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NASET Special Educator e-Journal

Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

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Special Education Legal Alert

Perry A. Zirkel
August 2026

This month's update identifies two recent decisions that respectively reflect the initial appearance of AI and the difficulties of IDEA discipline in the world of special education litigation. For related publications and special supplements, see perryzirkel.com

On May 14, 2026, the federal district court in Utah issued an unofficially published decision in <i>Wilkes v. Canyons School</i>. In this case, the school district first found a student eligible for special education in kindergarten under the IDEA classification of autism. Although the initial IEPs were successful, the child's progress stalled in grades 3 to 5. Yet, upon the transition to middle school for grade 6, the IEP team determined, despite the parents' objections, that he was no longer IDEA-eligible. Instead, the district provided him with a 504 plan. His decline worsened despite multiple revisions to this plan. In December of grade 6, the parents requested another IDEA evaluation, but the district refused. They also requested a functional behavioral assessment, which the district agreed, but failed, to do. In March, the parents hired an attorney, and the district assented to an IDEA evaluation. In late May, the IEP team determined that the student re-qualified under the IDEA. In August, the district held a meeting to develop the child's IEP for grade 7, but the parents expressed dissatisfaction with the meeting's brevity and the cursory consideration. In October, they filed for a due process hearing, alleging denial of FAPE extending back to grade 3. In March, the hearing officer issued a decision in favor of the district. In July, the parents filed an appeal with the federal district court based on multiple claims, including (1) Section 1983 for alleged violations of the Fourteenth Amendment; (2) Section 1983 for alleged violations of the IDEA, Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); and (3) the IDEA on its own. The district filed a motion to dismiss all the parents' claims except their appeal of the hearing officer's ruling for the two-year period within the IDEA's statute of limitations.	
The parents argued that the district was liable under Section 1983 for violations of the Fourteenth Amendment's due process and equal protection clauses.	The court dismissed this claim without prejudice (meaning that they could submit a revised version) because it unduly overlapped with their claims under the IDEA and Section 504/ADA.
The parents separately predicated Section 1983 claims on alleged violations of their child's rights under the IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA.	The court dismissed this claim with prejudice due to well-settled precedent that each of these statutes had their own comprehensive enforcement mechanisms.
The district's threshold challenge was to the notable part of the parents' IDEA claim that was beyond the two-year limitations period (reserving the rest of their challenge for further proceedings).	The court agreed with the district because for their statute of limitations argument the parents relied on artificial intelligence (AI)-hallucinated case citations.

The court held a follow-up show-cause hearing to determine whether the parents' use of nonexistent citations warranted sanctions.	The court ruled that the parents' attorney must pay \$7,000 to the school district as reimbursement for legal expenses incurred as a result of the use of non-existent case law.
The primary, though not exclusive, lesson from this case is to beware of the misuse of AI in legal proceedings (as well as elsewhere).	

On June 23, 2026, a federal district court in Ohio issued an unofficially published decision in *Thomas v. Beachwood City School District Board of Education*. Mrs. T was a passionate participant in the education of her child with an IEP. For example, she was the founder of a local special education PTA to promote inclusion. In June 2025, she filed a state complaint that alleged the school district's denial of "inclusive extracurricular and mental health planning." The following month she filed complaints with the district's human resources department, claiming that school administrators had engaged in harassment and retaliation against her. In September, in response to purported staff complaints that had sent them harassing and threatening communications, the district's superintendent directed the IT department to block all future emails from her to her child's teachers and re-route them to him, the director of pupil services, and to the principal of her child's school. When she pointed out to the school board that it lacked a policy authorizing such communication protocols, the board president responded that it was a matter of the superintendent's discretionary authority. After allegedly filing complaints with state and federal education agencies to challenge the "communication ban," she filed suit in federal court on a pro se basis (i.e., without attorney representation). She claimed (1) denial of FAPE by preventing her meaningful participation in her child's education under the IDEA; (2) discrimination of her child under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (§ 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by "restricting parental participation, failing to provide equal access to extracurricular programs, and ignoring accommodation needs"; (3) retaliation under § 504 and the ADA; and (4) violation of the First Amendment in that the "communication protocol unlawfully restricts [her] right to petition and communicate with public officials about [her child's] education." The district responded to the lawsuit with a motion for dismissal.

The district argued that the IDEA FAPE claim must be dismissed due to the parents' failure to meet the exhaustion requirement to first obtain a due process hearing decision before seeking judicial relief.	The court dismissed the IDEA FAPE claim due to not only the exhaustion requirement, but also (a) as a pro se litigant, the parent cannot represent her child's interests, and (b) the IDEA's procedural safeguards do not include "a right for parents to directly email teachers"
The district challenged the parent's standing in court for the § 504/ADA claim of discrimination against the child.	The court agreed on the same basis that applied to the IDEA claim with regard to pro se litigants in federal court.
The district argued that the parent failed to meet the exhaustion requirements for the § 504/ADA claim of retaliation for protected disability advocacy.	The court agreed based on Sixth Circuit precedent but alternatively ruled that cause for the communication ban was her excessive emails to teachers, not her complaint 2.5 months earlier.

The district argued that prevailing case law has rejected parents' challenges to such school communication protocols.	The court again agreed, citing the various previous judicial decisions with particular attention to the lack of the requisite causal connection,
Although one lesson of this case is that communication protocols are legally permissible if reasonable, viewpoint neutral, and not violations of the IDEA or § 504/ADA, the larger and more generalizable lesson of this case is the extreme disadvantage faced by pro se parents in federal court litigation on behalf of students with disabilities.	

Buzz from the Hub

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-july2026/>

Deafblindness

What exactly does it mean when a person is deafblind? When most people hear the term “deafblind,” they think of Helen Keller or someone with no vision or hearing. The term actually describes a person who has some degree of loss in both vision and hearing, which may vary from person to person.

This new page on the CPIR website, created in collaboration with the **National Center on Deafblindness**, provides information on deafblindness and resources that will be helpful in the different stages in a person’s life.

Visit the **Deafblindness page** to learn more and explore the available resources.

OCECD

The Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD) is the federally funded Parent Training and Information Center for the state of Ohio. OCECD brings together parents, professionals, and community partners to advocate for children with disabilities, ensuring they have access to the educational services, supports, and opportunities they need to achieve their full potential.

Learn more about OCECD here!

Guided Play: Turning Everyday Play into Meaningful STEM Learning Opportunities

Are you looking for ways to help children learn STEM concepts and processes naturally and in a fun and engaging way? In this blog post **STEMIE** staff members Dr. Christine Harradine and Victoria Waters share teaching strategies and adaptations, such as prompting and scaffolding, to help children with disabilities engage in playful, meaningful STEM learning.

[Read the post here.](#)

AI in Education: What the Research Says

AI use in the classroom has increased dramatically in recent years, with research on its impacts on children's learning lagging behind. Is AI effective for helping students learn? What challenges do teachers face in using these tools and making sure children are completing their own schoolwork?

This new tip sheet from the **Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development** offers practical, evidence-based strategies to guide educators in the new AI-driven classroom, as well as parents navigating children's learning in the age of AI.

[Read the tip sheet here.](#)

Life Hacks for Transition

These 20-minute podcasts, created by the **National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT)**, provide work-based learning resources and strategies you can use on the fly!

[Start listening today.](#)

“Now What?” Resource Suite

The “*Now What?*” *Resource Suite* by the **Connecticut Pathways to Integrated Employment (CTPIE)** helps job seekers navigate common milestones and decisions throughout the employment process. Each resource provides simple, practical next steps to help individuals prepare for opportunities, build workplace skills, address challenges, and move toward long-term employment success. Topics include what to do after submitting a job application, preparing for interviews, following up after employer events, evaluating and responding to job offers, successfully transitioning into a new job, and addressing challenges that may arise in the workplace.

[Access the resources here.](#)

Pain Care Rights

Pain Care Rights is a patient advocacy organization that helps people with chronic pain and their caregivers navigate healthcare, document their symptoms, and advocate for better treatment. It provides practical resources and guidance to empower patients.

[Check out the website and explore all the available tools here.](#)

Leveraging Change Through the SAP and ICC

Join the State Advisory Panel (SAP) and the Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC) for a collaborative networking session focused on strengthening connections between the SAP and the ICC to create a more seamless experience for families navigating special education. Whether your state already has strong collaboration between its ICC and SAP or is exploring new opportunities to connect these efforts, this session is for you.

[When: September 23, 2026](#)

[Time: 3:00 PM EST](#) [Register here.](#)

Update from the U.S. Department of Education

<https://www.ed.gov/>

Birth to Grade 12 Education-Resources

<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 Visits Kansas on Returning Education to the States Tour

August 5, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Manhattan High School and Kansas State University as part of her Returning Education to the States Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Approves the Nation's First Workforce Pell Grant Program in Iowa

August 4, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) approved the nation's first Workforce Pell Grant program, marking a major milestone in expanding faster, more affordable pathways to careers in high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand industry sectors

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Issues National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards

August 3, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon issued a national call to action to university presidents and governing boards, urging them to reaffirm higher education's foundational commitments to academic excellence, pathbreaking research, and nationa

U.S. Department of Education Demands Clarity on California and Washington Plans to Revise "Transgender" Policies

July 30, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (the Department's) Student Privacy Policy Office (SPPO) demanded updated information from the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

What They Are Saying: Support for Breaking Up the Federal Education Bureaucracy

July 30, 2026

Organizations and state leaders praised the Trump Administration's efforts to break up the federal education bureaucracy to cut through red tape, ensure efficient delivery of services, and empower local leaders to prioritize students.

U.S. Department of Education Finds Burlington Public Schools Violated Federal Parental Rights Laws by Ignoring Parent Requests to Opt Children Out of Inappropriate Survey

July 29, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (the Department's) Student Privacy Policy Office (SPPO) determined that Burlington Public Schools (the District) in Massachusetts violated the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA).

Trump Administration Investigates the Use of "Transgender Dolls" in Minnesota Schools

July 29, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education launched an investigation into the Minnesota Department of Education to ensure compliance with the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment.

U.S. Department of Education Investigates Districts in Washington and Colorado to Protect Parental Rights Laws and Uphold Title IX

July 28, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (the Department's) Student Privacy Policy Office (SPPO) launched parental rights investigations into Bethel School District in Washington and Denver Public Schools in Colorado for alleged violations.

Trump Administration Cracks Down on School Districts Secretly "Transitioning" Students and Hiding it from Parents

July 27, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) took significant action against Anne Arundel County Public Schools in Maryland and Ann Arbor Public Schools in Michigan for hiding sensitive information about children's health.

U.S. Department of Education Approves South Dakota's Returning Education to the States Waiver

July 24, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) delivered another win for state-driven innovation by granting South Dakota's Returning Education to the States (RES) Waiver and approving its Ed-Flex application.

U.S. Department of Education Removes Disparate-Impact from Title VI Regulations

July 23, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (the Department's) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced significant deregulatory actions to ensure equal educational opportunities and treatment for students across the country.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Elimination of Unnecessary Burdens on Career and Technical Education Programs

July 22, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights announced a significant deregulatory action, taking an important step to reduce unnecessary red tape and burdensome administrative requirements for states and schools.

U.S. Department of Education Investigates Five Medical Schools as Trump Administration Pushes to End Racial Discrimination in Admissions

July 22, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights launched new investigations into five medical schools across the country for alleged racial discrimination in admissions.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Issues Statement on the House Education and Workforce Committee's "Less Bureaucracy, Better Education" Legislative Package

July 15, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released the following statement in response to the House Education and Workforce Committee's passage of the "Less Bureaucracy, Better Education" legislative package.

Secretary McMahon's Remarks to 1,000 High School Students at Turning Point USA's Chapter Leadership Summit

July 10, 2026

Secretary McMahon delivers remarks to 1,000 high school students at Turning Point USA's Chapter Leadership Summit.

U.S. Department of Education Launches National K-12 Initiative to Protect Students from Adult Sexual Predators in Schools

July 10, 2026

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) today launched a national K-12 initiative to crack down on sexual predators in schools.

Secretary McMahon's Vision for 250 Years of American Innovation at the Great American State Fair

July 10, 2026

Secretary McMahon delivers a keynote address at 'The Next 250 – Innovation' event at the Great American State Fair.

“Presidential 1776 Award: The Ultimate Civics Showdown” Draws 1.63 Million Live Viewers

July 9, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) celebrates the success of the Presidential 1776 Award: The Ultimate Civics Showdown, with 1.63 million people tuning in.

U.S. Department of Education Holds First-of-its-Kind Higher Education Fraud Summit

July 8, 2026

Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Education held the first-of-its-kind Higher Education Fraud Summit featuring Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Arkansas' Returning Education to the States Waiver, Other Education Flexibilities

July 7, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) granted a major set of flexibilities that will allow Arkansas to streamline federal compliance requirements and enhance the state's ability to serve its students.

The Impact of High-Leverage Practices on Academic and Inclusive Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

By Cosett Maytin, Amyerim Suarez, Julianne Verdayes, Lina Abjouadi

Introduction

Providing meaningful educational opportunities for students with disabilities requires more than simply placing students in inclusive classrooms. Teachers must be equipped with instructional practices that address diverse learning needs while maintaining high academic expectations. High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) were developed to identify the essential instructional and professional practices that special educators use consistently to improve student outcomes across grade levels, disability categories, and educational settings (McLeskey et al., 2019). Rather than promoting isolated teaching strategies or commercial intervention programs, HLPs provide educators with a common framework for delivering effective instruction, collaborating with colleagues and families, monitoring student progress, and creating inclusive learning environments.

Literature Review

This literature review examines how HLP implementation influences academic achievement and inclusive participation for students with disabilities. Specifically, it focuses on five areas that consistently emerge throughout the literature: explicit instruction, assessment and data-informed decision making, collaboration, social and behavioral supports, and teacher preparation. These topics were selected because they represent both the instructional and collaborative components of special education practice while reflecting the evidence available within current research.

Although HLPs are often presented as a unified framework, research indicates that not every practice has the same level of empirical support. Nelson et al. (2022) found that explicit and intensive instructional practices possess the strongest research base, whereas collaboration and assessment, despite their recognized importance, require additional investigation as independent interventions. Consequently, evaluating HLPs requires considering both their overall effectiveness and the strength of evidence supporting individual practices. Understanding these distinctions enables educators to make informed instructional decisions while identifying areas where additional research and professional development remain necessary.

High-Leverage Practices as a Framework for Special Education

McLeskey et al. (2019) define High-Leverage Practices as instructional and professional practices that occur frequently in teaching, can be applied across instructional contents, and have demonstrated potential to improve student outcomes. It allows educators to adapt instruction

without sacrificing evidence-based principles. The framework also addresses longstanding challenges in special education: bridging the gap between research and practice. McLeskey et al. (2018) argue that teacher preparation programs should organize coursework and clinical experiences around HLPs because these practices represent the skills teachers are most likely to use throughout their careers. This practice-based approach provides teacher candidates with repeated opportunities to observe, rehearse, and refine instructional techniques before entering the profession.

However, the literature also cautions against assuming that every HLP possesses an equally strong evidence base. Nelson et al. (2022) reviewed multiple meta-analyses and concluded that instructional HLPs, particularly explicit instruction and intensive intervention, demonstrate the strongest empirical support. Conversely, collaboration and assessment remain essential components of effective special education, yet fewer studies have isolated their individual effects on student outcomes. This distinction reinforces the importance of interpreting the HLP framework as an interconnected system rather than a collection of equally validated practices.

Explicit Instruction and Academic Achievement

Among the High-Leverage Practices, explicit instruction consistently demonstrates the strongest evidence for improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities. Rather than relying on students to independently discover concepts, explicit instruction provides carefully sequenced lessons that include teacher modeling, guided practice, frequent opportunities to respond, immediate feedback, and gradual release of responsibility (Hughes et al., 2017). These components reduce cognitive demands by making the learning process visible and helping students master new skills before working independently.

Hughes et al. (2017) explain that explicit instruction is not a single teaching strategy but a systematic approach that combines several instructional practices into one cohesive method. Students receive clear explanations of learning objectives, observe demonstrations of expected performance, practice with teacher support, and gradually assume greater responsibility as proficiency develops. This instructional sequence is particularly beneficial for students with disabilities because it minimizes confusion, reinforces correct responses, and prevents repeated practice of errors.

The findings reported by Nelson et al. (2022) further strengthen the evidence supporting explicit instruction. Their systematic review of meta-analyses found that instructional HLPs consistently produced positive academic outcomes across multiple disability categories and subject areas. Compared to other practices within the HLP framework, explicit instruction demonstrated the greatest level of empirical support, suggesting that it should remain a primary focus of classroom instruction when students experience academic difficulties.

Additional evidence is provided by Satsangi et al. (2019), who compared explicit instruction and video modeling while teaching geometry word problems to students with mathematics learning disabilities. Although both instructional approaches improved student performance, explicit instruction produced slightly higher levels of accuracy for most participants. While the study involved a small sample size, its findings illustrate how systematic modeling, guided practice, and corrective feedback can improve student understanding of complex academic tasks.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that explicit instruction benefits students by providing consistent structure while maintaining high academic expectations. Rather than lowering standards, explicit instruction gives students access to rigorous content through carefully scaffolded learning experiences. This distinction is especially important in inclusive classrooms, where students with disabilities are expected to engage with grade-level curriculum alongside their peers.

Assessment, Data-Informed Decision Making, and Collaboration

Although explicit instruction receives the greatest research attention, effective implementation depends upon continuous assessment and collaborative decision making. Without ongoing assessment, teachers risk providing instruction that fails to meet individual learning needs. Nelson et al. (2022) acknowledge that assessment-related HLPs have received less direct empirical attention than instructional practices. Nevertheless, assessment remains fundamental because it guides every instructional decision educators make. Progress-monitoring data, classroom observations, work samples, and curriculum-based assessments provide valuable information regarding student growth and instructional effectiveness. Rather than serving primarily as compliance measures, these data should inform instructional planning and intervention decisions.

Firestone et al. (2021) extend this discussion by examining special educators' pedagogical content knowledge related to HLPs. Their research suggests that effective implementation requires more than simply recognizing the names of high-leverage practices. Teachers must understand when particular practices are appropriate, how to adapt them for individual students, and how to interpret assessment results to modify instruction. This distinction highlights the importance of professional judgment alongside evidence-based practice.

Collaboration also plays a critical role in successful HLP implementation. Inclusive education requires coordinated efforts among special educators, general education teachers, related service providers, administrators, and families. Each stakeholder contributes unique expertise regarding student learning, instructional planning, behavioral support, and family priorities. Effective collaboration therefore strengthens consistency across instructional settings while promoting shared responsibility for student success.

Rivera and McKeithan (2021) emphasize that collaboration extends beyond academic planning by incorporating social, emotional, and behavioral supports within inclusive classrooms. Students with disabilities often benefit from clearly established routines, explicit behavioral expectations, and opportunities to practice self-regulation skills. When educators collaboratively plan these supports, students experience greater consistency, increased engagement, and improved classroom participation.

From my perspective as an ESE Support Facilitator, collaboration is most effective when it occurs proactively rather than reactively. Collaborative planning before instruction begins allows teachers to identify potential barriers, determine appropriate accommodations, clarify instructional roles, and anticipate behavioral supports before students experience failure. This preventive approach reflects the collaborative philosophy underlying High-Leverage Practices while promoting meaningful inclusion for students with disabilities.

Teacher Preparation and Sustained Professional Learning

A consistent finding across the literature is that the effectiveness of High-Leverage Practices depends largely on how teachers learn and implement them. Simply introducing educators to HLPs during coursework is insufficient to ensure successful classroom application. Instead, teachers require repeated opportunities to observe effective instruction, rehearse instructional techniques, receive meaningful feedback, and reflect on their practice within authentic educational settings.

McLeskey et al. (2018) argue that teacher preparation programs should organize clinical experiences around HLPs so that teacher candidates repeatedly practice the instructional skills they will use throughout their careers. This practice-based approach narrows the research-to-practice gap by connecting university coursework with real classroom experiences. Similarly, Maheady et al. (2019) describe school-university partnerships as an effective method for helping future teachers apply HLPs through structured observation, coaching, and guided practice. These partnerships provide consistency between theory and classroom implementation while strengthening teacher confidence.

Professional learning should continue beyond initial teacher preparation. Billingsley et al. (2019) emphasize that beginning special educators often face significant responsibilities involving instruction, behavior management, collaboration, legal compliance, and documentation. Comprehensive induction programs that include mentoring, coaching, classroom observation, and collaborative problem solving help novice teachers develop confidence while improving instructional quality and teacher retention. Likewise, Firestone et al. (2021) recommend using teacher knowledge assessments and classroom observations to identify professional development needs so that training can be individualized rather than delivered through generalized workshops. Together, these studies suggest that continuous coaching and reflective practice are essential components of successful HLP implementation.

Research-Grounded Perspective

As an ESE Support Facilitator, I view High-Leverage Practices as a connected system rather than a collection of independent teaching strategies. Effective collaboration with general education teachers establishes shared instructional goals and identifies potential barriers to learning before instruction begins. Assessment data then guide instructional decisions by identifying student strengths, monitoring progress, and determining when instructional adjustments are necessary. Explicit instruction provides students with structured opportunities to learn new skills, while progress monitoring allows educators to evaluate the effectiveness of those instructional decisions and make timely modifications.

This integrated approach reflects both the research and my experiences supporting students in inclusive classrooms. When teachers have dedicated planning time, access to student data, and opportunities to collaborate regularly, HLPs become practical tools for improving student learning rather than isolated educational initiatives. Conversely, when collaboration is limited or professional learning is inconsistent, evidence-based practices are more difficult to implement with fidelity. The literature reinforces that meaningful inclusion depends not only on selecting effective instructional practices but also on creating organizational structures that support their consistent implementation.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed demonstrates that HLPs provide a strong evidence-based framework for improving instruction and inclusive educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Among the practices examined, explicit instruction possesses the most substantial empirical support for increasing academic achievement, while assessment, collaboration, and social-behavioral supports contribute to more responsive and inclusive learning environments. Equally important, the research indicates that successful implementation depends on comprehensive teacher preparation, ongoing coaching, and sustained professional development rather than simple awareness of the practices themselves.

The studies suggest that HLPs are most effective when implemented as an integrated cycle in which collaboration informs assessment, assessment guides instruction, and progress monitoring shapes future instructional decisions. Schools that invest in structured professional learning, protected collaboration time, and evidence-based instructional practices are better positioned to provide meaningful educational opportunities for students with disabilities. As inclusive education continues to expand, High-Leverage Practices offer educators a practical and research-supported framework for improving both academic performance and equitable participation across diverse learning environments.

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Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

By Carrie Whitsell and Zuniga

Due to the growing number of students diagnosed with ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), gaining a deeper understanding of ADHD is essential for raising awareness, reducing stigma, and enhancing support for those affected by the disorder. ADHD can impact various aspects of life, including academic achievement, social interactions, and daily activities. The more we learn about ADHD, the earlier diagnoses can be made, access to treatment can improve, and overall quality of life can be achieved. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, meaning it changes how the brain works and develops. It affects parts of the brain responsible for executive functions, such as planning, organizing time, maintaining focus, managing impulses, and regulating emotions. (Courtesy of MedlinePlus from the National Library of Medicine). Before 1994, this disorder was called ADD (attention deficit disorder); today, it is known as ADHD and mainly involves inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), 2024).

Children and adults with ADHD have trouble managing their emotions and executive functioning. They may impulsively react to situations and, when frustrated, struggle to find ways to calm themselves. They may also rush through their work and make careless mistakes. ADHD also affects students' academic performance by making it difficult for them to recall lessons. Students with ADHD often face challenges related to working memory, impacting their ability to remember details, follow instructions, and maintain focus. Organization is also a significant concern because individuals with ADHD struggle with prioritizing or writing down assignments

and adhering to deadlines. To support the learning and executive functioning skills of students with ADHD, targeted instructional strategies and evidence-based interventions are necessary. The following evidence-based interventions will provide students with ADHD with the best support possible in the classroom and beyond.

Evidence-Based Interventions

Organizational Skills Training

This intervention may help students with ADHD develop organizational, time management, and planning skills to address challenges at school. Students with ADHD who may have executive function deficits often struggle with organizational skills, leading to task delays, frustration, and decreased motivation. Additionally, calendars and planners, visual reminders, such as timers, can support effective time management. Kuzma (2012) developed a visual tool to assist students with disabilities in planning their homework, thereby enhancing focus and motivation when parental support is unavailable.

The study by Abikoff et al. (2013) evaluated two behavioral interventions designed to improve organization, time management, and planning (OTMP) difficulties in children with ADHD. In a randomized controlled trial involving 158 participants, children were assigned to one of three groups: organizational skills training (OST), a performance-based intervention called PATHKO, or a wait-list control. Treatments consisted of 20 sessions over 10–12 weeks.

The results showed that the OST program was more effective than the wait-list group in several areas, including parent and teacher assessments, academic performance, and family functioning. While OST was rated higher than PATHKO by parents, PATHKO also performed better than the control group in most areas, except for academic proficiency. Notably, 60% of

participants in both OST and PATHKO no longer showed signs of OTMP impairments, compared to just 3% of the control group. Both treatments provided lasting benefits. Overall, Abikoff et al. (2013) suggest that these programs can lead to significant and long-term improvements for children with ADHD who struggle with organization.

Behavioral Classroom Management

This evidence-based intervention aims to support students' positive behaviors in the classroom. Behavior management utilizes evidence-based strategies, such as rewards and reinforcers, that effectively enhance student behavior and improve the overall classroom environment. By consistently implementing positive reinforcement, teachers can encourage desired behaviors and reduce the occurrence of misbehavior. Epstein et al. (2008) show that when students receive frequent positive reinforcement for demonstrating expected behaviors, they are more likely to internalize these actions, resulting in lasting changes in their behavior.

According to Epstein et al. (2008), modeling the desired behavior is also crucial because it provides clear examples for students to imitate. Establishing routines is supported by evidence showing that structured environments can reduce anxiety and uncertainty, which often leads to disruptive behavior. Moreover, utilizing visual tools like reminders or charts is excellent for visual learners who need a concrete guide to expectations and keep key guidelines prominent in their awareness.

Behavior-Specific Praise

This strategy is one of the most successful and influential in the classroom. Villeda et al. (2016) suggest that behavior-specific praise (BSP) provides students with specific, positive verbal feedback indicating approval of social or academic behavior (e.g., "Great job being quiet,

Joel"). It is an evidence-based classroom management strategy that improves student behavior by communicating to students what they are doing correctly. According to DuPaul et al. (2014), teachers can reduce minor disruptive behaviors (e.g., pencil tapping) by ignoring them. However, it's important to note that neglecting minor behaviors may sometimes escalate to more disruptive actions (e.g., shouting out) because students aren't receiving the attention they seek and haven't been offered a socially acceptable replacement.

Clear Expectations

By establishing clear expectations, teachers can support students with ADHD more effectively and proactively address students' behavioral needs by establishing a supportive classroom climate guided by positive behavior expectations. What this looks like in the classroom is giving clear and consistent verbal and non-verbal directions for expectations before the teacher begins an activity or a transition in the classroom. According to Lane et al. (2024), "Teachers can also teach students to monitor and reflect on their own behavior and provide feedback using behavior ratings that are aligned with clear behavior expectations" (p. 8). Thus, students can begin to monitor their progress, keep track of their success, and be in control of the outcome if they are working toward a reinforcer or a behavior reward. Clear expectations can also help students who may be exposed to trauma who have ADHD, as trust bonds are built between the teacher and the student when the student knows what to expect.

Peer Leader

When given the opportunity to be a peer leader in the classroom, students with ADHD can actively participate in the learning and are able to stay focused. Earning a peer leader role may also help students with ADHD stay on task and grow in their behavioral goals. Students

with ADHD who take on the role of peer leader may feel more confident and secure in the classroom setting, which also enhances their ability to focus and stay on task. What this looks like in the classroom is giving a student with ADHD the opportunity to read directions on an activity, pass out materials, collect finished work after a lesson is complete, or even participate in a small group during parts of a lesson. According to Zeigler Dendy, children with ADHD may thrive with an increase in class participation by teaching them strategies “that work to establish a supportive, structured classroom that will encourage learning, enforce discipline, and boost self-esteem” (2025). Peer leader is a strategy that promotes self-esteem and self-confidence in students with ADHD.

Peer Work and Peer Helper

Peer work provides a unique opportunity to teach communication skills to children with ADHD, an area where they often struggle. It can serve as an effective behavior intervention to help children with ADHD stay on-task, maintain focus, and improve their communication skills. Peer work allows students to practice these skills and use them effectively, channeling their energy into engaging with an activity and a peer. According to Tustin (2020), peer work and being a peer helper also give children with ADHD the chance to ask as many questions as they need, without the possible embarrassment of asking in front of the entire class. In the classroom, this can look like buddy reading, partnering children with ADHD with peer learners for project work, and giving children with ADHD the opportunity to choose a partner who will support and help them stay on-task.

Conclusion

As the education community becomes more aware of the evidence-based practices that support learners with ADHD, it is clear that strategies have been improving effectiveness in the classroom over the past decade. Practices such as organizational skills training, behavioral classroom management, behavior-specific praise, clear expectations, peer leader, and peer work/helpers have demonstrated significant and lasting improvements for learners with ADHD. Behavioral interventions that are effective in the classroom not only benefit students with disabilities but can also transform the learning environment for all students. As Lane et al. (2024) shared, “Behavioral interventions can help students learn self-regulation skills, contributing both to their individual education success and to the success of their peers in the classroom” (p. 1). When children with disabilities receive the appropriate accommodations and strategic support tailored to their needs, they are provided with the truly least restrictive environment, allowing them to reach their full potential and bring about lasting positive change for all learners.

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