges the gap between general and special education, ensuring that expertise is shared, practices are predictable, and students experience a cohesive, inclusive path to success.

Systemic Support for Equitable and Inclusive Learning. Ensuring differentiation is applied systematically across classrooms, rather than relying solely on individual teachers, is critical for consistent and equitable learning, particularly for students with diverse needs. Aligning accommodations, modifications, and instructional strategies with education quality standards strengthens student engagement, motivation, and achievement (Meng, 2023). When individual teachers implement differentiation without systemic support, practices become uneven, which fragments learning and reduces the effectiveness of instructional delivery, interventions, and specially designed instruction. Observations revealed that collaborative co-teaching and shared planning help bridge the gap between general and special education; effective co-teaching models improve access to the general curriculum, distribute instructional responsibility, and foster shared accountability among staff (Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Cook & Odom, 2013). Furthermore, systematic use of behavioral, communication, and academic data allows teams to monitor progress, adjust instruction, and maintain consistency (Brendle, Lock, & Piazza, 2017). By embedding differentiation, collaboration, and data-driven decision making into a cohesive framework, schools can support individualized student needs, reduce disconnects between special and general education, and promote equitable outcomes.

When differentiation is implemented consistently across grade levels and within a district, students gain more equitable access to instruction and smoother transitions between classrooms. Consistent application ensures that accommodations, modifications, and instructional strategies are embedded within a unified framework rather than dependent on the individual teacher. Systemic differentiation reduces variability in learning supports, increases engagement, and enhances both academic achievement and social development (Meng, 2023). At the district level, aligning differentiation across schools promotes equity by enabling all students, including those with specialized needs, to benefit from research-based practices, regardless of their classroom or grade. Schools that do not utilize the expertise of special education-focused programs miss opportunities to strengthen instruction, implement specialized strategies, and improve student outcomes. Ultimately, district-wide consistency in differentiation supports teacher development and student success, reinforcing inclusive education as a collective responsibility.

Professional development plays a pivotal role in equipping educators with the skills to implement inclusive practices, differentiation, and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies. Research indicates that targeted training improves teachers' ability to meet the diverse needs of students (Meng, 2023). Training in augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools and SEL strategies is important for supporting students with communication challenges and fostering emotional well-being. High-quality professional development provides embedded opportunities for educators to apply these concepts in real classroom settings, ensuring that learning translates into practice.

Professional development should also emphasize the use of a full range of assessments, including traditional, formative, summative, and alternative measures, to evaluate student progress in meaningful ways beyond standard tests. Embedding these assessments allows all staff to see connections across instruction, student learning, and outcomes. Teachers learn to design, implement, and interpret assessments that capture growth in life skills, social-emotional competencies, and functional academics. Integrating alternative assessments within professional development aligns instruction with students' individualized goals and promotes collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers, allowing content-specific expertise to be shared across districts. By combining applied learning, alternative assessments, and cross-district collaboration, professional development strengthens educators'

capacity to create inclusive, supportive environments while ensuring continuity of instruction and access to specialized support for all students.

Research indicates that systematically implemented differentiated instruction significantly enhances student learning outcomes (Groenewald, Valle, Viscara, & Abendan, 2024). Observations from Schools A, B, and C revealed that, although accommodations and modifications were often present, their application largely depended on individual teachers rather than a coordinated, school-wide approach. At School A, teachers implemented the TEACCH framework and visual supports effectively, delivering highly individualized instruction to meet student needs; however, lesson planning and delivery occurred largely independently, limiting opportunities for collaboration among staff. School B applied differentiation mainly during co-teaching sessions, and new teachers demonstrated less understanding of these strategies. Evidence that accommodations and modifications were implemented at School C was minimal, reducing confidence that support services were delivered consistently. Although teachers reported implementing these supports, observable evidence did not confirm their use. Groenewald et al. (2024) emphasize that schools benefit from structured professional development, collaborative planning, and consistent monitoring of instructional strategies to maximize engagement, motivation, and achievement.

By embedding differentiated instruction into school-wide practices and fostering cross-collaboration among general and special education teachers, educators ensure students receive equitable and effective learning experiences across all classrooms. Over time, this systemic alignment strengthens instructional quality, supports diverse learning needs, and promotes sustained student growth and improved educational outcomes.

Foster cross-collaboration to integrate support into the general education environment. Cross-collaboration refers to structured, ongoing partnerships between general and special education teachers that involve shared planning, co-teaching, mutual learning, and shared responsibility for student outcomes. Unlike informal consultation, true collaboration means educators co-design instruction, share strategies for assessment and intervention, and jointly monitor student progress. Research consistently demonstrates that these practices benefit both students and teachers. The meta-analysis conducted by Meng (2023) found that students with disabilities who were co-taught frequently outperformed their peers in self-contained classrooms in terms of academic achievement. These findings highlight the benefits of inclusive practices, particularly when general and special education teachers collaborate to provide differentiated support. In spite of this, not all students with special needs can successfully integrate into full inclusion. This recognition reflects the reality that not all schools are able or equipped to deliver the full range of specialized services, and in such cases, placement in a special school may be considered as an alternative. Collaboration in these alternative settings can be especially valuable, as teachers bring expertise in specialized content areas that enrich instruction and better address diverse learning needs. The effectiveness of placement must be considered on a case-by-case basis, considering individual learning needs, social-emotional development, and the level of support available. This study demonstrates that inclusion varies depending on the setting, highlighting that a balanced approach does not follow a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, it considers each student's unique strengths and challenges within three distinct environments: full inclusion in general education classrooms, hybrid or co-taught models, and specialized or separate placements. Research further indicates that co-teachers often experience increased professional growth and gain new instructional strategies as a direct outcome of working collaboratively (Scruggs et al., 2022).

Valuing the expertise of special education teachers is central to the success of cross-collaboration. Special educators bring specialized skills in differentiated instruction, accommodations, behavior management, and adaptive communication strategies that are essential for meeting the needs of students with diverse learning profiles. To leverage this expertise, districts and general education schools should actively seek partnerships with special schools and provide opportunities for special educators to serve as mentors, trainers, and collaborative partners. Shared professional development sessions, joint lesson planning, and model classrooms are ways in which general and special educators can learn from one another and ensure consistency in instructional quality across settings (Friend, 2007).

At the district level, intentional structures are needed to foster collaboration. This includes scheduling formal co-planning time, creating systems for shared lesson design, and promoting co-teaching models where both teachers assume responsibility for instruction. Research highlights that when special education teachers are given parity in planning, instruction, and assessment, collaboration is more sustainable and effective (Villa et al., 2013). These practices ensure that the knowledge of special educators is not only valued but fully integrated into general education environments.

Despite these benefits, barriers such as limited time for planning, insufficient training in co-teaching models, and a lack of clarity in roles often impede effective collaboration. Studies emphasize that structural support, administrative backing, and ongoing professional learning are critical for overcoming these challenges (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Building a culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility further strengthens collaboration and maximizes its impact on student outcomes.

In conclusion, cross-collaboration is an evidence-based approach that improves student learning and professional practice. By valuing the expertise of special education teachers and creating opportunities for districts to partner with special schools, educational systems can move beyond isolated practices toward integrated and coordinated instruction. When supported with time, training, and leadership, cross-collaboration fosters equity and ensures that all students, regardless of learning needs, have access to high-quality education in inclusive environments.

Summary

Inclusive education requires more than individual teacher effort; it demands an understanding of how students develop within layered systems and how those systems interact to shape learning outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) demonstrates that students' growth is influenced not only by immediate environments such as classrooms and families but also by broader cultural values and policies. Specifically, students with special needs benefit from inclusive classrooms that align school practices, family supports, and district policies, thereby strengthening the microsystem and fostering belonging. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) highlights how students learn from role models, develop self-efficacy, and regulate their behavior. Intentional modeling, scaffolding, and feedback create conditions for engagement, communication, and responsible decision-making. Observations from this study revealed that some inclusive practices have persisted over time but lack systematic evolution, indicating that deliberate change is needed to ensure consistent progress across classrooms and schools. Findings from the three schools studied show that inconsistencies in collaboration, data use, and aligned supports can either hinder or promote inclusion. Schools that prioritize shared responsibility and structured collaboration between general and special education foster empathy, resilience, and equity for all students (Hehir et al., 2016). Grounded in ecological and social learning perspectives, inclusion becomes a systemic approach, requiring districts, schools, and educators to work collectively so every student can thrive academically and socially.

About the Author

Dr. Deborah Boldt is an Iowa-based researcher with 30+ years of experience in educational leadership, disability, and special education services. To support students with disabilities and promote their mental well-being, Dr. Boldt brings a strong background in autism, evidence-based instructional strategies, individualized supports, and social-emotional learning. She has published prior articles focusing on inclusion, least restrictive environments, and co-creation. Dr. Boldt earned her Ph.D. at Drake University in Des Moines and completed coursework in K-12 Educational Leadership in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Currently, Dr. Boldt is completing preliminary research into neurological disabilities that affect cognitive function and how each neurological disorder, depending on severity, impacts classroom learning. In addition to her research, Dr. Boldt writes educational grants to help schools obtain funding for their most pressing needs.

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Observation Outline

Purpose:
Collecting data about general education and special education collaboration across settings, emphasizing systems, practices, and adult collaboration, not outcomes.

School
• Date & Time:
• Grade Level(s):
• Setting (Gen ed, resource room, inclusion, self-contained, etc.):

I. Academic Collaboration
• Instructional Planning & Delivery:
- Evidence of co-planning or co-teaching?
- Differentiated instruction?
- Accommodations/modifications in general ed?
• Roles in the Classroom:
- What are the roles of each educator?
- Are both actively engaged?
• Shared Tools & Strategies:
- Use of routines, visuals, or tools?

II. Behavioral Collaboration
• Behavior Expectations & Supports:
- Consistency across staff?
- Joint reinforcement?
• Behavior Management Strategies:
- Unified approach?
- Shared strategies/language?
• Crisis or Behavior Response:
- Coordinated vs. siloed response?

III. Communication Support
• Language and Interaction Practices:
- AAC/tools used?
- Equal support from both teams?
• Collaboration Between Adults:
- Evidence of staff collaboration during support?
• Inclusive Communication Environment:
- Classroom is communication-rich?

IV. Social-Emotional Collaboration
• Emotional Support Practices:
• Adult Modeling & Support:
• Shared SEL Programs or Tools:
- Common SEL language/tools?

V. Collaboration Culture Across Schools

• Structures That Support Collaboration:
    - Co-planning/PLC time?
    - Shared goal setting?
    - Common tools?
• Admin Support and Expectations:
    - Leadership visible/supportive?
    - Inclusive practices normalized?

Moving Beyond Learning Styles: Practical UDL Strategies That Work

Melissa Beck Wells, Ed.D., BCASE, BCISE, CRCM

Many teachers who completed their certification years ago were introduced to Howard Gardner's (1983) *Multiple Intelligences* framework. Pre-service programs often encouraged future educators to design lessons that aligned with "intelligence types"—bodily-kinesthetic, musical, or interpersonal, for example. This approach helped teachers value diversity, but later research showed that tailoring instruction to a preferred "style" does not improve learning outcomes (Pashler et al., 2009; Willingham et al., 2015).

Today, instead of designing around "types," we can draw on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and cognitive science to plan strategies that work for all learners. Below are three evidence-based strategies I use in my teaching, research, and faculty development—strategies that any educator can apply right away.

1. Scaffolding for Access and Equity

In practice: Break tasks into smaller steps, model the process with think-alouds, and gradually release responsibility. Provide guided notes, checklists, or sentence starters that fade as students gain independence.

Why it works: In my research on digital accessibility (Wells, 2024b), students reported that scaffolds such as worked examples or structured templates made challenging material manageable. Similarly, students with ADHD benefited from structured steps that reduced cognitive load and improved persistence (Wells, 2024a).

Try this tomorrow: When assigning an essay, provide a guided outline and sample introduction paragraph. As students practice, reduce the scaffolds until they can produce work independently.

2. Retrieval Practice to Strengthen Memory

In practice: Build in frequent, low-stakes opportunities for recall—exit tickets, quick write-and-share exercises, or "teach it back" activities.

Why it works: Cognitive science shows retrieval strengthens long-term retention more than re-reading or highlighting (Roediger & Butler, 2011). In my study on inclusive use of polls (Wells, 2024c), students shared that short retrieval activities made learning active and reduced anxiety because they were low-stakes.

Try this tomorrow: End class with a two-question poll asking students to recall key points. Use the results to clarify misconceptions at the start of the next lesson.

3. Metacognitive Reflection to Build Agency

In practice: After an activity, ask students to reflect: *What strategy helped you learn today? What will you try differently next time?* Allow them to respond in different formats—written, verbal, or digital.

Why it works: My research on students with anxiety in digital courses (Wells, 2022b) showed that reflection activities increased confidence by helping learners recognize strategies that worked for them. UDL emphasizes multiple means of action and expression, so providing options for reflection supports agency without lowering expectations.

Try this tomorrow: Ask students to write one "learning strategy note" at the end of class, then revisit those notes before the next lesson.

Putting It All Together

Each of these strategies—scaffolding, retrieval practice, and metacognitive reflection—honors student diversity without relying on "styles." Instead, they strengthen interconnected brain networks and align with UDL's call for multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. In my forthcoming *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* article (Wells, forthcoming), I extend this approach by showing how UDL principles and cognitive science together can transform both teacher preparation and classroom practice.

Educators who were trained under the MI era had the right instinct: respect learners' differences. Today, we can update that instinct with approaches that are both inclusive and effective. By embedding scaffolds, encouraging retrieval, and prompting reflection, we design classrooms where every student has the tools to succeed.

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- National Institute of Health
- National Organization on Disability
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Education-The Achiever
- U.S. Department of Education-The Education Innovator
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- U.S. Department of Labor
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration
- U.S. Office of Special Education

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