Pumping Up Supports for Special Education

A focus on scheduling, professional development, and accountability ensures every student gets the resources they need

By Brittany Vigil and Jessica Shroyer-King

Have you ever felt as though you didn't have enough teachers to meet the needs of the special education (SPED) students in your school? Have you wondered what professional development (PD) would be most beneficial for your SPED teachers? Have you struggled with finding efficient systems of accountability for SPED teachers?

After a few weeks as the SPED administrators at our school, we realized there was a need to maximize the amount of time that teachers and paraprofessionals were spending with students with disabilities in order to directly support individualized education program (IEP) goals. We ultimately decided to focus on three areas to have the biggest effect on student achievement and ensure equity and inclusion—scheduling, professional development, and accountability.

1. Scheduling

There are multiple facets of scheduling, beginning with the master instructional schedule. We have limited resources to support students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Each grade level wants to have reading and math in the morning, but the more content areas overlap, the fewer teachers we need to delegate. When creating the master instructional schedule, we stagger math and reading to create as little overlap as possible across the grade levels, increasing equity and access to resources and supports. This maximizes the number of people who are available to support students in these content areas.

Once the master instructional schedule is created, we evaluate student caseloads and create a schedule for special education teachers and paraprofessionals to ensure equitable distribution of hours among staff members to meet student needs and IEP goals. We don't want

SPED teachers and paraprofessionals supporting the same students at the same time; we want to make sure the most students are being serviced at any given time throughout the building. We reevaluate the schedule throughout the year, since student needs change, new students enroll, and IEP goals and hours shift.

2. Professional Development

Timely and purposeful professional development is key when building your SPED team's knowledge. The first thing we did was create a regularly scheduled meeting time; we hold biweekly meetings with the team in the mornings prior to school. At the start of the year, we hold more meetings because we want to front-load teachers with important information that we'll revisit throughout the year. We begin each session with an icebreaker to build community within the team; it can be as simple as a quick get-to-know-you activity.

We began the year by reflecting on the growth of our team and looking at student achievement data. This led us to address how teachers can use paraprofessionals to help SPED students reach their fullest potential. We start each year talking about the importance of co-teaching with classroom teachers and paraprofessionals, sharing different models for co-teaching, and tasking special education teachers to have a conversation with anyone they teach alongside to develop co-teaching agreements.

We want to make sure the most students are being serviced at any given time throughout the building.

We have all teachers engage in The Mandt System's training surrounding the crisis cycle. All teachers and many paraprofessionals get trained in this system, and we recertify together each year. We want teachers to be able to identify when a child is escalating and to have the skills necessary to deescalate.

The remainder of PD content is based on our goals for the year. Last year, training focused on accommodations and writing IEP goals. We analyzed accommodations and discussed the criteria for access to accommodations and how to document them properly in an IEP. As a result of these meetings, we created "cheat sheets" for teachers to reference when planning IEP meetings and filing IEPs.

The professional development focused on writing IEP goals that span a year rather than a grade level. We provided time for teachers to talk to the grade levels above and below them to align the special education support in the school, and we find that this creates more consistent support for students.

3. Record-Keeping and Accountability

Because of the legal and instructional implications related to special education, we created systems to ensure that students have all accommodations and supports necessary to meet IEP goals. These systems help us, as administrators, support teachers and students; we know students by name and by need. We try to make our systems as simple as possible, because simple plans have a better chance of being implemented.

At the forefront are student accommodations and testing groups. We have created a resource for special and general education teachers that outlines students who require small groups for testing, as well as the accommodations they must access on a regular basis. Many accommodations dictate testing groupings for students, and accommodations must be given in the classroom in addition to high-stakes testing situations.

We have a simple binder system—the Accommodation Binder—to keep track of these. It has a tab for each grade level under which we can find the pages from the IEP that identify accommodations specifically. We also use accommodations to create a small-group testing page on which we group students as though it were end-of-year, high-stakes testing, and we update the binder monthly.
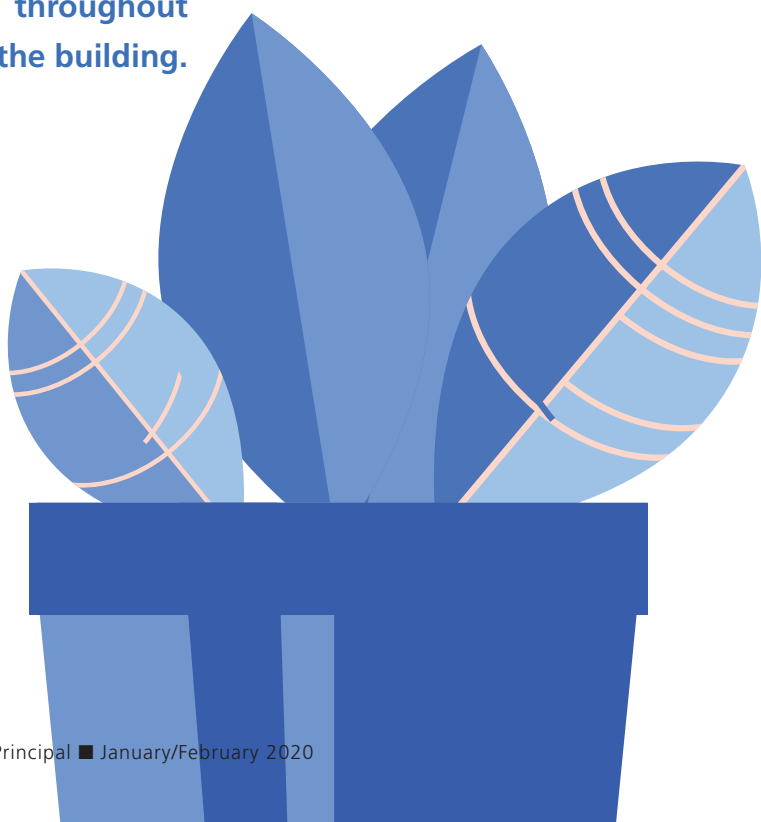
Twice a year, we meet with each SPED teacher to go over Accommodation Binders together and discuss each child by name and need. This allows us time to check on student progress toward IEP goals. Our school has a high percentage of students who are English-language learners; they are required to take the WIDA proficiency test each year, and an IEP can impact their accommodations. We meet with teachers two months before WIDA testing so that we can make any addenda as needed to make sure the students have access to what they need on this assessment. The second time we meet with teachers to discuss this is two months before end-of-year state standardized tests. Again, we want to ensure that students have the same accommodations in testing that they have had in the classroom.

In addition to the Accommodation Binder, we require each special education teacher to keep a Data Binder, in which they record IEP goals for each student in their caseload and the evidence they collect to monitor those goals. This ensures that when it's time to complete a progress report or update an IEP, we have accurate data to determine the student's progress. We review Data Binders at the end of each quarter to update ourselves on student progress.

The last accountability item we put in place is protocols for the many meetings that are required for students with disabilities. In order to ensure that IEP meetings, reevaluation meetings, and eligibility meetings are efficient, consistent, and concise, we created a document for each meeting to clarify its agenda. It includes the order in which each item should be addressed and who should be facilitating the meeting. This keeps the team focused on the goals and purpose of the meeting to ensure the best outcomes for each child.

Our three-tiered approach to supporting the special education team emphasizes scheduling, professional development, and accountability to build capacity. We recommend front-loading content focused on the goals for the year and scheduling biweekly meetings to set a routine for the year. Plus, you can always give the gift of time when teachers need a morning to get their progress reports done. ▣
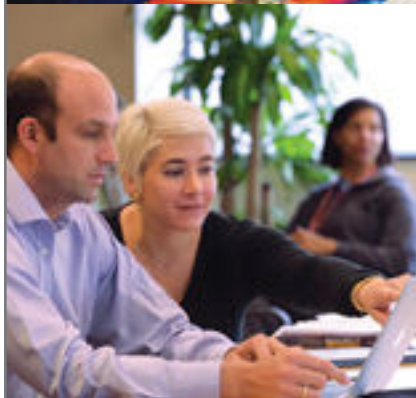
Brittany Vigil and **Jessica Shroyer-King** are assistant principals at Coates Elementary School in Herndon, Virginia.

BASIC ACCOMMODATION

Coates Elementary's binder system tracks each student's accommodations, including:

• Presentation accommodations such as alternative content delivery systems, including audio recordings, videos, and digital media;

• Response accommodations such as the use of a word processor or scribe;

• Setting accommodations such as a quiet room for testing; and

• Scheduling accommodations such as additional time to complete a task.