

10 LESSONS TO REMEMBER

Taking Action to Improve Special Education

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Taking Action to Improve Special Education

Better outcomes are possible for students with mild to moderate disabilities and students who struggle. Best practices do exist and have been proven to work. Putting these best practices into action in a systemic way is arduous work but can dramatically improve the lives of students and can result in more effective and efficient use of resources. These 10 lessons can help guide the way.

Rigorous general education is key.

Too often, good intentions result in the primary responsibility for learning shifting away from the general education teacher to special education teachers or paraprofessionals. Students are best served academically when their general education teacher has primary responsibility.

Reading is the gateway to all learning.

Many referrals to special education are, at their root, due to reading difficulties. Elementary students should receive 90 minutes a day of literacy instruction. Systems should be in place to identify struggling readers at each grade level beginning in kindergarten.

Ensure extra time to learn.

Students who have difficulty achieving grade-level standards need extra instruction time. Elementary students who have difficulty with reading should receive at least 30 minutes of additional reading instruction, and secondary students who struggle with grade-level content should receive 60 minutes per day of extra instruction in the relevant subject area.

Make scheduling a priority.

Time is a highly valuable resource. Entrust a skilled scheduling expert and/or leverage technology to ensure the precious resource of student and staff time is being used efficiently and effectively. Scheduling these best practices can be challenging, but it is possible.

Ensure content-strong teachers deliver targeted interventions.

Interventions should be tightly connected to core curriculum and instruction and should be targeted to address students' specific skill gaps. And it is essential that these interventions be delivered by content-strong teachers.

Make time for collaboration to better support students.

General education teachers, special education teachers, and principals should meet and plan together to support students as a team. By meeting regularly, staff members can monitor student progress and update plans and interventions to ensure each student's needs are well understood and addressed effectively throughout the school day.

Focus on student outcomes, not inputs.

Don't just add more staff or more hours of service with the hope of improving outcomes. Use short-cycle assessment data to monitor progress and make adjustments with a focus on results. Better results may be achieved by investing in coaching and/or professional development or by implementing some of the other best practices.

Maximize time with students.

The number-one priority of teachers and service providers is to help students. Psychologists, social workers, counselors, and behaviorists often spend too much of their time in meetings and doing paperwork. Keep the focus on spending time with students by setting guidelines and streamlining meetings and paperwork.

Use data to track progress and inform improvement.

If current practices are not delivering desired results, adding more staff, more paraprofessionals, and more hours of service is the path of least resistance, but this approach seldom yields significant improvement for students. Use data to track progress and inform improvements to deliver results for students.

High expectations and rigor matter.

Research says that when teachers held high expectations for students with disabilities and provided challenging instruction, students demonstrated significant gains in academic achievement. Believing in students' capabilities and providing the necessary supports to help them meet high expectations is important to success.