



SPOTLIGHT

Blurring the Divide: Improving Special Education by Strengthening Core Instruction

by Mark Wiernusz and Christopher Cleveland

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Districts that have made the most significant gains among students, whether with or without disabilities, have done so by providing students with teachers skilled in content instruction during extra instructional time.

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Improving Special Education by Strengthening Core Instruction

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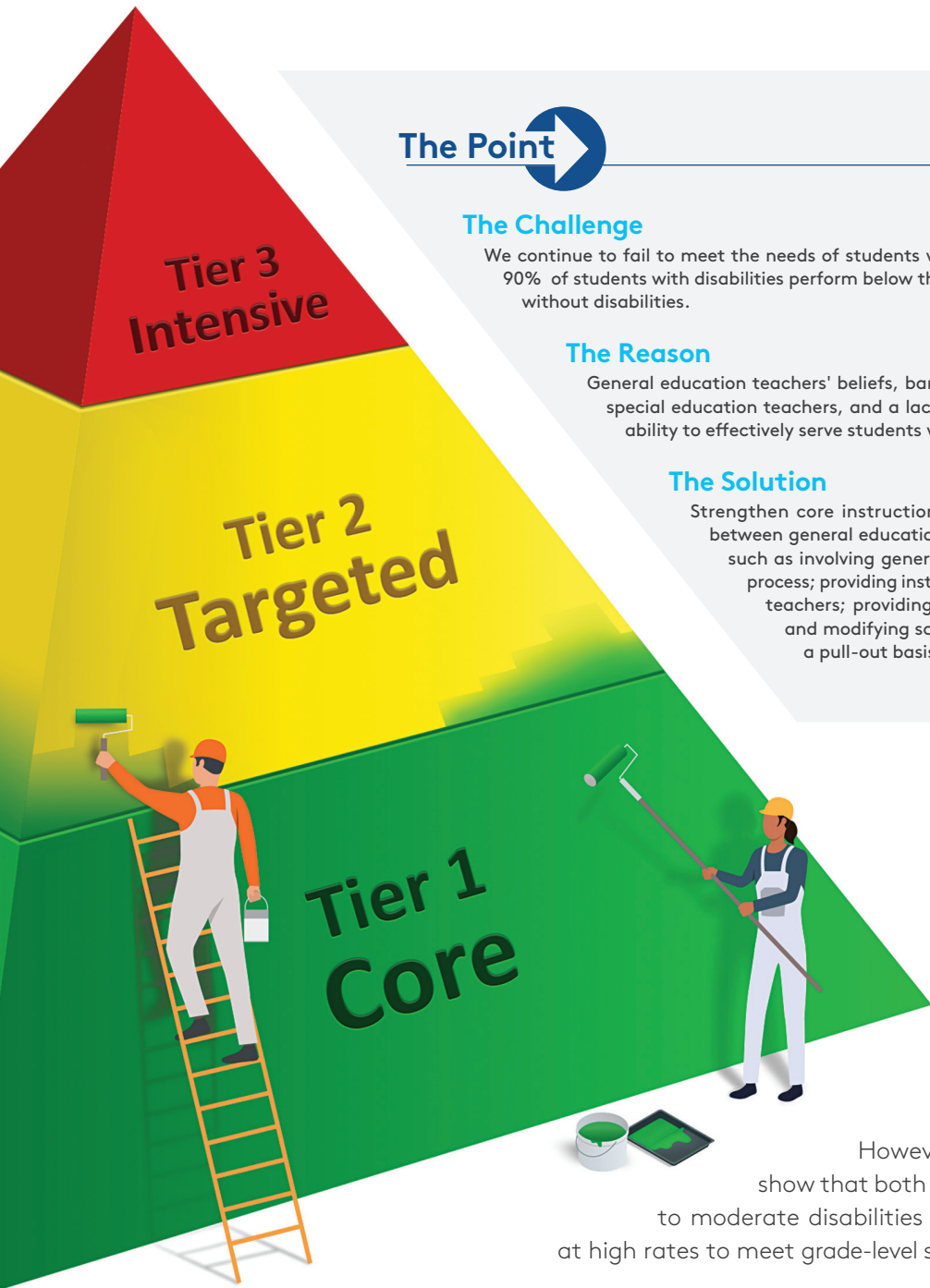
It has been 45 years since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* [IDEA]), which required states to protect the rights of students with disabilities.¹ Over the decades, there has been much debate on how to best educate students with mild to moderate disabilities, and a myriad of changes and increased standards have been introduced.

Despite the variety of efforts over almost five decades, the most recent results from NAEP, the “nation’s report card,” show a significant gap between the scores of students with disabilities and of those without disabilities (*Exhibit 1*).²

This unrelenting gap has numerous causes, but it may be at least partially attributable to the prevalent belief that students with mild to moderate disabilities and students without disabilities represent two distinct types of students that require two distinct approaches of learning support. Indeed, common practice in many districts is to handle special education as separate from general education.

DMGroup Spotlight represents the thinking and approach of District Management Group.





The Point

The Challenge

We continue to fail to meet the needs of students with disabilities. According to 2019 NAEP data, 90% of students with disabilities perform below the proficient level compared to 62% of students without disabilities.

The Reason

General education teachers' beliefs, barriers between general education teachers and special education teachers, and a lack of access to the right opportunities limit the ability to effectively serve students with mild to moderate disabilities.

The Solution

Strengthen core instruction and blur the often-sharp divide that exists between general education and special education. We delve into tactics such as involving general education teachers in the special education process; providing instructional coaching to support general education teachers; providing rigorous grade-level content for all students; and modifying schedules so that intervention is not provided on a pull-out basis during core instruction.

However, typical achievement distributions show that both groups of students — those with mild to moderate disabilities and those without disabilities — fail at high rates to meet grade-level standards.

Consider the significant percentage of students, with and without disabilities, who perform below the proficient level — at the basic and below basic levels — on the NAEP. Students with disabilities do fare worse, but should as many as 62% of students without disabilities be failing NAEP (*Exhibit 2*)?³

With both categories of students performing poorly, there needs to be a focus on better supporting all students and blurring the often-sharp divide that exists. This goal requires a shift from thinking of students as belonging to two distinct categories and refocusing on better equipping the general education teacher to educate all students.

Key Steps to Strengthen Core Instruction

Students with mild to moderate disabilities and students behind grade level spend most of their day in the general education classroom, so effective general education instruction is key for all students. Therefore, core instruction provided by the classroom teacher must meet a large share of students' needs. The following steps are key:

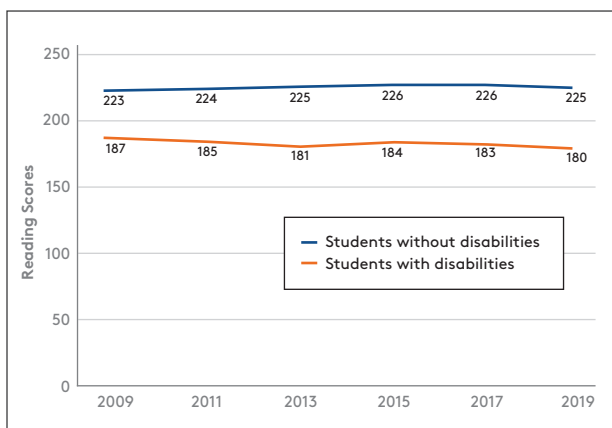
Shift general education teachers' mindsets about supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities

District leaders need to help general education teachers to develop a positive belief in their ability to work with students with disabilities and to hold high expectations for students with disabilities.

A recent nationally representative survey of 1,350 teachers conducted by the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood.org revealed that of the general education teachers surveyed,

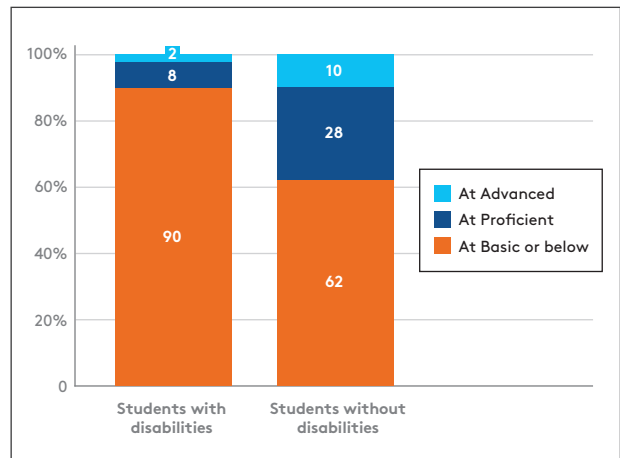
- **Fewer than 20%** felt very well prepared to teach students with mild to moderate disabilities,
- **Only 30%** felt strongly that they can successfully teach students with learning disabilities, and
- **Only 50%** believe students with learning disabilities can reach grade-level standards.⁴

Exhibit 1 NAEP 4TH-GRADE READING SCORES FOR STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES, 2009-2019



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Exhibit 2 NAEP 4TH-GRADE READING: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES AT BASIC OR BELOW, 2019



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The deficit in teachers' beliefs about their self-efficacy is coupled with persistent beliefs that students with disabilities should not be expected to meet the same standards as students without disabilities.⁵ This sentiment among teachers stands in sharp contrast to the feelings of students with disabilities, who believe at rates nearly comparable to students without disabilities that they will graduate high school and attend post-secondary education.⁶ Ninety-seven percent of students with disabilities expect to receive a regular high school diploma.

In our work with districts, we all too often hear classroom teachers and administrators asking for students to be evaluated so that special education teachers can take responsibility for their learning. When staff are requesting that a student be evaluated, it is important for district leaders to recognize that this statement typically means two things: (1) the administrator or teacher has a student who is struggling, and (2) the administrator or teacher needs help. In many districts, the typical response in this situation is simply to have the student referred for an evaluation; leaders seldom address the second issue by engaging in intensive conversations with their staff about developing skills to work with students with disabilities and setting high standards for the students. The path of least resistance is to default to the existing culture and have special education staff take the lead in serving students with disabilities.

Districts that have successfully improved general education teachers' belief in their ability to teach students with mild to moderate disabilities and in the abilities of these

students to learn have created leadership alignment on the feasibility of this work. They begin by having intensive conversations between district leaders and school leaders; school leaders then are charged with establishing and maintaining a strong but supportive school culture that encourages high standards for all students. The successes of teachers who do this work well within the district are then highlighted by district and school leaders, and these pockets of success help shift mindsets. Longer-term, incorporating these philosophies into district hiring and support strategies for teachers and students is essential.

Improve general education teachers' understanding of, and involvement in, special education processes

Shifting general education teachers' mindsets is challenging, but helping them to better understand the special education process can be a good starting point. Often, all that general education teachers hear are statements about being "more inclusive," "differentiating," or using "universal design for learning." This general advice isn't enough to fully support general education teachers.

General education teachers need to understand the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that are being written for the students in *their* classroom. Often, the general education teacher has only a passive role in the development of a student's IEP. A better practice is for

the general education teacher to be an active collaborator in the IEP development process and assume responsibility for its implementation.

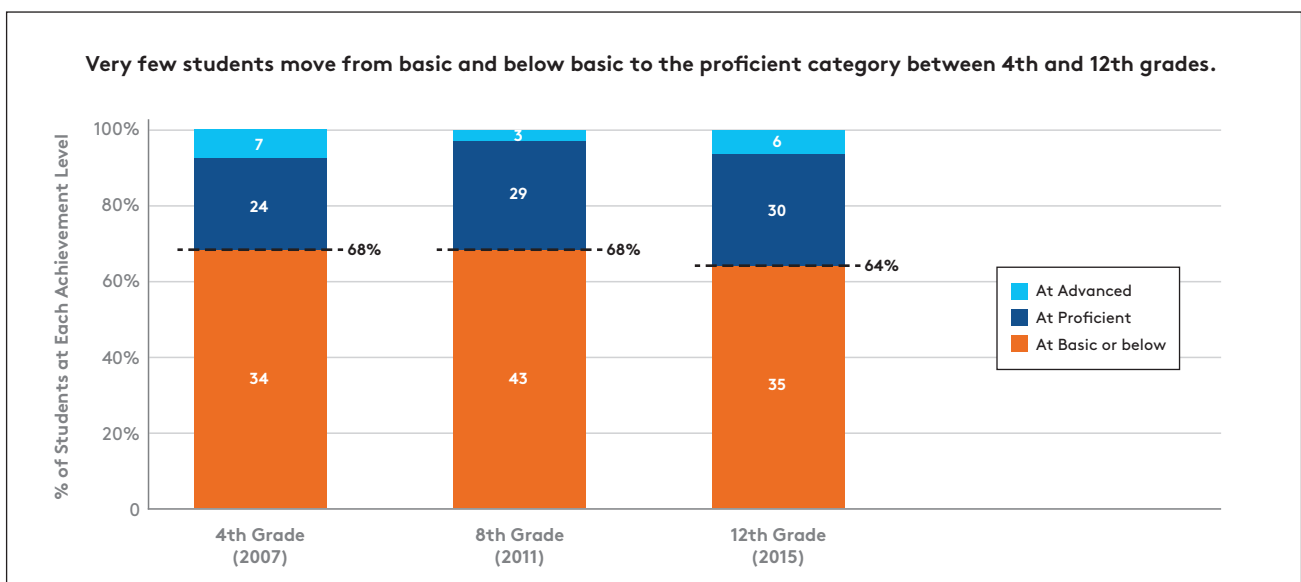
Beyond the development of the IEP, general education teachers need to plan and adjust instruction just as they do for students without disabilities. Many general education teachers believe that changes in instruction for a student with a disability can occur only during the annual or tri-annual review of the IEP, which is a markedly slower timeframe than the adaptations happening every few weeks for students without disabilities. This belief is not true. The IEP is a living document that should be regularly updated to reflect a student's current needs with input from staff and guardians.

General education teachers should not feel alone in this work. They should collaborate with special education staff to understand the needs of every student with an IEP and not just have access to general strategies.

Schedule students with mild to moderate disabilities to receive all core instruction

In many districts, up to half of the referrals to special education are due to reading difficulties.⁷ Referral rates jump in third through sixth grades when reading problems make it difficult for students to learn math, science, and social studies. Many students who have not mastered reading by the end of third grade will

Exhibit 3 NAEP READING PROFICIENCY LEVEL BY STUDENT COHORT (2007-2015)



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, DMGroup.

continue to struggle throughout high school and beyond. As NAEP results show for a cohort of students tested between 2007 and 2015, very few students move from the basic and below basic category to a higher performance category between 4th and 12th grades (*Exhibit 3*).

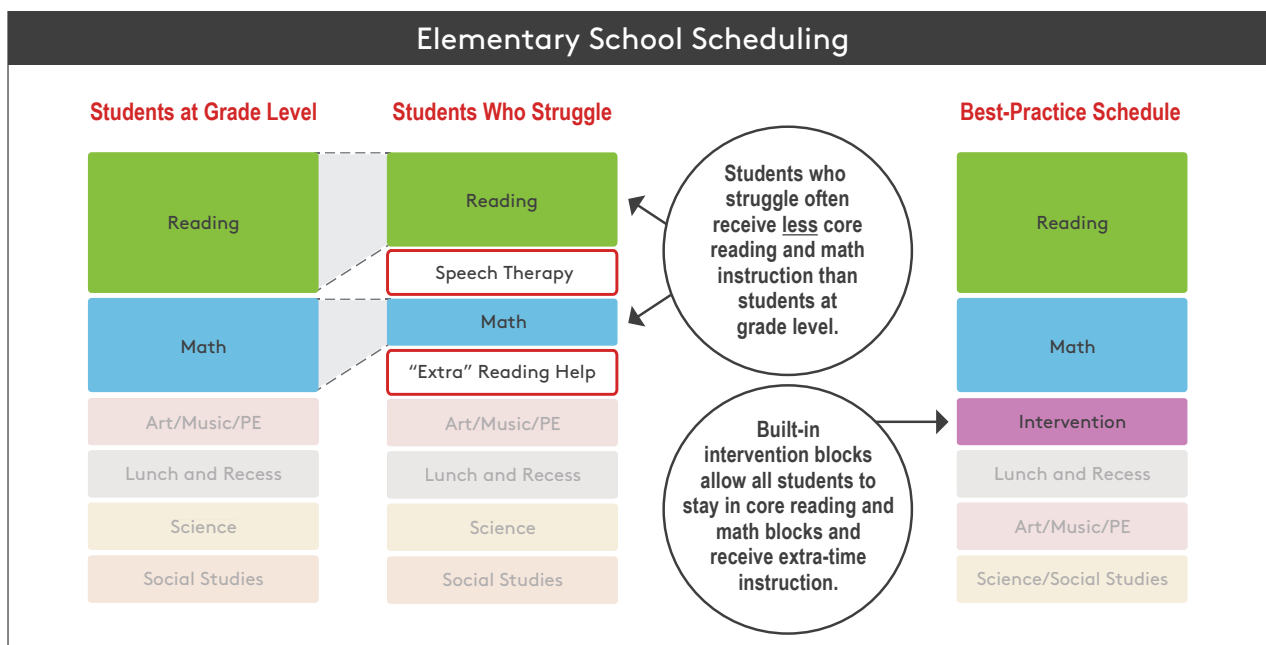
“ Too often, the master building schedule forces teachers to pull students from core instruction in reading or math.

In many elementary schools, children who struggle to read are pulled out of the core reading block to be taught by a special education teacher or paraprofessional. At the secondary level, students who are below grade level often receive lower-level courses — like Read 180 or Achieve 3000, which have limited evidence of success — instead of grade-level content and standard programming. While well-intentioned, these practices often shift responsibility for student success away from the general education teacher to a special education teacher or paraprofessional. General education teachers must help students achieve grade-level standards at each step of the way in a student’s K-12 experience.

One of the more effective ways that leaders can help is to assist principals and special education and intervention staff to build thoughtful schedules in accordance with best practices. Too often, the master building schedule forces teachers to pull students from core instruction in reading or math. Scheduling is both an art and a science, and effective scheduling is key to ensuring that student needs are best met. Not every teacher or principal is an expert scheduler; even if they are, the schedule they create is impacted by the schedules of dozens of other people. Efficient and effective schedules cannot be built in a vacuum. Coordinated scheduling is essential to ensure that all students are receiving core instruction.

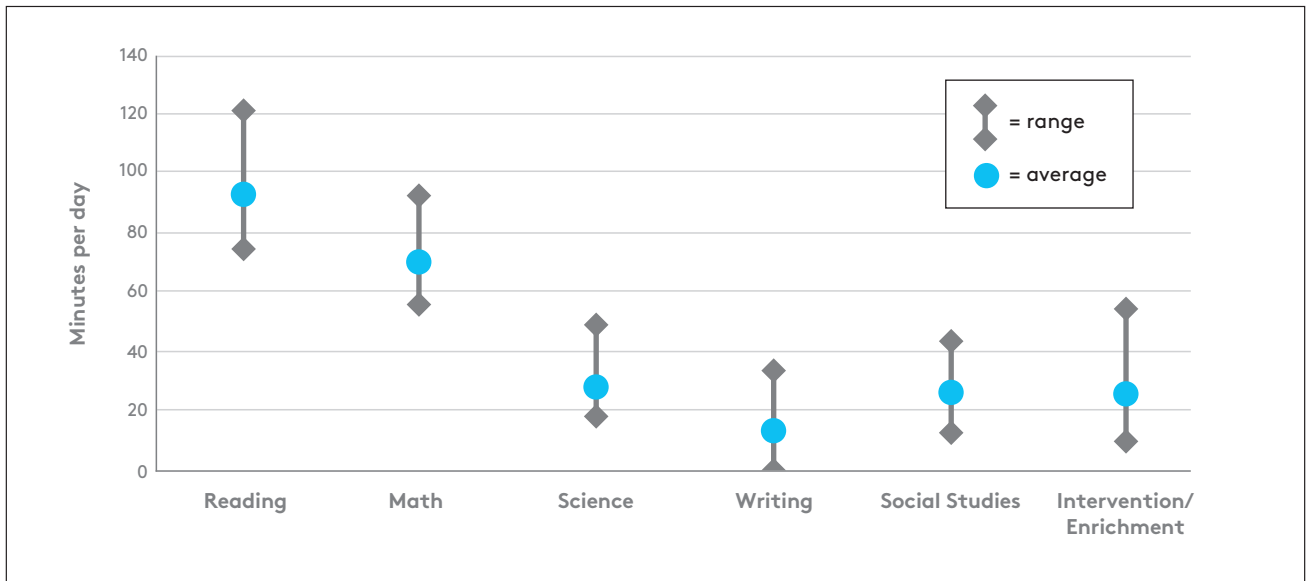
DMGroup has conducted in-depth diagnostics in many districts to understand how elementary students were receiving core instruction and intervention. Our data analyses have shown that in the majority of these districts, pull-out services were being provided during reading and math, meaning that interventions that were intended to provide *extra* instruction instead *replaced* the core instruction they were intended to supplement (*Exhibit 4*). Although schools and teachers were trying their best, the structure of the schedules made it virtually impossible to avoid these situations. Once armed with

Exhibit 4 **EXAMPLES OF TYPICAL ELEMENTARY SCHEDULES COMPARED WITH BEST-PRACTICE SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS AT GRADE LEVEL AND STUDENTS WHO STRUGGLE**



Source: DMGroup.

Exhibit 5 VARIATION IN USES OF TIME BY TEACHERS IN BCSD ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS



Source: DMGroup.

this information, many districts took action to create a clearly articulated set of district instructional guidelines and to build schedules aligned with best practices that minimize students' loss of core instruction.

Ensure core instruction provides rigorous grade-level content for all students

While district leaders are working with staff to preserve core instruction for those students who need it most, they must also ensure that the core instructional time is being used well. If students are remaining in the general education classroom but still not receiving rigorous instruction in grade-level content, their inclusion is less effective.

For example, DMGroup worked with Bibb County School District (BCSD) in Georgia to examine how core instruction was being provided to its elementary students. Focus groups with teachers highlighted that in the absence of any guidance, teachers were taking different approaches to providing appropriate curriculum for students (*Exhibit 5*). Teachers emphasized that the quality and rigor of the materials they were using were highly variable. DMGroup also collected data on how much literacy instruction students received. The data revealed that time spent on literacy ranged from 30 minutes a day to two hours, and there was a wide variation in the amount of phonics instruction. Systems and structures for supporting students also varied. For example, each

school had reading groups for students in need of intervention and for high-performing students, but the cutoffs to be in these groups varied significantly between schools. With this new, detailed understanding of current practices, the superintendent and district leadership were able to identify specific improvements to the district's reading program that are now yielding benefits for students with mild to moderate disabilities and students without disabilities.⁸

At the secondary level, districts face unique challenges to providing students with rigorous content due to historical scheduling practices. Still, district leaders should be striving to provide all students with access to rigorous content, including grade-level and advanced courses. While access to rigorous courses is crucial to raising student achievement, many districts do not systematically analyze data to understand how students are distributed among rigorous courses across different departments. Dissecting data by department and level of rigor clarifies where there may be actions that don't match stated priorities.

Refine Additional Interventions

While the focus of this article is on supporting general education teachers and core instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities, the role of additional interventions is still very important. A few key actions can make these interventions more effective.

Ensure targeted interventions are in addition to core instruction

In many schools, students behind grade level are provided extra adults, but not extra time. These learners may receive additional support from a teaching assistant, paraprofessional, special education teacher, or co-teacher, while staying in the same classroom as their peers for the same duration as their peers. Some schools have specialized instruction in place, but it is typically not in addition to the regular period. Students behind grade level may be assigned to a “replacement” class, for example — a lower-level general education class that covers less content with less rigor.

Also, extra “help time” should not be confused with extra instructional time. It is common for students with disabilities to have a resource room period or a support period where a special education teacher provides ad hoc help or test prep across multiple subjects, grades, and courses. This is not the same as a daily dedicated extra period focused explicitly on providing targeted instructional support that addresses gaps in a student’s reading or math skills.

At the elementary level, dedicated intervention blocks should be built into the schedule so that students in need of remediation can receive *extra* support, while other students receive grade-level or enrichment content.

These intervention blocks can be scheduled by reducing the time a student spends on other non-core subject areas until the student reaches grade-level standards.

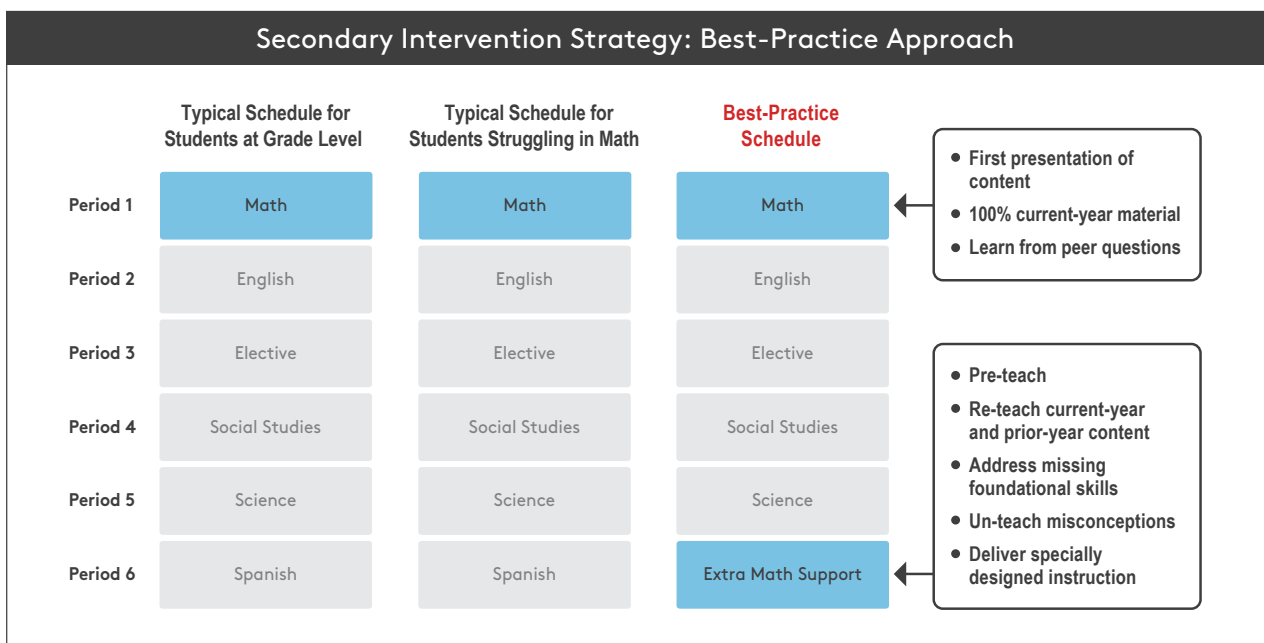
At the secondary level, an additional class that provides reading, English, or math intervention support for 60 minutes a day can help remediate a student’s skills gaps more quickly (if the intervention is addressing the student’s learning needs). The student’s core class will provide the first presentation of 100% current-year material, while the extra-time intervention can include pre-teaching the next day’s lesson, re-teaching current materials, or remediating prior-year content (*Exhibit 6*).⁹

The schedule needs to support general education intervention in English, math, and reading as well as access to rigorous classes. These elementary and secondary scheduling maneuvers can create difficult short-term scheduling trade-offs. As some students spend time catching up on core academic areas, they may have to spend less time on specials or other extracurriculars. However, the long-term payoff of being able to read, complete rigorous math problems, and graduate ready for college or career is worth it.

Have content-strong staff deliver interventions

Districts that have made the most significant gains among students, whether with or without disabilities,

Exhibit 6 SECONDARY INTERVENTION STRATEGY: TYPICAL AND BEST-PRACTICE APPROACHES



Source: DMGroup.

Exhibit 7 **THREE-YEAR PROCESS TO HAVE CONTENT-STRONG STAFF PROVIDE INTERVENTION**

By not backfilling natural attrition of aides, the district was able to fully fund additional skilled staff positions.

Investments				
Description	Target Investment	Funds Allocated Year 1	Funds Allocated Year 2	Funds Allocated Year 3
Reading intervention special education teachers	\$200k	\$33k	\$66k	\$100k

Reductions				
Opportunity	Size	Funds Shifted Year 1	Funds Shifted Year 2	Funds Shifted Year 3
Attrition of aides	\$200k	\$66k	\$66k	\$66k

Source: DMGroup.

have done so by providing students with teachers skilled in content instruction during extra instructional time. As academic standards have risen and the complexity of the content has increased, it is even more important that staff possess a deep understanding and mastery of what they teach. A teacher who has engaged in extensive study and training in a subject is more likely to have a wider repertoire of ways to teach the material than a staff member who has not.

However, in most districts, extra instruction is still provided by either paraprofessionals or special education teachers. Paraprofessionals are not teachers and are generally not trained in effective teaching practices. Of course, many special educators are very strong teachers of reading, writing, and math, but not all of them are. In a review of teacher preparation programs, the National Council on Teacher Quality indicated that only 2% of special education teacher programs prepare these teachers for content-strong instruction.¹⁰ District leaders should ensure that content-strong general and special education teachers hold responsibility for delivering all interventions and that the instructional role of paraprofessionals is minimized.

One district that had paraprofessionals providing a significant amount of academic interventions for students with and without disabilities was able to shift away from paraprofessional support to content-strong staff by putting a hiring freeze on paraprofessionals and managing staffing levels through attrition (*Exhibit 7*). Whenever a paraprofessional left, staffing assignments were rearranged to promote student independence. This change, combined with implementing daily interventions staffed with "academic specialists," helped the district shift away from the generalist support model it had in place previously. The shift has been greatly beneficial for students in the district, who are now getting the type of support they need.

Leverage instructional coaching to support teachers

Ensuring that content-strong general education and special education teachers deliver interventions seems sensible and straightforward but in actuality is challenging to accomplish. A fundamental problem is that many teachers are not getting adequate training in their preparation programs. As one example, the most recent



Districts that have made the most significant gains among students, whether with or without disabilities, have done so by providing students with teachers skilled in content instruction during extra instructional time.

National Council on Teacher Quality review found that only 53% of graduate-level elementary programs teach scientifically based methods of early reading instruction.¹¹

Given this deficit in training programs, districts have sought to provide professional development, but the majority of efforts have focused on “sit and get” professional development instead of sustained guidance and coaching from leaders. It’s hard to imagine that general education teachers would feel able to support their students with disabilities if the only support they receive is one to two hours per year of professional development lectures.

A more effective approach is to include coaching as a core element of professional development.

Coaching has been shown to reduce learning loss and reinforce retention of critical lessons. Coaching also helps teachers to improve their beliefs about their skills and enhance teacher’s abilities to raise student academic achievement. In fact, teachers who receive coaching see improvements in the quality of their instruction that are larger than the differences in measures of instructional quality between novice and veteran teachers.¹²

**Tier 3
Intensive**

**Tier 2
Targeted**

**Tier 1
Core**



When district leaders want to develop an effective instructional coaching program, DMGroup advises that they (1) align the structures of the coaching program (e.g., which approaches to coaching the district should use, who the district’s coaches should be, which teachers should receive coaching); (2) provide support for coaches to carry out effective strategies inside and outside of the classroom; and (3) define roles and reporting structures to encourage teacher buy-in and participation, and measure success to adapt, improve, and scale the coaching program to reach more teachers.¹³

Align operational structures with the coaching program

Typically, districts are navigating three types of coaching, and should choose the approach that best aligns with the district's needs:

- A data-driven approach tailors instruction based on specific evidence of student learning
- An approach driven by teacher practice uses coaches to move teachers toward implementing a program policy or instructional practice
- An approach driven by teacher goals relies on teachers to direct the objectives of the coaching and on coaches to tailor their support to match teachers’ self-identified needs

Each of these coaching approaches can be useful for improving how teachers educate students with and without disabilities. District priorities and context will drive which type of coaching is most appropriate.

Districts also need to be mindful of selecting the right coaches. Coaches must possess key strengths and attributes in relationship-building, problem-solving, and teaching both students and adults. Coaches must have experience in driving student results for students with and without disabilities, be knowledgeable about the skills to impart to teachers, be adaptable to individual teacher needs, and be engaged and motivated to improve teacher practice.

“

Districts must clearly delineate coaching as a non-evaluative activity focused solely on teacher development.

Districts also need to determine which teachers will receive coaching by assessing the skills teachers need and their willingness to embrace coaching. Many districts tend to direct coaching to their teachers who "struggle." But in fact, districts would benefit more by focusing their coaching efforts on "developing" teachers — those who have the desire to improve but have a skill gap, like supporting students with disabilities, that needs to be addressed. "Disenfranchised" teachers — those who have the ability, but not the motivation — should be next in priority (*Exhibit 8*). Focusing on these two populations of teachers will help maximize the investment the district is putting into coaching.

Provide resources for coaches to execute strategies

Districts must support coaches by giving them the time and resources required to execute effective coaching strategies both inside and outside of the classroom. In addition to observations, modeling, and other activities within the classroom, coaches need time to analyze teacher and student data, plan coaching sessions, give feedback, and work with teachers outside of the classroom to be responsive to teachers' needs. Districts too often task instructional coaches with additional responsibilities that reduce the amount of time available for instructional coaching and diminish the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the coaching.

Scale coaching programs by building teacher trust

District leaders must strengthen and expand their coaching programs by building trust with teachers to encourage their participation. When a district is looking to launch or expand its coaching program, it is critical to

clearly define roles and responsibilities for the coach, the teacher's evaluator, and the coaches' supervisor in order to promote teacher trust and participation. Above all, districts must clearly delineate coaching as a non-evaluative activity focused solely on teacher development. If possible, districts should have coaches report

to a supervisor other than the principal, or at least ensure that any issues teachers share in confidence with their coach remain in confidence.

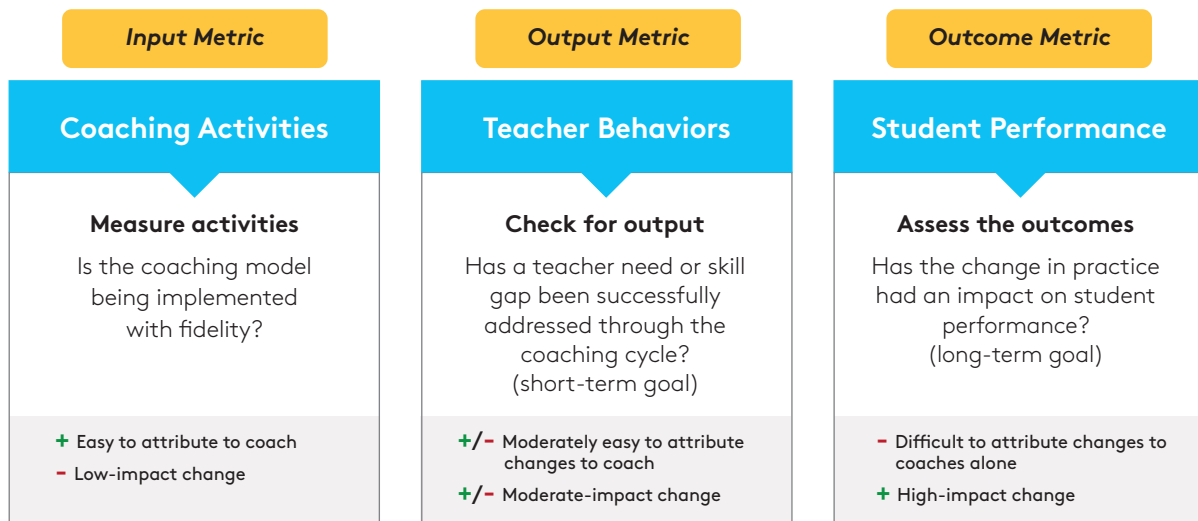
Consistent and thorough progress monitoring will allow districts to identify gaps, adapt and improve their coaching programs, and ensure impact. Districts should track input metrics such as coaching activities to determine whether the coaching model is being implemented with fidelity. Districts should also measure output metrics like teacher mindsets and behaviors to check whether the teachers' needs have been successfully addressed. Most importantly, districts should document outcome metrics to examine whether the change in practice has had an impact on student performance (*Exhibit 9*). Overall, a well-executed coaching program can be a powerful lever to help teachers improve outcomes for students with and without disabilities.

Exhibit 8 WHICH TEACHERS SHOULD RECEIVE COACHING?



Source: DMGroup.

Exhibit 9 **PROGRESS MONITORING — DEFINING SUCCESS**



Source: DMGroup.

Blurring the Divide

Our nation has come far in expanding access to education since 1975, when the precursor to IDEA was established. Still, as recent achievement data highlights, much work has yet to be done to move from ensuring access to education to ensuring achievement for all students.

In this article, we have focused on moving beyond the silos of general education and special education to focus on improving core instruction for the sake of all students. District leaders need to ensure that general education teachers have a high degree of confidence in their ability to work with students with disabilities and set high expectations for them. To support the development of these mindsets, district leaders need to ensure that general education teachers have an accurate understanding of the special education process and are actively involved in managing and adapting students' IEPs. District leaders also need to ensure students are not being pulled from core instruction and that core instruction is providing rigorous grade-level content. Beyond core instruction, district leaders also need to add extra time to the schedule to provide academic interventions delivered by content-strong staff. Throughout this work, instructional coaches can play a key role in providing sustained guidance and support to teachers about supporting all students' needs. Though it is challenging to implement these recommendations, we owe it to our students to ensure that when 2030 arrives, we will have made dramatic improvements in the achievement of all students, whether with or without disabilities. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ U.S. Department of Education, "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>.
- ² U.S. Department of Education, "Reading, Grade 4, Disability status of student, excluding those with 504 plan – Average scale scores," National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), <http://bit.ly/3cjs2B2>.
- ³ U.S. Department of Education, "Reading, Grade 4, Disability status of student, excluding those with 504 plan – Achievement levels," National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), <http://bit.ly/32CXQFS>.
- ⁴ Corey Mitchell, "Most Classroom Teachers Feel Unprepared to Support Students with Disabilities," *On Special Education* blog, *Education Week*, May 29, 2019, https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/speced/2019/05/teachers_feel_unprepared_to_teach_students_with_disabilities.html and Corey Mitchell, "Help for Principals Who Want to Support Special Education Teachers and Students," *On Special Education* blog, *Education Week*, December 19, 2019, https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/speced/2019/12/a_principals_guide_to_special_education.html.
- ⁵ National Center for Learning Disabilities, "Forward Together," National Center for Learning Disabilities, May 22, 2019, <https://www.nclld.org/research/forward-together/>.
- ⁶ Innovate Public Schools, "An Advocate's Guide to Transforming Special Education," *Innovate Public Schools*, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://reports.innovate-schools.org/an-advocates-guide-to-transforming-special-education-home/> and M. Wagner, L. Newman, R. Cameto, P. Levine, and C. Marder, *Perceptions and Expectations of Youth with Disabilities: A Special Topic Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* (NCSE 2007-3006) (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2007), <https://ies.ed.gov/ncser/pdf/20073006.pdf>.
- ⁷ Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters: A KIDS COUNT Special Report on the Importance of Reading by 3rd Grade," 2010, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-why-reading-by-the-end-of-third-grade-matters/>.
- ⁸ Kathleen Choi and Tess Nicholson, "Raising Achievement and Addressing Equity at Bibb County School District (GA): Instructional Guidelines and Effective Scheduling Pave the Way," *District Management Journal* 23 (Spring 2018).
- ⁹ Nathan Levenson, "Building Better Secondary School Schedules to Raise Achievement," *District Management Group*, 2019.
- ¹⁰ Graham Drake and Kate Walsh, "2020 Teacher Prep Review: Program Performance in Early Reading Instruction," National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), January 2020, <https://www.nctq.org/publications/2020-Teacher-Prep-Review:-Program-Performance-in-Early-Reading-Instruction>.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² M. A. Kraft, D. Blazar, and D. Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 4 (2018): 547–88, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0034654318759268>.
- ¹³ Mark Wiernusz and Amram Migdal, "Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program," *District Management Group*, 2019.

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