



Solutions FROM THE Source

Experts reveal strategies they use in handling common issues in special education

Guaranteeing an appropriate education to every student will never be easy or simple. But guaranteeing an appropriate education to children with disabilities carries added concerns in multiple areas such as assessment, intervention, and instructional delivery. *Principal* magazine recently asked several school leaders and other experts in special education to volunteer their advice and suggest solutions to common issues.



HERE'S WHAT THEY SAID:

Instructional Design

"Principals should be mindful that every child—with or without disabilities or special needs—is unique. That translates to ensuring information is delivered in a variety of modalities and giving students the opportunity to show mastery of the material in different ways. Known generally as Universal Design for Learning, this is the hallmark of good teaching."

— Myrna R. Mandlawitz, president, MRM Associates LLC

"We use the MAP Reading Fluency Assessment from NWEA in the fall, winter, and spring. We use this data to group students for what we call 'Walk to Read,' which allows students of similar ability to walk to a classroom to be with other students on the same reading level. We keep the groups of students small (five to 10 students per group), and every educator in the school participates, [including] our PE teacher. Students read for about 20 minutes and receive instruction based on their skill level. It is a great way for teachers to work with students they may not see on a regular basis, and it allows all students to be a part of a small peer group."

"To address students with auditory and hearing impairments, we had an FM unit installed in the school. FM systems allow the teacher to wear a microphone that channels sounds to a receiver the student wears. This helps students with auditory and attention issues differentiate the teacher's voice from other sounds around them and helps them understand directions better. In addition, it amplifies the teacher's voice to the entire class, which benefits all students, and it means the teacher is not straining for his or her voice to be heard."

— Emily Nickell, principal, Yale Elementary School, Yale, Oklahoma; and Emily Springer, speech language pathologist, Gainesville Speech and Language Services

Building Capacity

"Our three-tiered approach to supporting the special education team [emphasizes] scheduling, professional development, and accountability as a starting point for school leaders to begin building capacity on special education teams. We recommend front-loading content focused on the goals for the year and scheduling biweekly meetings from the beginning of the school year. This is crucial to setting the routines for the year, [and] you can always give the gift of time when teachers need a morning to get their progress reports done."

— Brittany Vigil and Jessica Shroyer-King, assistant principals, Coates Elementary School, Herndon, Virginia

Mentoring

"Fostering support for novice special education teachers with resources from higher education institutions [can] strengthen the novice teacher, promote a professional network, and broaden the scope of professional development. Institutions of higher education are often called upon to support professional development for districts, schools, and/or specific initiatives. Consider these institutions for mentoring individual special education teachers, as well."

"An e-mentoring relationship [pairs] a novice special education teacher with a mentor teacher who has similarities in teacher preparation programs, licensure, and teaching assignments, making the relationship an informal, less evaluative one. The electronic discussions that ensue allow the novice special education teacher to gain multiple perspectives, advice, and support from someone with a similar background and experiences."

— Lisa Burke and Linda Dauksas, Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, Illinois

Assessment

"Even the best-intentioned teachers may inject bias into students' abilities when it comes to subjective assessments of students' growth, especially where student growth is a factor in assessing teacher performance. Nowhere is this more important than in the special education context, where specific subjective assessments are required in a whole host of contexts. By adopting a blind-assessment practice, school districts can minimize bias and enhance the reliability and validity of assessments—leading to more accurate assessments of students' knowledge and performance."

— Kenneth J. Ashman and Neal D. Kitterlin, Ashman Law Offices LLC

Discipline

“Educators often forget how much our mindset, emotions, and bias have an effect on the actions we take in the classroom when dealing with discipline. We should first seek to understand the why behind the behaviors through patience and love. Kids feed off our emotions, so we must be careful what vibes we are giving them. Often, students are pushing us away through misbehavior, but we need to instead pull them in close to us to make the biggest impact in their lives. Always consider our adult actions and how they will help or hurt the relationship with the students in front us.”

— Andy Jacks, principal, Ashland Elementary School, Manassas, Virginia, and fellow with NAESE’s Center for Innovative Leadership

The Principal’s Role

“As a longtime lobbyist for organizations representing special education administrators, parents, and specialized instructional support personnel, I highly recommend principals be conversant with laws and policies [regarding special education]. But that’s just the foundation. Especially as families first encounter the special education system, making sure they are comfortable with bringing concerns to school staff and reassuring them that the whole multidisciplinary team is there to support them is the most critical role a principal, as school leader, can play.”

— Myrna R. Mandlawitz, president, MRM Associates LLC



Teacher Retention

“Raising the principal’s awareness of stress specifically for special education teachers seems to be a critical next step in combating burnout. When special education teachers do not have the time needed to prepare for their students and lack adequate time for IEP development, they are at risk of leaving the field. Special education teachers are rarely recognized for the amount of time and effort placed into ensuring students with IEPs are receiving a quality education.”

— Timara Davis, Ph.D. student at the University of Central Florida; and Angelica Fulchini Scruggs, post-doctoral researcher, Vanderbilt University

Parents

“First and foremost, we need to reframe the conversation with parents. Instead of ‘dealing’ with parents, we’re all on the same team. Parents want more than anything for their children to be happy and successful—to be members of the school community. Parents are often scared. They feel isolated. They want tools, and they frequently feel blamed for their children’s behaviors and needs.

“By reframing the parent-administrator relationship, principals can model respect for parents’ lived experiences. They can recognize that they, as administrators, might not understand the nuance in every situation, and that they can learn from listening. It’s rare that principals are also experts in every disability and diagnosis. But what they can be experts in is listening to parents and students, in respecting learning differences, and in modeling inclusivity to their teachers and support staff.

“That simple reframing of perspective can have a dramatic difference in the school climate. It changes how teachers view parents, transforming an adversarial meeting environment into a collaborative space to solve problems and share experiences. It also directly impacts how teachers teach and how students view and interact with each other.”

— Hannah Grieco, education and disability advocate

“The best way to ensure a child has success in school is to engage family members early and nurture communication between school and family. I spent 14 years as a kindergarten teacher and then in upper elementary and felt one of my most important tasks was to ‘translate’ to families what the class was learning and how family members could support that learning at home. Specifically for children with disabilities, demystifying the rights and responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and state requirements was particularly useful in reducing everyone’s stress levels.”

— Myrna R. Mandlawitz, president, MRM Associates LLC 