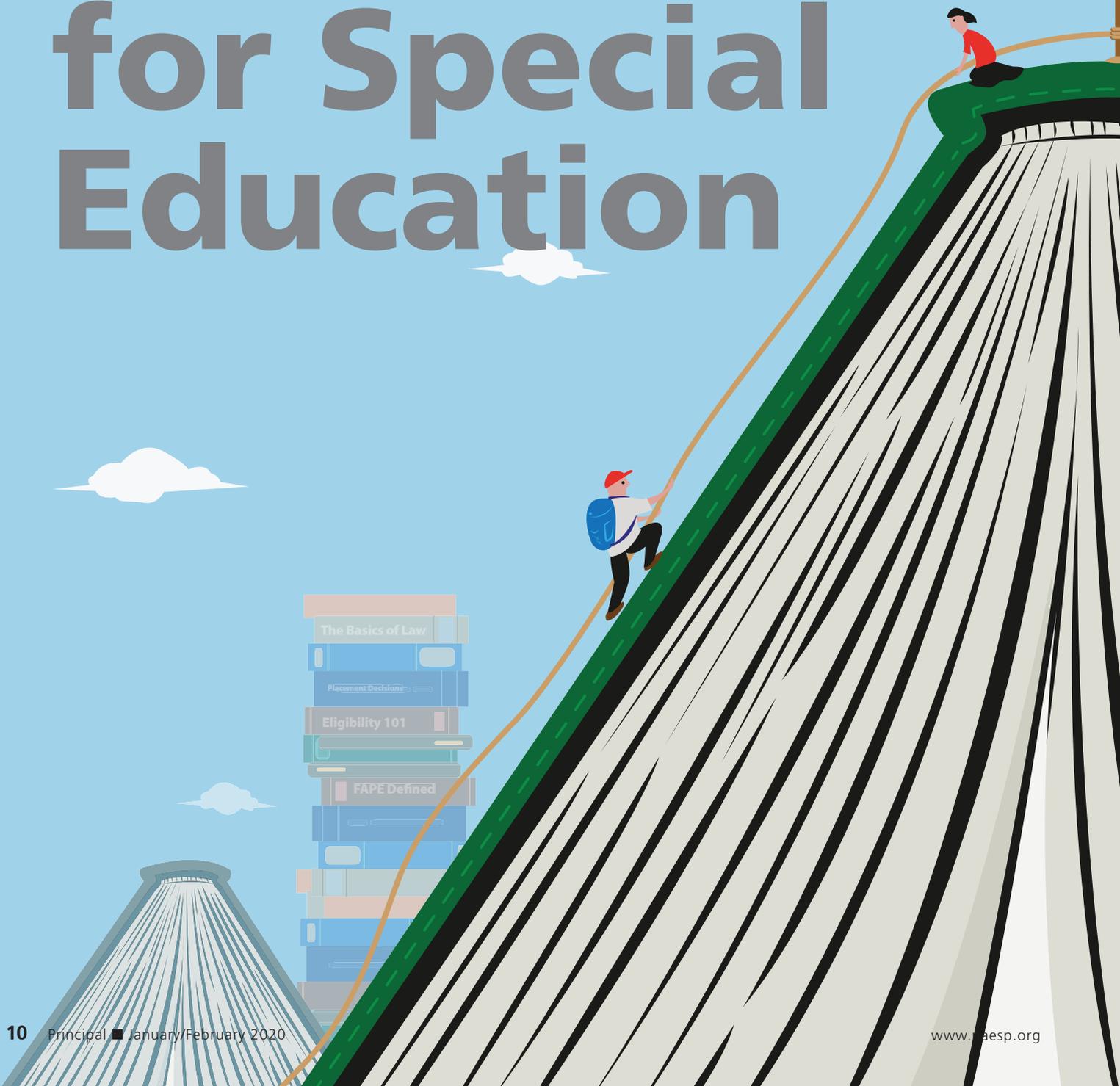
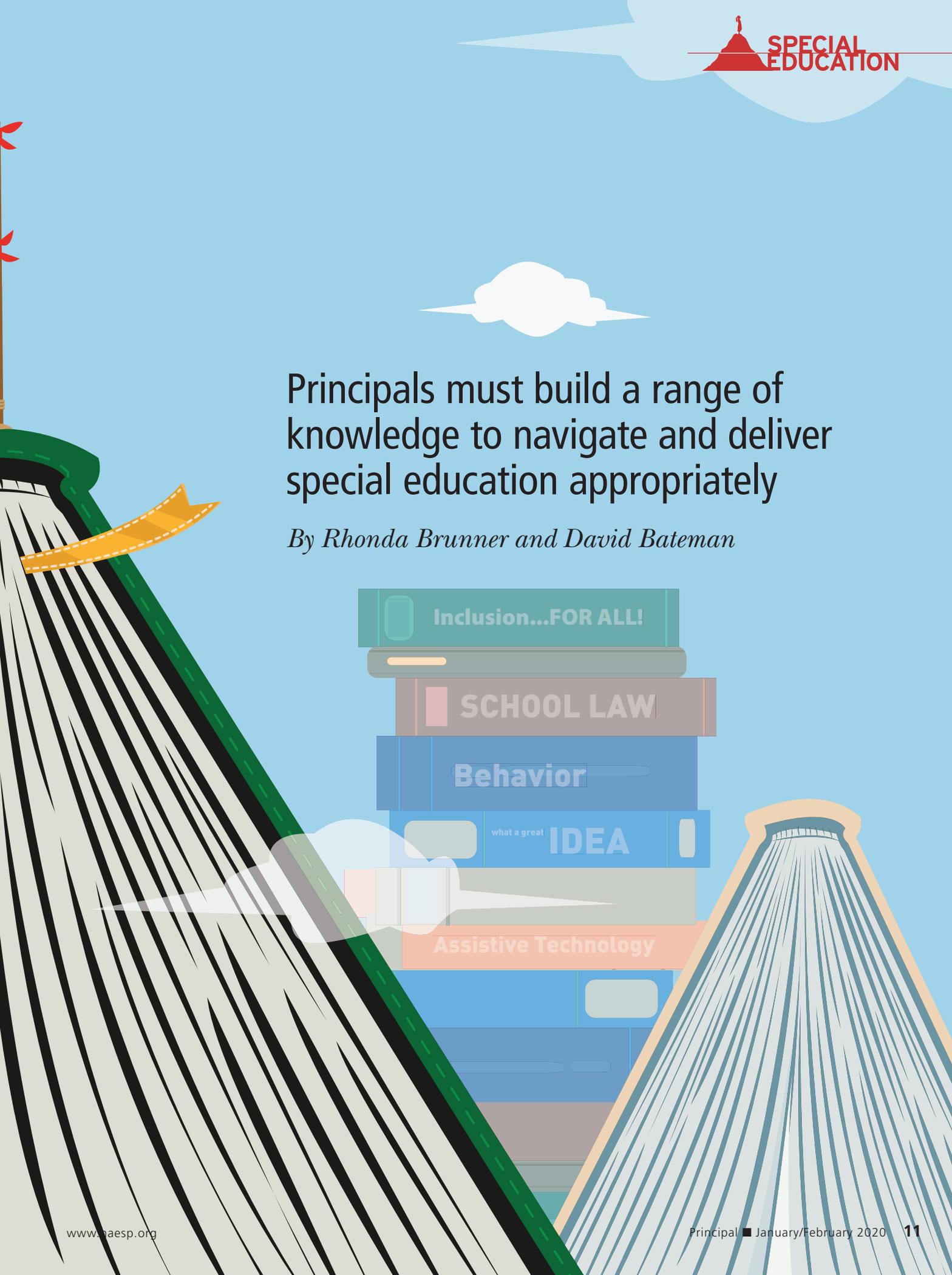


The Point Person for Special Education





Principals must build a range of knowledge to navigate and deliver special education appropriately

By Rhonda Brunner and David Bateman

Inclusion...FOR ALL!

SCHOOL LAW

Behavior

what a great IDEA

Assistive Technology

As a student with a learning disability, specifically in reading and writing, “Josh” is eligible for special education and related services. At the end of the first marking period of his third-grade year, his grades were down, and he was not making progress on his Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives. Despite this, no changes were made to his educational program and placement.

At the end of the second marking period, it was evident that Josh was not achieving academically in school and was still not making sufficient progress on his IEP goals. The district did not make any changes to his program. At the end of the third marking period, Josh was still not making academic progress in school. His grades continued to decline, and there was little or no progress on his IEP goals.

To make matters worse, he had begun to have significant behavior problems in school, hitting and pushing other students. He also was starting to show signs of school avoidance, frequently having stomachaches and asking to visit the school nurse. The district decided that since it was close to the end of the school year, they would not make any changes to his current program but instead would start fresh the following year.

There are students like Josh in most schools—students who have disabilities but who aren’t making progress in their programs and are beginning to suffer because the school or district fails to address their individual needs. What is a principal to do?

Know the Law

Educating students eligible for special education is complicated. There are many disabilities, and all have unique needs. Special education is the most litigious area of the field, according to P.A. Zirkel’s article “Special Education Law: Illustrative Basics and Nuances of Key IDEA Components,” and since principals are the point persons of schools, they must

know something about special education law and be aware of the role they play in providing services for all students.

There have been significant changes in the provision of services to students with disabilities in the past decade. *Endrew v. Douglas County*, a recent U.S. Supreme Court case, continued to define the requirements for a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. And the school restructuring currently in vogue is placing new leadership demands on all administrators and especially principals, say David Bateman and Jennifer Cline in *Special Education Leadership: Building Effective Programming in Schools*.

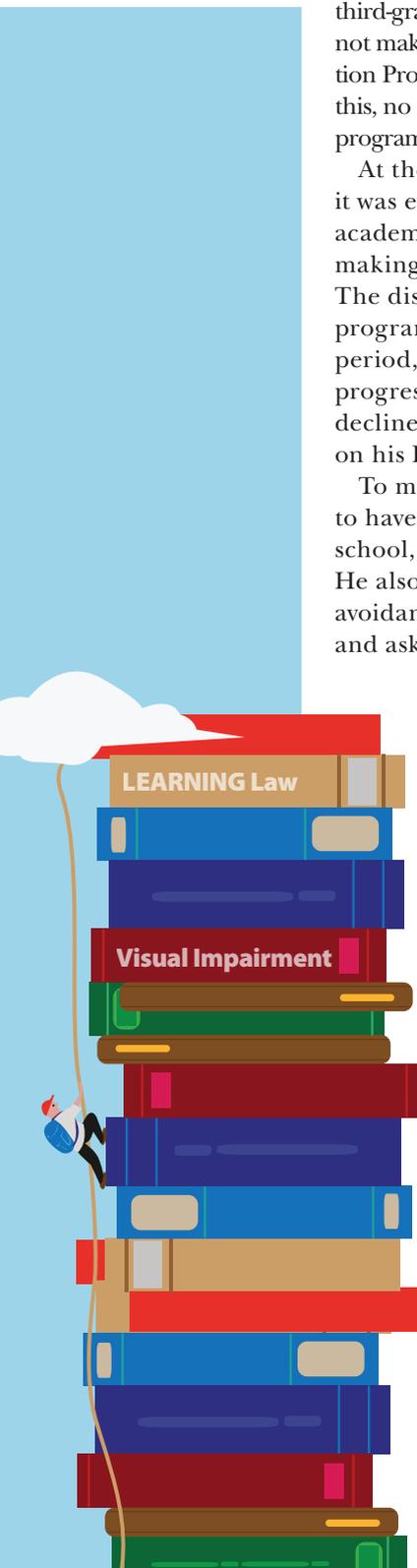
Additionally, the move to educate students with disabilities in more inclusive settings necessitates shared responsibility and school-wide collaboration among supervisors, principals, general and special education teachers, and related service personnel. To be effective, today’s leaders must be knowledgeable about programs for students with disabilities and must provide appropriate support to teachers.

The problem is that even 45 years after the implementation of special education in the U.S., most states continue to certify principals with, at most, a single course related to students with disabilities. Many universities continue to advertise principal preparation programs without including even a cursory knowledge of the various laws relating to special education, according to our prior research.

The school principal is at the center of all students’ education. He or she must ensure that the laws governing special education are properly followed and that the services in support of the education of students with disabilities are properly delivered. Parents contact the school principal when they believe their child isn’t being served. Additionally, it is the principal to whom staff members turn for direction when there is uncertainty surrounding questions related to special education.

Points to Know

There are several important points all principals should understand about special education. These points are not isolated; instead, they are often intertwined. Keep them in mind when working with the students in your building.



1. **Make all students your responsibility.** There might be other programs housed in the building, and there might be students who receive special reading instruction or other supplemental services, but the principal is responsible for ensuring that *all* students receive an appropriate education.
2. **Learn what's required.** Although most principal training programs don't offer extensive training related to special education, principals have an obligation to know about special education and what is required of it. Attend workshops; ask questions; go to meetings. Stay connected with education organizations like NAESP and find opportunities to learn about special education and how to meet students' needs.
3. **Train staff in their responsibilities.** There is a lot to know, including IEP implementation, Section 504 implementation, behavior plan implementation, progress monitoring, confidentiality, and being on a student's team. Be sure that the staff not only understand their roles but also actually do what they are supposed to do.
4. **Address behavioral needs.** To ensure students are making progress, principals need to be sure to address the academic needs of the students and also their behavioral needs. Be a part of the teams reviewing the data, and when a student is not making progress or is having difficulty, do something. Change the groupings, change the instruction, or change the amount of services; don't simply let a student continue to have problems.
5. **Identify students early.** Most students with disabilities are found eligible for special education in elementary school. The principal should make sure all staff are aware of the process for the identification of students with disabilities.
6. **Participate in IEP sessions.** The principal might have to lead IEP meetings for students with disabilities. Make sure you know the staff and their responsibilities, and work with them to ensure they have data about their efforts with the student. Also, make sure the staff take meetings seriously and provide families with the information and time necessary to help

them make informed decisions about their child's education.

7. **Know your students.** The principal needs to know all students in the building and be ready to talk about them. Special education students are students first, and they happen to have disabilities. Greet them in the hall, observe their classes, and attend meetings regarding special education services. The more you participate, the more you will be able to understand their needs and advocate for all students in your building. Bonus: You'll also be able to answer parents' questions and be viewed as the leader of the building.

The Point of No Return

In Josh's case, it was clear at the end of the first marking period that he was not making progress. Something should have been done at that moment, instead of waiting for him to continue to have problems in his program.

Parents of students eligible for special education should receive updates on their child's goals and objectives from the IEP at the same frequency as nondisabled students get updates on their progress—typically every marking period.

Special education law looks at when districts either knew or should have known a student was having problems. The principal should have known at the end of the first marking period that Josh wasn't making progress and should have met with the team to decide what changes needed to be implemented. The team should have implemented the changes and continued to collect data on Josh's progress, making additional changes if necessary.

Meet regularly with the special education and general education staff and make changes when necessary. It is better for the student, and it will ensure better relations with parents in the long term. 

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CART BEFORE THE HORSE?

Avoid the tendency to "shoehorn" special education students by determining placement before outlining the goals and services provided, says "Making Educationally Appropriate and Legally Sound Placement Decisions," a presentation made at the Council for Exceptional Children's 2018 Special Education Convention & Expo.

Always complete the goals and services sections of an IEP before considering placement, or you'll be at risk of violating IDEA and denying the student's right to a free appropriate public education.