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10 Tips to Better Support Students in Special Education, Interventions, and/or Receiving Related Services

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Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.30, Winter 2022

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10 Tips to Better Support Students in Special Education, Interventions, and/or Receiving Related Services

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School districts are federally mandated under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide to the nation's 7 million students with disabilities an education tailored to their individual needs. However, during the past year and a half, delivering all the services detailed in each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) proved nearly impossible for many of our nation's schools as they grappled with responding to the vicissitudes of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This year, and likely for years to come, it will be critical for schools and school systems to work intentionally and aggressively to help these students make up for the past year and a half's lost opportunities to learn and develop. But how can schools and districts make this happen? Even before the pandemic, ensuring that students received the mandated supports and that they received these services from the most appropriate, best qualified professionals proved challenging. "We just do the best we can" or "The schedule keeps getting in the way" have long been all-too-common refrains.

While it is tempting to hope that some new pedagogical approach, new intervention, or cutting-edge research will provide a cure-all, a very big part of the solution is something that sounds all too simple — perhaps even mundane: making efficient and effective use of time. By this, we mean ensuring that there is

- Time in the master schedule to deliver all of the mandated instruction defined in students' IEPs
- Time to receive interventions in addition to — not instead of — regular class time
- Time for a student's needs to be matched with the skills of the most appropriate provider
- Time to fully and equitably leverage the skills of teachers and staff



Using time efficiently and effectively can allow schools to maximize opportunities for students receiving interventions, special education, and/or related services. Here are 10 tips to make sure you can make the best use of student and staff time at the elementary school level:

1

Establish clear instructional guidelines that require at least 90 minutes of literacy and 60 minutes of math each day.

Effective general education instruction is key: higher performance of general education students correlates to higher performance of students with disabilities. Ensuring all students can read is especially important: in many districts, up to half of the referrals to special education are, at their root, due to reading difficulties.

2

Establish common, grade-level schedules.

This has multiple benefits: it allows students to be more effectively regrouped across classrooms during intervention or small-group instruction; it also allows each grade's homeroom teachers to have common planning time opportunities every day during specials.

3

Create a daily period for intervention and enrichment of at least 30 minutes.

This period then becomes the primary time for students to receive extra help or special education services, or to participate in enrichment activities. Districts that have successfully closed the achievement gap and have significantly raised the achievement of students with and without special needs provide extra instructional time each day in addition to core content instruction time.

4

Stagger the daily period for intervention and enrichment by grade.

This type of master schedule allows special education teachers and related services staff to efficiently and effectively work through each grade daily and to ensure that there are no times when services cannot be provided. For example, many teachers like to teach core subjects in the morning, but if the whole school does so, it limits opportunities to pull out students in the morning and forces almost all pull-outs to occur only in the afternoon.

5

Clearly specify and schedule reading and math whole-class time versus small-group instruction.

Specifying this in the master schedule allows specialists and interventionists to target support during small-group time and avoid whole-class time.

6

Establish and communicate clear student support services guidelines for when pull-out and push-in can occur, and what is off limits.

Guidelines commonly include:

- Pull-out services are not allowed during reading and math instruction, but push-in services may be provided during small-group instruction.
- Interventions should be provided in addition to and not instead of Tier 1 instruction.

These guidelines ensure that students are receiving interventions and supports in addition to — not instead of — essential core instruction.

7 **Ensure that content-strong staff provide interventions and support and that student needs are matched with teacher strengths.**

A teacher who has engaged in extensive study and training in a particular subject is more likely to understand individual student needs and have a wider repertoire of ways to teach the material. However, in many districts, extra instruction is provided either by paraprofessionals, who by definition do not have academic content expertise, or by special education teachers, who have expertise in pedagogy but often do not have specialized expertise in teaching subjects such as reading, math, and English.

8 **Encourage grouping of students with similar needs for intervention and small-group instruction.**

Effective grouping can help expand the reach and impact of the most appropriate teachers and staff, and can create opportunities for students to connect and collaborate with each other.

9 **Clearly communicate that general education teachers have primary responsibility for all students' learning — including those students in special education.**

Students are best served academically when their general education teacher takes primary responsibility for their learning. Response To Intervention (RTI) and efforts like it embrace general education as the foundation for all students' success.

10 **Enable collaboration among general education teachers, special education teachers, related service providers, and interventionists by making student availability transparent.**

Coordinating a student's IEP and intervention services across teachers within a school can be time consuming and challenging. It is even more difficult for students with greater needs who may require a combination of services each week. Common practices and tools can help reduce scheduling conflicts, help find ideal times to serve students without interrupting core instruction, and improve compliance.

These 10 tips can help elementary schools make the most efficient and effective use of student and staff time and help improve outcomes for students in intervention, special education, and related services. While scheduling and time management may seem mundane and lack the allure of new curriculum and new interventions, time is a precious resource and needs to be used intentionally and strategically. Optimizing time positively impacts student learning and establishes the foundation on which educators can make up for the past year and a half of lost opportunities. ♦

