



Building Inclusive Classrooms for Special Education Students

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Leverage assistive technology and one-to-one device programs for a cost-effective intervention to increase inclusion. Administrators at **District A** and **District E** use their one-to-one device programs to help increase inclusion for special education students. Specifically, students benefit from technological tools such as text-to-speech readers that provide adaptations for students with unique learning needs. Contacts at District A note that assistive technology allows special education students to integrate into general education classrooms without the need for costly additional staff members.

Use co-teaching methods for special education students in the general education classroom to increase academic achievement. All profiled districts offer some form of co-teaching to provide additional support for special education students in the general education classroom. **District A** and **District E** have special education teachers in the classroom alongside general education teachers. To provide less expensive support, both **District B** and **District C** offer one-to-one aides or special education teaching assistants to students requiring additional attention in the general education classroom.

Provide individualized social-emotional learning (SEL) services for special education students with the greatest need. Contacts at **District C** believe that districts should supply SEL services for special education students in the general education classroom, so that they can practice these skills with their general education peers. However, for students with significant social-emotional needs, all profiled districts provide alternative options outside the general education classroom. The Community Outreach Program for Education (COPE) at **District B** offers both academic and SEL support services for special education students outside the general education classroom.

Include general education teachers when developing service models for special education students. The complex legal framework of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process often leaves general education teachers feeling intimidated and disenfranchised. General education teachers lack understanding about their responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Administrators at **District B** and **District E** recommend providing basic training on the IEP process to general education teachers to alleviate any confusion with this process. Including general education teachers more fully in the IEP process allows them to better serve special education students in inclusive classroom environments.

Offer inclusion-based professional development opportunities for both general education and special education teachers to increase faculty-wide support for inclusionary practices. At **District B**, a board-certified behavioral analyst conducts monthly social skills trainings for teachers. These optional professional development trainings address topics such as behavioral reinforcement and improving communication skills. These trainings help teachers develop more inclusive general education classrooms. Due to the voluntary nature of these programs, administrators at District B rely on the support of school-level leaders to maximize teacher attendance. Special education administrators at **District A** lead mandatory professional development sessions about once every three months on topics such as integration of SEL practices into curricula.

2) The Individual Education Program (IEP) Process

Benefits of Inclusion

Inclusive Practices Increase Academic Achievement for Special Education Students

Inclusive practices benefit not just special education students, but also the broader school community by increasing academic achievement and fostering a supportive classroom environment. Teachers, both in general and special education, improve through collaborating and exchanging information about instructional activities and teaching strategies.¹ General education students develop an appreciation for the unique abilities of all their peers, irrespective of formal disability labels. In other words, inclusive practices create an environment where all students can feel a part of the classroom community, regardless of disability.²

Research shows that special education students learn best from general education teachers, as opposed to less qualified staff (i.e., teaching assistants, paraprofessionals).³ Contacts at **District D** explain that, often, general education teachers view aides as the main instructors for special education students in the general education classroom. To increase academic achievement for special education students, general education teachers must feel the same responsibility to serve these students as they do their general education students.

Administrators at **District C** note that incorporating inclusive practices in schools has had financial benefits as well. Special education students receive alternative placements outside of the district when their local school district cannot meet student needs. When special education students require alternative placement, district funding (allocated on a per-pupil basis) decreases as a result. By providing additional inclusionary supports within the district, administrators have seen gains in the district's funding as enrollment has not decreased due to lack of resources for special education students.

Special Education Populations at Profiled Districts

District	Percentage of Students Identified as Special Education Students
District A	8.8 percent
District B	13 percent
District C	10 percent
District D	9 percent
District E	11 percent

Including General Education Teachers

Provide a Formal Role for General Education Teachers in the IEP Process to Align Inclusionary Resources with Student Needs

Traditionally, special education operated independently due to complex legal requirements, processes, and paperwork that confused general education teachers. However, recent research highlights the importance of encouraging collaboration

¹ *Inclusive Practices*. Pennsylvania Department of Education. <http://www.charterarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Inclusive-Practices.pdf>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Addressing the Paraprofessional Dilemma in an Inclusive School*. Michawel Giangreco. University of Vermont. <https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Center-on-Disability-and-Community-Inclusion/Giangreco31303.pdf>

across general and special education through inclusionary practices.⁴ The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legally requires special education students receive instruction with general education students unless the nature or severity of their disability requires individual instruction outside a traditional classroom setting.

The IEP process determines the appropriate support services to maximize inclusion for students. As part of this process, general education teachers must know how to advocate for the support they require to serve students of all abilities in their classrooms. However, contacts at **District B**, **District C**, and **District E** note that general education teachers do not feel empowered to participate actively in the IEP process due to the unfamiliar legal complexities of the IEP framework.

Administrators at **District C** initiated an inclusion-focused shift among their staff by instituting a more holistic IEP process that includes general education teachers more fully. Through this shift, general education teachers became more active and collaborative participants in meetings. General education teachers helped develop service delivery models, which increased their investment in the performance of special education students. This model set the precedent that general education teachers hold primary responsibility for helping special education students succeed academically.

When shifting to this new model, administrators at District C held information sessions for parents, special education staff, and building administrators to prepare them for the shift. In addition, administrators held professional development meetings for parents and teachers to outline the improved outcomes that come with increased participation by general education teachers.

⁴ "5 Benefits of Inclusion Classrooms". Understood.org. <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/5-benefits-of-inclusion-classrooms>

3) Implementing Inclusive Support Services

Inclusive Academic Support

Leverage Assistive Technology to Increase Inclusion in General Education Classrooms

Assistive technology provides a low-cost and minimally disruptive opportunity for districts to increase inclusion in the classroom for special education students. Administrators at **District A** and **District E** leverage their districts' one-to-one technology programs to equip special education students with technological tools, such as text-to-speech readers, that provide in-classroom adaptations for their unique learning needs.

At District A, the one-to-one program provides all district middle and high school students with a personal technology device. The district provides Google ChromeBooks to their middle school students and MacBook Air laptop computers to their high school students.

At District E, all students receive Google ChromeBooks. Administrators also note that their one-to-one technology program provides an opportunity to build independence in the classroom for special needs students. Through assistive technology, special education students can self-serve rather than depending on support from a teacher or aide. For example, a student might utilize text-to-speech software to participate in class discussions rather than requiring an aide to communicate.

EAB's report [1:1 Computing Programs](#) explores one-to-one programs at eight school districts. Topics include device selection, program implementation, policies for one-to-one programs, and professional development to support one-to-one initiatives.

The Inclusive Benefits of One-to-One Programs

Expand the accessibility of the curriculum for special education students by adapting technology to student needs.

Build independence for special education students to participate in the classroom without the need for additional staff.

Foster social acceptance for special education students by minimizing discrepancies in technology use.



Increase classroom participation and improve the academic achievement of special education students.

Although special education improvements may not have been the initial goal of these programs, administrators at District A note that assistive technology allows special education students to integrate into general education classrooms without the need for costly additional staff members. In addition, the ubiquity of one-to-one devices in the classroom at both districts allows students requiring accommodations to blend in seamlessly with their peers.

Provide Additional Staff Members in General Education Classrooms to Differentiate Instruction for Special Education Students

Differentiated instruction (i.e., providing all students within the classroom with unique avenues for understanding new information) provides benefits for all students, regardless of disability. All profiled districts use co-teaching models to provide this individualized instruction to best serve special education students within the general education classroom.

Administrators at **District D** evaluate the success of their co-teaching program through assessments taken every trimester. Contacts observe significant improvements in assessment scores across math and reading for special education students in co-taught classrooms.

Administrators at **District D** saw compelling academic and behavioral improvements when special education students moved from a special day class (i.e., a self-contained class which provides services to students with intensive needs that cannot be met by the general education program) to a general education classroom.⁵ The district piloted co-teaching in their preschools and middle schools last year and intends to expand their co-teaching model to students in kindergarten through second grade.




Administrators at **District A** use co-teaching models for upper elementary, middle, and high school students, though contacts note that services provided differ from school to school based on available resources. For example, at one district elementary school, a special education teacher provides co-teaching for upper elementary students. The special education teacher works directly with the general education teachers to modify the curriculum and deliver the content tailored for special education students in the general education classroom.

Special education teachers at **District B** also partner with general education teachers to provide in-classroom support to students with special needs. To further assist students with physical disabilities, these students also have one-to-one aides that travel with them throughout the day.

Administrators at **District E** credit their co-teaching practices, which reduce the staff-to-student ratio, with increased academic achievement for special education students. Co-teaching models (e.g., station teaching, alternate teaching, parallel teaching) allow teachers to serve the unique needs of special education students within the general education classroom.

⁵ "Special Education Terms and Definitions". UnderstandingSpecialEducation.com. <https://www.understandingspecialeducation.com/special-education-terms.html>

Co-Teaching Models at *District E*

	<p>Station Teaching</p> <p>Teachers set up their classrooms in two stations with each allocated staff support (e.g., a special education teacher and a general education teacher) to increase time teachers can provide to students in need. Teachers split the class into two groups and cover different topics at each station. For example, Teacher A might cover vocabulary while Teacher B runs a reading comprehension exercise.</p>
	<p>Alternate Teaching</p> <p>One staff member works directly with students requiring additional support on the class material, while the primary teacher continues progressing through new content. These interventions take place inside the general education classroom to minimize disruption. For example, Teacher A might review the previous day's work with struggling students while Teacher B progresses to new material.</p>
	<p>Parallel Teaching</p> <p>Two teachers working in one general education classroom divide students into two groups. Both staff members teach the same content, but the smaller student-teacher ratio allows students to ask more questions and get more one-on-one support. For example, Teacher A and Teacher B both lead identical small-group discussions on course material.</p>

Require Robust Training for Teaching Aides to Ensure Quality Instruction for Special Education Students

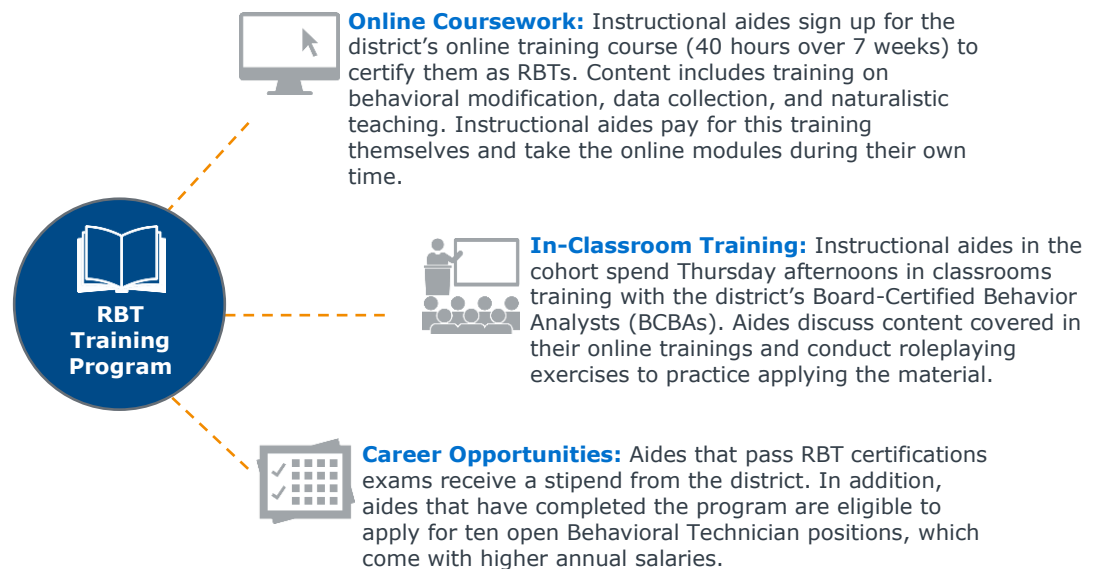
Teaching assistants, who face less stringent licensing requirements (e.g., less required education) than traditional special education teachers, are a cost-effective alternative to provide one-to-one support or co-teaching for students with more significant special needs. However, if not provided proper training, employing aides in the classroom can harm student achievement. Contacts at **District D** note that, rather than increasing inclusion, using untrained one-to-one aides typically ends up isolating special education students in the back of the general education classroom.

Administrators at **District C** and District D provide one-to-one aides to serve students requiring intensive individual support in the general education classroom. State departments of education do not require formal training for aides, instead only mandating that they possess a high school diploma. This leaves local school districts responsible for determining the quality and depth of professional development and training.

Contacts at District C provide both special education teachers and approximately 100 special education teaching assistants to serve their 7,200 students. Administrators train these teaching assistants on the benefits of integrating special education students into the general education classroom and providing these students with individualized services. The district offers both mandatory and optional professional development trainings for their special education staff. Administrators note that financial incentives motivate attendance at optional professional development trainings, as the district offers a special rate of compensation for special education teaching assistants who attend.

Administrators at District D note that there is an expectation in the district that all students with an IEP in general education classrooms receive a one-to-one instructional aide. This district has 47 one-to-one aides to serve approximately 520 students with IEPs. Contacts report that students receive all of their instruction from their aides, rather than learning from the general education teacher. Contacts are implementing an online training program for instructional aides to certify them as Registered Behavioral Technicians (RBTs), with the goal of replacing one-to-one aides with RBTs to serve multiple students in the general classroom.

Registered Behavioral Technician Training at *District D*



Offer Additional Academic Services for Students Requiring Separate Instruction

Administrators at all profiled districts note the need for alternative accommodations for special education students with the most intensive needs. If an IEP determines that a student needs a separate classroom, all profiled districts will transport those students to the schools in the district offering these more intensive resources.

While **District D** is moving towards a co-teaching model, contacts note that currently all elementary and high school special education students are educated in special day classes. However, district contacts caution that they have seen special education students in special day classes regress academically.

At **District A**, younger elementary special education students receive most of their instruction outside the general education classroom—either at their own elementary school or at another district elementary school, depending on resource availability. Contacts note that younger special education students need to master the basic skills of absorbing and comprehending material before integrating into general education classrooms, which have more distractions. Students learn these skills best when provided with individualized or small-group instruction.

Incorporate Social-Emotional Learning into the General Education Curriculum to Build More Inclusive Classrooms

Administrators at both **District A** and **District E** build social-emotional learning (SEL) practices into their academic curricula. Integrating SEL practices into the general education classroom provides myriad benefits for both special education and general education students. General education students can model appropriate behavior management while learning to be more tolerant of their special education peers. Special education students gain valuable experience communicating and making connections with their peers. By building empathy and communication skills through SEL practices, administrators can contribute to a more inclusive environment by teaching students to be understanding of differences.⁶

District E provides a comprehensive SEL curriculum for all students, regardless of disability. Administrators provide this curriculum through dedicated lessons and by embedding SEL practices into academic content. For example, a social studies lesson might also discuss sharing perspectives across cultures. These SEL lessons teach students to make and maintain relationships with others, which fosters a culture of understanding in the classroom. Contacts note that their goal is for every lesson to have both an academic content message and a SEL message. Integrating SEL practices into the general education curriculum also minimizes the burden on general education teachers by reducing the amount of specialized SEL support they must provide to special education students.

Beyond the academic curriculum, administrators at District E also train support staff on SEL best practices. Administrators identified building leaders who provide professional development trainings on SEL best practices to their colleagues, such as the paraprofessionals who work with special education students in general education classrooms. The paraprofessionals can then supplement SEL skill-building support in the general education classroom.

Provide SEL Services Outside the Classroom for Students Who Need Individualized Support

Contacts at **District C** recommend providing SEL services in the general education classroom so that special education students can practice these skills with their general education peers. However, administrators at all profiled districts offer individualized instruction on SEL practices to special education students with the greatest need.

While the district primarily integrates SEL into the general education classroom, administrators at District C do provide small-group or individual instruction for students with significant SEL needs. Administrators believe that these students benefit from receiving SEL support away from the distractions of a general education classroom. The district also maintains separate areas outside the classroom for sensory breaks, allowing students who need opportunities to self-regulate to engage in movement-focused activities (e.g., jumping jacks, animal crawls, therapy balls). Contacts note that these sensory rooms are available to all students, regardless of disability.

At **District E**, contacts provide pull-out SEL services for both special education and general education students who need intensive support building SEL skills. Administrators note that the IEP process determines what SEL services (e.g., one-to-

⁶ *Social Emotional Learning and Inclusion in Schools*. Laura Sokal and Jennifer Katz. Oxford Research. <http://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-146>

one support, modified assessment) will meet the needs of each special education student.

The Community Outreach Program for Education (COPE) at **District B** provides both academic and SEL support services for special education students with the greatest social-emotional needs. The IEP team determines student eligibility for the COPE program, as well as how much time each student spends in COPE classrooms versus the general education classroom. Once placed in the COPE program, students receive a behavioral intervention plan that is reviewed and modified every four to six weeks by the IEP team.

Community Outreach Program for Education (COPE) at *District B*

Pull-Out Model

Students in the COPE program receive either full- or half-day instruction outside the general education classroom. Successful students can also check in and out of the COPE classroom in the mornings before entering their general education classroom.

Transportation

The district offers COPE services at two elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Students whose IEPs recommend COPE services are reassigned full-time to schools that offer them.

Mental Health Interventions

There are licensed practicing counselors and licensed clinical social workers available onsite. The district also partners with psychiatrists from Duke University to provide mental health services and counseling free of charge to students in need.

Academic and SEL Support

Students in the COPE program often receive most of their academic instruction outside their general education classroom. In addition, a licensed clinical social worker or licensed practicing counselor provides SEL trainings on topics like anger management and building coping skills.

Administrators at District B can measure some programmatic success from COPE via students' ability to re-enter general education classrooms. However, contacts note this is not an accurate measure of success for all students. For some students, additional challenges outside of their noted disability (e.g. family instability, homelessness, mental illness) make it impossible for them to ever re-enter general education classrooms. Contacts emphasize that programs can still be successful even if students don't exit, such as by providing free and accessible mental health services for those that would otherwise not be served.

4) Gaining Faculty Support for Inclusive Practices

Faculty Development

Provide Training to General Education Teachers on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process to Increase Participation

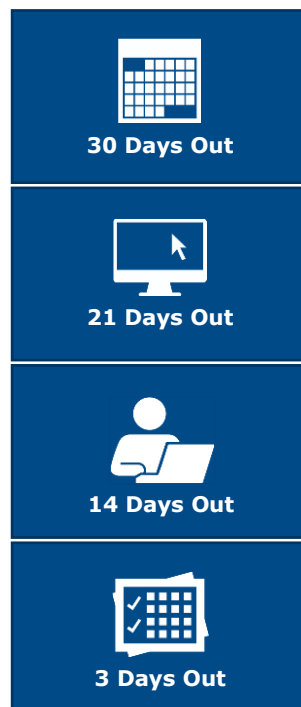
Administrators at all profiled districts emphasize including general education teachers when developing service models for special education students. This ensures that inclusionary support services exist within the parameters of the general education classroom. **District B, District C, and District E** all provide various degrees of training for general education teachers on the IEP process.

Administrators at District B and District E recommend providing basic mandatory training for general education teachers on the purpose of an IEP and their responsibilities during the IEP process. In addition, contacts note the importance of providing an overview of various characteristics of students with disabilities for general education teachers. These administrators explain that with this added context, general education teachers can participate more actively in inclusionary service delivery.

District B currently offers online module trainings via Canvas for their general education teachers, however, contacts believe that this training needs to be more robust. Administrators clarify that, ideally, this professional development would take place on-site, with a facilitator leading formal content training on the role of the IEP, data collection, and characteristics of different disability groups.

Sample IEP Planning Guide for General Education Teachers from District A

Time to IEP Meeting



Tasks to be Completed

- Send home Notice of Meeting and Parent Rights.
- Request feedback from general education teachers.
- Secure required attendance at IEP meeting from district administrators and the general education teacher.
- Read last two IEPs or evaluations.
- Gather progress data through assessments, teacher comments, and student interviews.
- Draft and write the IEP, send home for parental review.
- Get parental feedback on the draft and incorporate if possible.
- Alert administrators to any potential problems.

Incorporate General Education Teachers into Professional Development Opportunities Around Building Inclusion

Administrators at all profiled districts provide professional development opportunities on best practices in inclusion (e.g., communication skills, service delivery) for both special education and general education teachers. Through these trainings, general education teachers build the skills necessary to facilitate the inclusion of special education students into the classroom.

At **District B**, a board-certified behavioral analyst conducts monthly social skills trainings for teachers. These optional professional development trainings address topics such as behavioral reinforcement or improving communication skills. These trainings help teachers develop more inclusive general education classrooms. Due to the voluntary nature of these programs, administrators at District B rely on the support of school-level leaders to maximize teacher attendance at these valuable trainings.

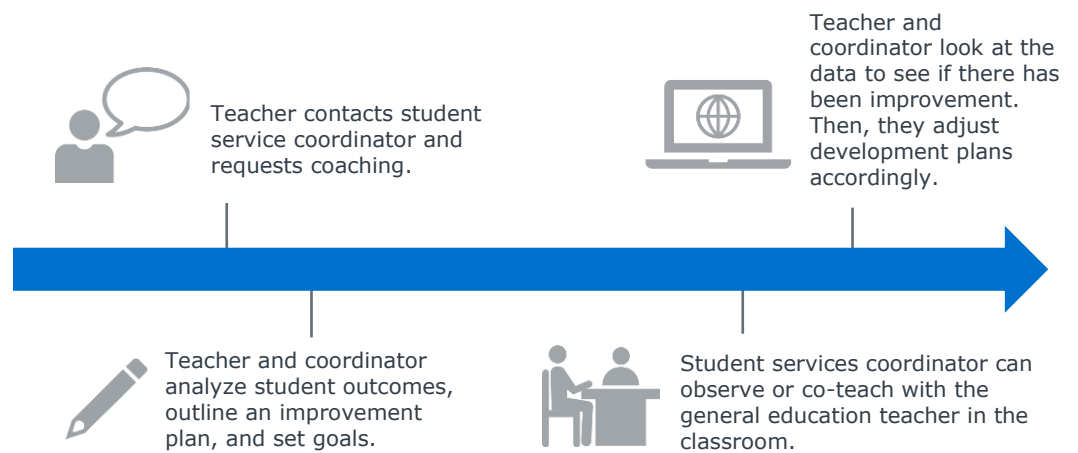
Special education administrators at **District A** lead mandatory professional development sessions about once every three months for all teachers working with special education students. Sessions cover topics such as integration of SEL practices into reading comprehension lessons and best practices in service delivery for special education students.

Funding for professional development at **District E** comes from grants specific to the IDEA.

Administrators at **District E** reorganized their district to provide more resources for their student service coordinators. These student service coordinators provide coaching for general education and special education teachers on instruction strategies and inclusive practices for special education students. Teachers voluntarily request coaching, however, school administrators can require general education teachers meet with a coach based on results of teacher evaluations.

After conducting an achievement gap analysis for all district schools, district-level administrators at District E distributed student service coordinators based on need. If a school qualifies as an "impact school" (i.e., the schools with the highest achievement gap between general education and special education students), they receive a full-time student services coordinator. The rest of the district's schools share a part-time coordinator who serves two to three schools several days a week.

Coaching Process led by Student Service Coordinators at *District E*



The coaching process typically takes around six weeks, however, timelines vary based on individual teacher need. Teachers can repeat the coaching process as often as

necessary. Collaboration between the teacher and coordinator takes place during common planning time. Administrators at District E see benefits from embedding this professional development into the daily workflow of their teachers, as it provides consistent reinforcement and the opportunity for iterative learning when implementing new inclusive practices. Contacts explain that teachers enjoy the opportunity to work with coordinators, and actively pursue this professional development opportunity.

Collaboration

Build Collaborative Partnerships Between General Education and Special Education Teachers

Administrators at all profiled districts provide opportunities for collaboration between general education and special education teachers. Contacts across profiled districts report that building collaborative planning time into school schedules creates strong partnerships between general education and special education teachers and allows them to provide optimal service for students.

Instead of training their special education teachers to serve students based on specific needs (e.g., students with autism), administrators at **District C** see benefits from training their special education teachers to serve at specific grade levels. Through this model, special education teachers understand the nuances of grade-level curricula and can help modify curricula to fit individual students' needs. In addition, grade-level service teams (i.e., teams of grade-specific general education and special education teachers) provide additional opportunities for collaborative planning for special education and general education teachers.

4) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What methods do contact districts employ to accurately identify students for special education programs?
- How do contact districts align services with identified student needs?
- What percentage of contact districts' student populations do students in special education programs compose?
- How do contact districts deliver special education instruction?
- What academic support services do contact districts offer students in special education programs to increase their inclusion in general education classrooms?
- What social-emotional support services do contact districts offer students in special education programs to help increase their inclusion in general education classrooms?
- How do contact districts leverage Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to improve special education students' academic achievement?
- To which components of special education programs do contact districts attribute program success?
- What are the most cost-effective opportunities for contact districts in providing special education services?
- How have practices aimed at increased inclusion bridged the achievement gap between special education students and general education students at contact districts?
- How do contact districts measure the effectiveness of inclusionary practices?
- What professional development opportunities do contact districts provide general education teachers to prepare them to work with special education students?
- What professional development opportunities do contact districts provide to special education teachers to increase inclusion for students in these programs?
- How do contact districts fund professional development programs aimed at increasing inclusion for students in special education programs?
- What types of formal trainings do contact districts provide for teachers that address socio-emotional needs for students?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed district-level administrators who oversee special education programs at middle-income, suburban districts.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Enrollment
District A	Midwest	22,680
District B	South	33,640
District C	Midwest	6,910
District D	Pacific West	5,130
District E	Midwest	16,710