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ESSENTIAL BEST PRACTICES IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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When students with disabilities are provided appropriate instruction and supports, they can learn grade-level general education curriculum, communicate in ways that are commensurate with their same-age peers without disabilities, have meaningful social relationships, and graduate from high school—college and career ready.

Background

An Essential Best Practices document was first developed by the Institute on Disability as part of the Beyond Access model demonstration project, funded from 2002-2006 by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. At that time, the authors synthesized over 25 years of research and practice to identify inclusive educational practices that were shown to support positive school and post-school outcomes for students with significant disabilities.^{1, 2}

This version, formatted as a program improvement tool, was informed by our recent work in drop-out prevention, Response to Intervention, large scale accountability (particularly alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards), and three comprehensive syntheses that identified evidence-based instructional practices for students with autism. In addition, we conducted a targeted literature review of approximately 30 well journals for research published from 2002 – early 2012 concerning students with autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and deaf-blindness in general education settings.

Applying the current education policy context and our long history of work in inclusive education as a lens for organizing the findings, we crafted 12 categories and 112 indicators intended to support local initiatives to create inclusive school-wide reform, toward a vision of one, proactive educational system for all students. In this edition, we attempt to differentiate values or beliefs from research-based practices. Often, they are complimentary and consistent. For examples, our belief that there should not be places or programs just for students with significant disabilities aligns well with education science and policy recommendations for response to intervention or multi-tiered systems of support. These school-wide reform models aid in creating schools where all students may receive individualized instruction or intervention – regardless of qualifying for special education services.

Using the Essential Best Practices in Inclusive Schools Tool

This tool might be used in a variety of ways by families and professionals alike. For example:

- Superintendents might use the tool as a guide for working with staff to develop their individual professional development plans or a local school improvement plan.
- A teacher might organize a reflective practice or study group to study the best practices in the tool and then support one another to design and evaluate lessons that are inclusive of diverse learners.

¹ Students with significant disabilities are those with labels such as autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness who need intensive supports in order to be fully participating members of typical classrooms in their neighborhood schools.

² The earlier document had been adapted with permission of copyright holder Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. from *The Beyond Access Model: Promoting Membership, Participation, and Learning for Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom*.

- School board members might organize a study committee comprised of community members to consider how closely their schools implement the highlighted practices.
- Principals might assemble a task force of staff and community members to use the tool to conduct a self-assessment of their current school practices, followed by the development of a multi-year school improvement plan.
- Parents might share the tool with their child’s educational team to discuss program strengths and those that need improvement.
- A speech-language pathologist might share the tool with his or her supervisor to begin a discussion of how to change the current service delivery model to be more classroom-based.
- A legislator or state department employee might use the tool to guide the review of current educational standards in general and special education teacher certification.
- Students might use the tool as a springboard for discussion in a youth group dedicated to eradicating racism and other forms of social injustice in their schools.

Regardless of your role—student, parent/ guardian, educator, related service provider, administrator, or community member—we hope that you use this tool to not only advance your own knowledge, but to take action to improve the lives of your students and their families.

High Expectations and Least Dangerous Assumption

The inherent value and dignity of students with disabilities is respected. All students with disabilities pursue the same learner outcomes as students without disabilities. When students do not currently demonstrate content knowledge or skills, the least dangerous assumption of presuming competence applies, and all aspects of their educational programs continue to reflect high expectations.

Indicators

- ❑ All students are presumed competent to communicate about and learn general education academic content based on common cores state standards when they are provided with high quality, accurate, and consistent supports.
- ❑ Language regarding students’ perceived functioning or developmental level is not used as the primary descriptor; rather, student descriptions are contextualized and strengths-based, focusing on abilities and support needs.
- ❑ Predictions are not made that students will “never” acquire certain knowledge or skills.
- ❑ People speak directly to students rather than through a paraprofessional or other person.
- ❑ People use age-appropriate materials, vocabulary, and inflection when talking to students.
- ❑ Annual goals on students’ IEPs reflect common core state standards and functional skills necessary for full participation in school and life in the community after high school.
- ❑ In order to respect privacy, personnel discuss students’ personal care, medical needs, and other sensitive issues out of earshot of other students, and only with those who need to know.

General Education Class Membership and Full Participation

Students with disabilities are welcomed members of age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools. There are no programs or rooms just for students with disabilities and these students have access to the full range of learning experiences and environments offered to students without disabilities.

Indicators

- ❑ Students attend the school they would attend if they didn't have a disability.
- ❑ Students with disabilities are proportionally represented in classes, courses, clubs, extracurricular activities, and community service.
- ❑ The student is an equal member of an age-appropriate general education class.
- ❑ Students name is on all class lists, group lists put on the board, job lists, and so forth.
- ❑ Students in classroom and school routines – such as the Pledge of Allegiance, lunch count, jobs, errands, eating lunch in the cafeteria, changing classes, and so forth – in typical locations and at the same times as classmates without disabilities.
- ❑ Students receive accessible print and other learning materials in accessible formats, at the same time those materials are provided to students without disabilities.
- ❑ Students participate in classroom instruction in similar ways as students without disabilities; for example:
 - whole class discussions
 - at the board
 - in small groups
 - when called on by the teacher
- ❑ Students ride the same school bus as their peers without disabilities, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- ❑ Students transition between classes alongside their peers without disabilities, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- ❑ Students progress through the grades according to the same pattern as students without disabilities.
- ❑ Students learn in outside-of-school, age-appropriate, and inclusive environments *before* the age of 18 only when such instruction is the norm for typical students.
- ❑ Related services and specialized instruction are provided within the typical routines of a school day in addition to, not in place of, core general academic and behavioral instruction.
- ❑ Related services are delivered primarily through multi-tiered instruction and consultation in the classroom, or prior to or after the school day.

- ❑ The school is physically accessible and/or accommodations are arranged so that students and other individuals with mobility challenges have full access to all opportunities within the school building.
- ❑ The school accommodates students' sensory and health care needs.

Quality Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Students unable to communicate in ways commensurate to their same age classmates are provided with assistive technology such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Accurate and reliable AAC supports and services are provided to enable them to communicate about the content of the academic curriculum, participate in the academic instruction and in social situations with adults, same age classmates, family members, and others.

Indicators

- ❑ Students are provided with supports to develop symbolic language and have a means to communicate (speak, read, write, listen) all the time.
- ❑ Students are provided with supports to communicate for a variety of purposes including requesting, commenting, asking questions, answering questions, and expressing ideas, emotions, wants, and needs.
- ❑ Although students may have multiple ways of communicating, a primary means of communication is identified and understood by others.
- ❑ Students' communication systems include messages to demonstrate learning of age-appropriate core academics, commensurate with their age-appropriate classmates.
- ❑ Students' communication systems include messages for social communication that promote their participation in school and community extracurricular activities with peers without disabilities.
- ❑ Students' communication systems include "core" vocabulary (pronouns, action verbs, helping verbs, etc.) that promote language and literacy development and efficient communication.
- ❑ AAC systems and supports are provided to enable students to communicate for the purposes of self-determination and futures planning.
- ❑ AAC systems and supports take into consideration the communicative functions of challenging behavior.
- ❑ Students, their family members, and classmates without disabilities participate in the selection of messages to be included in the AAC system.
- ❑ When acting as a facilitator, people clearly engage in a support role, not actively participating in the content of the interaction between students using AAC and their conversational partners.

- ❑ When conversing with students as a conversational partner, classmates and adults utilize information provided by facilitators to converse directly with students themselves, not with the facilitator.
- ❑ Training and support to use the AAC system is provided to students in the contexts and routines in which students will communicate.
- ❑ Training and support to use the AAC system is provided to the team, including classmates, in the contexts and routines in which students will communicate.
- ❑ A variety of funding sources and streams (Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance, school funding, etc.) are utilized to acquire and maintain assistive technology and AAC systems, and to support training of students, their family, classmates, and support personnel.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Supports

Curriculum and instruction are designed to accommodate the full range of student diversity based on universal design principles. Individualized supports are provided to students with significant disabilities to enable them to fully participate and make progress within the general education curriculum. Students learn functional or life skills within typical routines in the general education classroom or other inclusive activities and environments.

Indicators

Curriculum is...

- ❑ Based on common core state standards for all students.
- ❑ Presented in a variety of accessible formats including written information at appropriate reading levels, and using multiple, symbolic representations (e.g., video, picture/symbols, actual objects, demonstrations, orally, etc.).

Instruction...

- ❑ Is universally designed with multiple options for representation, presentation, and engagement.
- ❑ Reflects the learning styles of all students in the class by the use of visual, tactile, and kinesthetic materials and experiences.
- ❑ Prioritizes the use of research-based strategies for increasing student achievement, such as:
 - Setting objectives and providing feedback
 - Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
 - Cooperative learning
 - Cues, questions, and advance organizers
 - Nonlinguistic representations
 - Summarizing and note taking
 - Homework and practice
 - Identifying similarities and differences
 - Generating and testing hypotheses
- ❑ Is provided in a variety of routines such as individual, pairs, small groups, and whole class.

- ❑ When students do not make progress within core academic instruction a variety of interventions are used to supplement that instruction and enhance student learning.

Supports...

Student supports are identified and provided to enhance social and academic participation in general education classrooms and other inclusive settings. Culturally responsive and contextually well-fit supports allow for a sense of equity and interdependence. Supports are "only as special as necessary" (Giangreco, 1996) and prioritize natural supports (Nisbet, 1992).

- ❑ Supports are provided within the general education class and other typical environments to enable students to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum and other inclusive learning opportunities and activities.
- ❑ Supports are defined by a student support plan, and may include: physical, emotional, and sensory supports; adapted materials; assistive technology and AAC; personalized performance demonstrations; personalized instruction; and individualized grading and evaluation plans.
- ❑ Whenever possible, physical, emotional, and instructional supports are provided by the typical cadre of "experts" within natural environments -- classroom teachers, librarians, classmates, office personnel, cafeteria staff, and volunteers.
- ❑ Peer supports are reciprocal. Students have the opportunity to provide support and assistance to others as well as to receive it.
- ❑ Supports related to challenging behavior are consistent with a schoolwide positive behavior philosophy.
- ❑ Challenging behavior that is not adequately addressed by universal positive behavior supports are addressed after completion of a functional behavioral assessment and development of an individualized positive behavior support plan.
- ❑ Aversive interventions, restraint, and seclusion are never utilized.
- ❑ Supports related to challenging behavior take into consideration students' sensory, health, and communication needs.
- ❑ Supports related to challenging behavior focus on improving quality of life and on teaching new skills, rather than on punishment.

Ongoing Assessment and Evaluation of Learning

Members of educational teams conduct authentic, performance-based assessments within typical activities in inclusive environments for the purpose of identifying students' preferences, talents, and interests; academic knowledge and skills; and support needs in the areas of learning, communication, movement, emotion, sensory, behavior, and essential life skills. They evaluate student learning in natural contexts and settings, with accommodations that promote students' demonstration of their "best work." Progress monitoring and other formative assessments are used to inform instruction and to determine when students need intensive interventions.

Indicators

- ❑ Documentation of students' academic learning represents the full depth, breadth, and complexity of the common core state standards.
- ❑ Assessment reports reflect students' abilities and needs rather than deficits.
- ❑ If students have difficulty communicating, assessment tools and strategies are chosen accordingly and assessment results are qualified accordingly.
- ❑ Teachers and related service providers use ongoing dynamic assessments and findings from discrete, one-time assessment tools are used with caution.

Evaluation and Grading...

- ❑ Include criteria for judging success that reflects general education curriculum standards and individualized IEP goals and objectives.
- ❑ Reflect benchmarks similar to those of students without disabilities.
- ❑ Reflect evaluation methods similar to those of students without disabilities.
- ❑ Allow students to receive grades that reflect "personal best" achievement and improvement.

Family-School Partnerships

Families and schools are engaged in equitable partnership to create quality inclusive educational experiences for students with disabilities. Families are connected to resources for developing their own knowledge base, leadership and advocacy skills.

Indicators

- ❑ Family priorities are reflected in annual goals on students' IEPs.
- ❑ Families positively acknowledge educators' efforts and educators positively acknowledge families' efforts on behalf of their children.
- ❑ Families are provided with information about resources for building their own leadership and advocacy skills relative to their children's education.

- ❑ Families attend case-management meetings or curriculum planning meetings on a regular basis and during days, times, and locations convenient for families.
- ❑ Families are provided with information and referral to community based services related to healthy family functioning.

Community Partnerships

School personnel maintain purposeful, active, and positive relationships with families of their students and with the community in which they operate. Communications within the community are welcoming, visible, purposeful, and take into account diverse populations. Community agencies play a key role in providing services to students and families. They work collaboratively and share resources with the school to strengthen the comprehensive network of support.

Indicators

- ❑ School personnel actively utilize community resources to promote learning beyond the school walls and access supports for all students.
- ❑ Students with disabilities participate in community based extended learning opportunities to earn course credit alongside and in natural proportion with students without disabilities.
- ❑ When deemed appropriate, specialized health care providers are active members of student teams.
- ❑ Community agencies are routinely invited to contribute specialized expertise to support student learning.
- ❑ Community members are routinely invited to participate in the school community as student mentors, volunteers, and as experts representing their field of knowledge.

Team Collaboration

General and special education teachers, Title I staff, reading specialists, related service providers, paraprofessionals, parents and when appropriate, students themselves, demonstrate shared responsibility by collaborating in the design, implementation, and evaluation of students' educational programs and their IEPs.

Indicators

- ❑ The roles and responsibilities of all teachers and staff reflect the commitment and skills needed to teach all students, including those with disabilities.
- ❑ Special education, Title I, and other personnel work within the general education classroom as co-teachers, team-teachers, small group instructors, or one-on-one support teachers for all students in the class.
- ❑ Special education, Title I, and other personnel provide intensive instruction in other inclusive school environments.

- ❑ The roles and responsibilities of all staff reflect the supports and services that enable all students to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum.
- ❑ IEP teams meet on a regular basis – optimally once a week – to do instructional and case management planning and evaluation.
- ❑ Teams use formal processes for conducting meetings, problem-solving, making decisions, and evaluating their own effectiveness.

Friendships and Social Relationships

An essential condition for friendship is proximity. When students with disabilities are kept apart from the mainstream of school life there are few opportunities for friendships to develop between students with and without disabilities. Being welcomed members of general education classes, going to recess, eating in the cafeteria, and access to extracurricular activities are recognized as key ingredients to the formation of friendships.

Indicators

- ❑ Students with disabilities have the same variety of social networks as students without disabilities: close friends, acquaintances, students they share activities with, and so forth.
- ❑ Students with disabilities participate in the same variety of inclusive and typical extracurricular activities as students without disabilities.
- ❑ Accessible transportation and staff support are provided when necessary to enable students to successfully participate.
- ❑ School personnel are knowledgeable about the connection between social relationships and student learning outcomes and utilize intentional strategies to promote friendships.
- ❑ Schools maintain anti-bullying efforts and promote respect for diversity in all aspects of curriculum, instruction, and the overall school community.

Futures Planning, Graduation, and Transition to Adult Life

Students with disabilities are more likely to transition from school to adult life college and career ready when they have a fully inclusive educational experience. Inclusive education affords students with disabilities the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships, social networks, and social skills; experience improved academic outcomes, and explore career and post-secondary options commensurate with their nondisabled peers.

Indicators

- ❑ Students develop a high school plan of study that includes courses and other learning experiences based on regular graduation requirements.
- ❑ Students participate in senior year graduation activities and ceremonies with their classmates without disabilities.
- ❑ Graduation planning for all students includes choices of inclusive postsecondary education, career, community living, and social activities and relationships.

- ❑ Students attend college fairs, utilize guidance counseling services, and are encouraged to apply for inclusive post-secondary education commensurate with their non-disabled peers.
- ❑ Students' graduation plans are developed using the principles of person-centered planning.
- ❑ A supportive wrap-around team, including relevant community agencies, guides students' their transition from high school to inclusive post-secondary education, career, community living, and social activities and relationships.
- ❑ When chosen by students and their parents/guardians, students' educational programs include learning in non-school, age-appropriate learning environments after the age of 18 and before special education services are discontinued.
- ❑ Students receive a diploma when educational services end.

Self-Determination

"People who are self-determined are people who cause or make things happen in their own lives ... component elements include choice-making, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; goal setting and attainment skills, self-management skills; and self-advocacy and leadership skills, as well as perceptions of control and efficacy and self-awareness and knowledge." (Wehmeyer et al, 2010) Students are instructed in and provided with opportunities to develop the component elements of self-determination as part of their social and academic experiences in school. Students with disabilities may attend and direct their own IEP meetings, join organizations of their choosing, and design a post-graduation "futures plan" for fully inclusive life in the community.

Indicators

- ❑ Students identify and define goals, tasks to achieve the goals, and specify actions necessary to achieve the desired outcomes.
- ❑ The student with disabilities participates in IEP meetings from junior high through graduation.
- ❑ Opportunities for making choices are infused throughout a student's day. The choices provided are authentic and result in the student exerting meaningful control over their environment.
- ❑ Throughout their educational career, students identify and define problems, generate possible solutions, make judgments about preferred solutions, and evaluate the outcomes from their problem-solving.
- ❑ Students are taught self-advocacy skills such as how to be assertive, how to effectively communicate their perspective, how to negotiate, how to compromise, and how to deal with systems and bureaucracies.
- ❑ Students develop their understanding of their strengths, abilities, unique learning and support needs, and limitations. They utilize this understanding to maximize success and progress.

- ❑ The student communicates his or her own thoughts, needs, opinions, and wishes, independently and/or with support from augmentative communication, friends, family, and educators.
- ❑ Students identify and assess courses of action and the possible consequences of each action, choose and implement their decision, and evaluate outcomes from their decisions.
- ❑ Students set goals, develop and implement action plans to achieve goals, evaluate outcomes and change action plans accordingly.
- ❑ Perceptions of self-efficacy and control are promoted through the students' understanding of the differences between outcomes that result from ability, effort, and chance.

School Improvement

School improvement is the process that schools use to ensure all students are achieving at high levels, including students with the most significant disabilities. Successful schools are dynamic places with high expectations for everyone. Effective improvements happen intentionally and are built around goals that educators, parents, students, and community members know and support. School improvement efforts are designed to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment, addressing the social and individual barriers to learning, and eliminating tracking and cultural biases.

Indicators

- ❑ The values of diversity and inclusion are evident in the school's mission statement.
- ❑ School improvement efforts are braided to align general and special education reform and the creation of a community of learners that is inclusive of students with disabilities.
- ❑ School staff and families are provided with guidance to address issues of changing roles, feelings of incompetence and other adaptive considerations related to inclusive education implementation.
- ❑ School leaders accept and promote change as a normal and positive process that leads to continual improvement.
- ❑ The history and culture of people with disabilities is recognized as a valued part of the diversity of educational curricula and experiences. For example, people with disabilities are represented in the school curriculum (history, science, and literature).
- ❑ General and special education administrators promote the values and benefits of inclusive education during meetings, in school improvement plans or annual reports, in school newsletters or Web sites, and in conversations.
- ❑ School leaders actively support faculty, staff, and families to recognize that implementation of innovations occurs in developmental stages and that measures of fidelity of implementation assist in continuous improvement.
- ❑ School and District Leadership Teams meet regularly and are comprised of multiple stakeholders including administrators, general and special education teachers, non-school employee parents/guardians of students with and without disabilities, related service professionals, paraprofessional staff, and, when appropriate, student representation.

- ❑ Schools employ procedures to assure that instruction and assessments are administered consistently to all students and reliably measure common learning targets.
- ❑ Staff members work as teams to gather and analyze information and make decisions regarding their instructional practice for all students.
- ❑ School leaders structure decision-making so the impact on student achievement is the most important determinant of changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- ❑ On-going support is provided for all staff members and teams to refine their skills in the use of data to make decisions that affect individual students and school programs.
- ❑ Schools/districts have a system for managing data and information in order to inform decisions to improve student achievement inclusive of students with disabilities.
- ❑ Schools/districts systematically gather and use multiple sources of evidence to monitor fidelity of implementation of instruction, other school practices, and student achievement inclusive of students with disabilities.
- ❑ Fidelity of implementation measures are valued and seen to support the continuous improvement process.
- ❑ There is a collective responsibility among the entire school staff for the success of all students.

Resources

Students and teachers need adequate resources in order for optimal teaching and learning to occur. Each staff member assumes responsibility for identifying and acquiring needed resources. When staff are unable to obtain these resources after reasonable attempts, administrators are notified and they work to provide them.

The following resources are available to all staff:

- ❑ Up to date instructional technology
- ❑ Accessible texts (i.e., at a variety of reading levels, comprehension abilities, and sensory modalities)
- ❑ Materials aligned with each grade's common core standards that represent the diversity of students' reading abilities, comprehension abilities, and sensory needs
- ❑ Accessible classroom and school spaces (e.g., lab tables that are accessible to students who use wheelchairs)
- ❑ Assistive technology including augmentative and alternative communication
- ❑ Internet access
- ❑ Supplies for creating teacher-made instructional materials
- ❑ Adequate space for conducting whole class, small group, and individual instruction
- ❑ Space for staff to store materials that are catalogued to enable them to be readily located
- ❑ Space for instructional planning meetings
- ❑ Time for collaborative instructional planning
- ❑ A school schedule that is based on students' instructional needs
- ❑ Space for adequate physical activity
- ❑ Desks, chairs, and other equipment that accommodates student diversity (e.g., size, weight, sensory characteristics)

Professional Development

Ongoing, job embedded professional development is highly valued, collaborative, combines both training and coaching, and is linked to improved educational outcomes for students. School leaders have provided a variety of structures from which staff can choose when participating in professional development and have designed structures to assure the successful transfer of learning into practice including opportunities to receive feedback on teaching strategies, observe exemplary practices, and reflect on practice.

Indicators

- ❑ Professional development related to inclusive education is an integral component within school/district improvement goals.
- ❑ The school/district provides the necessary time and professional development to address school and district school improvement goals.
- ❑ School schedules are designed in such a way that regularly scheduled time is provided for general and special educators to collaborate around common professional development opportunities.
- ❑ Professional development addresses both content-specific knowledge (e.g., behavior, academics) and the principles and practices of inclusive education.
- ❑ Professional development uses current research related to adult learners and learning, incorporates structures to enable teachers to implement new practices, and includes evaluation or documentation of improved teacher performance.
- ❑ Professional development is embedded in the daily work of teaching and learning activities and cultivated by a community that includes mentors, colleagues, coaches, and administrators.
- ❑ School leaders differentiate their interactions with staff based upon the needs of individual staff members and provide staff with frequent opportunities to reflect on best practice in professional learning communities.
- ❑ The school or district documents and communicates the roles and responsibilities of coaches including the relationships among coaching and broader professional development efforts.
- ❑ Regular review of student learning data informs the content and format of district, school, and individual professional development plans.