



District  
Management  
Group

FEATURE

# Improving Special Education

*District Management Group's Framework and Approach*

*by Joseph Costello and Matt Crowell*

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.33, Fall 2023

*Districts that have successfully closed the achievement gap and significantly raised the achievement of students provide extra instruction time each day in addition to core content instruction time.*



# Improving Special Education

## District Management Group's Framework and Approach

*Joseph Costello and Matt Crowell*

It was nearly 50 years ago on November 29, 1975, that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment possible. Currently, over 7 million public school students—about 15%—receive special education services.<sup>1</sup> Despite great effort and significant resources directed to providing supports, districts continue to be challenged by a persistent achievement gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. A 2018 meta-analysis of 23 studies found that, on average, students with disabilities performed more than three years below their nondisabled peers.<sup>2</sup> And this gap has likely been exacerbated by the pandemic; there is evidence that students with disabilities were among those most severely affected by the disruptions to learning and to their ability to access the needed supports.<sup>3</sup> The need to address improving outcomes for our nation's students with disabilities has never been more urgent.

The good news is that best practices do exist and can even be achieved cost effectively. Drawing on best-practice research and nearly two decades of experience working

with districts, District Management Group (DMGroup) has created a framework encompassing seven key best practices that can help students with mild to moderate disabilities—as well as students without disabilities—achieve higher levels of success while also making more efficient and effective use of district resources.

### Taking Action to Improve Special Education: DMGroup's Framework

District Management Group's framework focuses on seven key best practices that when implemented as an interconnected system can improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities as well as students without disabilities (*Exhibit 1*). In creating this framework, we draw upon our extensive research into best practices with emphasis on research from the What Works Clearinghouse,<sup>4</sup> the National Reading Panel,<sup>5</sup> and John Hattie's Visible Learning research,<sup>6</sup> our own research and benchmarking studies; and our in-depth examinations of those districts most successful in this area. In addition, this framework—and particularly our choice of best practices—is significantly shaped by our experience partnering with over 200 districts nationwide over the past nearly 20 years.

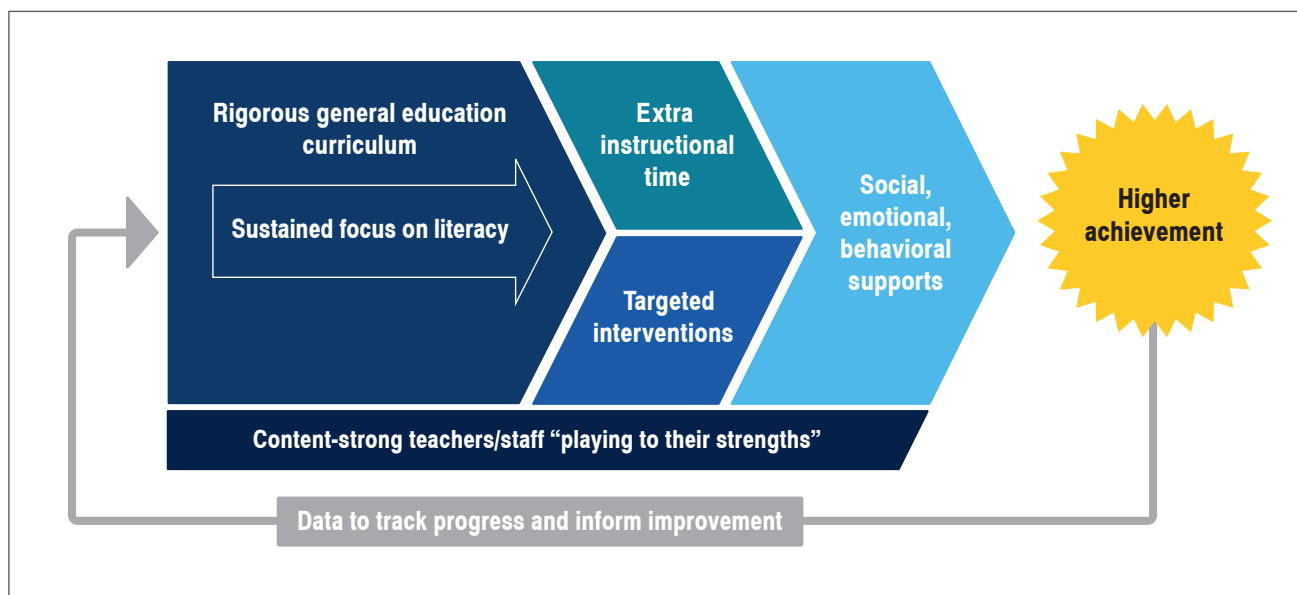
The seven best practices in our framework will undoubtedly sound very familiar to you. But it is putting these key best practices into action, and doing so in an interconnected, systemic fashion, that is central to success. In too many districts, fear of noncompliance, uncertainty about regulations, and concerns about the deep sensitivities to any changes have stymied the implementation of these best practices. Adding staff and layering in programs has been the path of least resistance; unfortunately, this strategy has generally failed to deliver meaningful improvement in outcomes for students. Making changes to current practices to implement best practices is challenging and arduous work—but with broad-based engagement of stakeholders, coordinated effort, time, patience, and commitment, a brighter, more equitable future is possible for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Here, we provide a brief overview of our framework.

## 1 Provide rigorous general education curriculum and instruction

Rigorous general education instruction is critical for student success. If general education core or Tier I instruction is strong, all students benefit, including students with disabilities (*Exhibit 2*). Providing students with rigorous general education instruction taught by content-strong teachers can increase the achievement of students with and without disabilities.

In many districts, particularly in elementary schools, students are often pulled from core instructional math and ELA blocks for small-group instruction with a special education teacher. While well-intentioned, this practice may shift responsibility for student success away

*Exhibit 1* DMGROUP'S FRAMEWORK FOR IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION



Source: DMGroup

“

*The seven best practices in our framework will undoubtedly sound very familiar to you. But it is putting these key best practices into action, and doing so in an interconnected, systemic fashion that is central to success.*

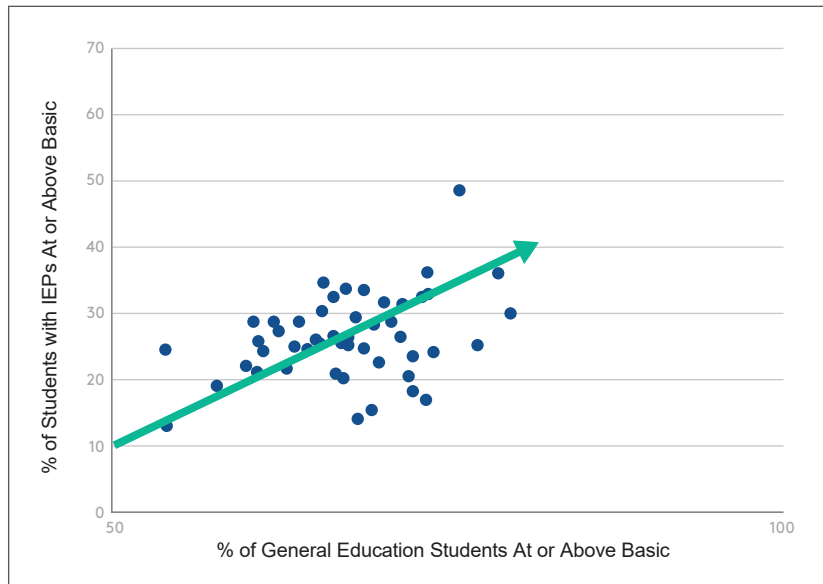
from the general education teachers when, in fact, students are best served academically when their general education teacher takes primary responsibility for their learning and provides a rigorous general education curriculum to all students. A recent study from the University of Indiana showed that students in high-inclusion education settings scored 24 points higher on ELA state tests and 18 points higher on math state tests than students in low-inclusion settings.<sup>7</sup> Interventions are also often best provided by content-strong staff, which is the hallmark of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Fundamentally, MTSS and efforts like it embrace rigorous general education as the foundation for all students' success. Creating strong collaboration between general educators and special educators is critical to ensure that students with disabilities receive the highest-quality instruction possible from teachers with content expertise.

Supporting teachers to do this important work is critical. The most effective means of improving Tier 1 instruction is through professional development paired with strong instructional coaching.<sup>8</sup> These supports can help teachers to engage students in higher-order thinking, teach reading using a science-based approach, use real-time short-cycle/formative assessments to check understanding, analyze student data to inform instruction, maintain grade-level expectations for all students, and progress-monitor results. These skills build teachers' capacity to meet the wide range of learning needs in their classrooms, including those of students with disabilities.

## 2 Coordinated and sustained focus on reading

Reading is the gateway to all other learning. Early reading difficulties may contribute to the overidentification of students for special education. Specific learning disabilities account for approximately a third of all disability types in the U.S., and nearly 80% of students with specific learning disabilities are identified due to reading challenges.<sup>9</sup> Referral rates rise in third through sixth grades when reading difficulties make it hard for students

**Exhibit 2 NAEP GRADE 4 READING PERFORMANCE BY STATE OF STUDENTS WITH IEPs VS. STUDENTS IN GENERAL EDUCATION**



Source: DMGroup graph prepared with data from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment, 2022.

to learn math, science, and social studies. And, as is well known, an overwhelming majority of students who have not mastered reading by the end of third grade will continue to struggle throughout high school and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

Key best practices for teaching reading include:

- 90 minutes a day of literacy instruction at the elementary level.
- A science-based approach to literacy including the explicit teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics as well as comprehension at the elementary level; explicit instruction in reading at the secondary level when needed by struggling students.
- Identifying students who struggle to read beginning in kindergarten and continuing at each grade level.
- One person in charge of reading at the district level to ensure focus and consistency. With so many approaches and stakeholders involved in reading and with funding for reading programming and interventions often stemming from a variety of sources (operating budget, Title I, Title IIa, IDEA, etc.), dedicating one person to be responsible and accountable for integrating and coordinating efforts, initiatives, and resources enables a district to provide consistency and alignment district-wide.<sup>11</sup>

# 3

## Extra time to learn

Students who have difficulty achieving grade-level standards often need more instructional time to catch up and keep up with their peers. They must master previous content and may need current content explained a few more times or explained in a different way.

In many schools, students with greater learning needs are provided extra adults but not extra time. Students with greater needs 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. Some schools have specialized instruction in place, but it is often not in addition to the regular period. For example, in some schools, students with greater learning needs may be assigned to an “alternative” core class, a lower-level general education class that covers less content with less rigor.

Districts that have successfully closed the achievement gap and significantly raised the achievement of students provide extra instruction time each day in addition to core content instruction time.

- At the elementary level, students who have difficulty with reading should receive at least 30 minutes a day of additional reading instruction.<sup>12</sup>
- At the secondary level, where the content is more complex and the scope of prior learning is even larger, the extra instruction time required for students with additional learning needs to catch up and master grade-level content is typically at least 60 minutes per day or one additional period per day. This extra time can be used to pre-teach materials, reteach the day’s lesson, address missing foundational skills, and correct misunderstandings.

# 4

## Targeted interventions

Interventions should be delivered through evidence-based best practices in a manner that supplements rigorous general education instruction. Intervention support should be flexible and fluid, and tailored to meet the unique needs of each student.

Throughout the intervention process, data meetings and progress monitoring should drive decisions to adjust



*Districts that have successfully closed the achievement gap and significantly raised the achievement of students provide extra instruction time each day in addition to core content instruction time.*

support and determine the next level of intervention needed. This comprehensive and dynamic approach maximizes learning opportunities for students, promotes skill development, fosters self-efficacy, and facilitates inclusion education experiences for students with disabilities.

Some key things to remember:

- Intervention should be tightly connected to core curriculum and instruction.
- Students should be dynamically grouped based on identified needs.
- The training and background of the instructor, the length of intervention time provided, and the type of instruction presented during intervention are more significant factors for increasing student achievement than intervention group size.

## 5

## Content-strong teachers to provide interventions and support

Nothing matters more than the effectiveness of the teacher.<sup>13</sup> As standards have risen and the complexity of the content has increased, a deep understanding and mastery of content has become even more important. A teacher who has engaged in extensive study and training in a particular subject is more likely to have a wider repertoire of ways to teach the material.

Students with additional learning needs should receive targeted support from staff who are highly skilled in the content area and have a proven track record of success. For example, students struggling in math should be provided extra help by a math teacher, and students struggling in science should be provided extra help by a teacher trained in science. While this seems like common sense, in many districts, extra instruction is provided by staff who may not have the specific training or certification in the content area. In some cases, paraprofessionals or special education teachers are asked to provide interventions despite their not having extensive expertise within a specific subject area such as math, ELA, or reading.

## 6

## Social-emotional and behavioral supports

Meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) needs of students is a prerequisite to meeting their academic needs. Unmet social-emotional and behavioral needs can impact a student's executive functioning, self-efficacy, persistence, prosocial behavior, grades, and scores on standardized tests.<sup>14</sup> The demand for SEB support continues to rise across the county; according to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 80% of public schools reported that the pandemic has negatively impacted students' social, emotional, and behavioral development.<sup>15</sup> With the increase in needs, it is more critical than ever for schools to provide comprehensive SEB support for students of all needs.

Key to meeting rising student needs in the face of hiring challenges and budget constraints is to maximize the reach and impact of existing staff, partner creatively, and ensure that IDEA funds are being fully leveraged.

Psychologists, social workers, counselors, and behaviorists have many responsibilities. They play an integral role in the identification and evaluation of special education students, manage many IEPs and 504s, attend meetings, coach teachers, communicate with parents, and of course, directly support students. To expand the reach and impact of these skilled staff, it is important to maximize their time with students and their time spent supporting teachers and staff. Guidelines need to be established to specify the amount of time that should be spent supporting

“

*In too many districts, if last year's efforts didn't work as well as desired, more staff, more paraprofessionals, more co-teaching, and more hours of service are added. These changes seldom help students and always cost more.*

students and supporting teachers and staff. Examining processes and working to streamline meetings and paperwork can also significantly increase their time available.

Partnerships are another effective way to expand supports while minimizing costs to the district. Many districts have formed successful partnerships with local nonprofit counseling agencies, teaching hospitals, graduate psychology programs, and insurance-funded mental health counselors.

It is also valuable to review the district's IDEA Part B spending and ensure that the district is making the most of these federal funds. The complex law and the many technical rules easily give rise to misunderstandings and result in many districts taking a narrower interpretation than specified by the regulations (see “Rethink IDEA Service and Spending Opportunities to Make the Most of Federal Funds,” page 26).



## 7

## Data to track progress and inform improvement

The focus must be on results, not on inputs. In too many districts, if last year's efforts didn't work as well as desired, more staff, more paraprofessionals, more co-teaching, and more hours of service are added. These changes seldom help students and always cost more. If the current approach isn't effective, current practices must be reviewed and modified.

Performance data from short-cycle assessments should be used as a way to inform instruction and progress-monitor students. DMGroup has been partnering with districts to address a wide range of challenges—from improving math and reading to increasing attendance to raising graduation rates—using short-cycle assessment, frequent data-based progress monitoring, focused goals, and team coaching; this approach, which we call our Breakthrough Results program, is delivering measurable results for students. Tracking progress motivates staff and students alike and keeps the focus on continuing to drive improved outcomes for students.

### Tackling Change to Improve Outcomes

Despite the many efforts over nearly 50 years, the nation's progress on raising educational outcomes for students with disabilities has been disappointing. But there is hope. Taking a systems-thinking approach to implementing the key best practices outlined here can make a difference. It is an arduous process and for many districts involves making some large-scale shifts in practices, staffing, scheduling, and roles and responsibilities. It demands much collaborative, open, and frequent dialogue among staff and with families. And it takes time. Districts that have been able to implement these improvements have generally devoted three or more years to the effort, understanding that moving too fast could erode trust and understanding, but also knowing that waiting would only delay helping students in need.

District Management Group stands ready to support districts in this challenging but critically important work. Our work with districts includes examining current practices, identifying areas of strength to leverage, making recommendations on high-impact opportunities for

improvement, and working collaboratively to design a methodical implementation plan to yield results for students with mild to moderate disabilities, as well as students without disabilities. Particularly after the last few years of disrupted schooling, the need to take action and get results is urgent. As we approach the 50th anniversary of IDEA, we look forward to partnering with districts to help realize the goals of this legislation to achieve a better future for students with disabilities and for all students. ♦

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "Students with Disabilities," *The Condition of Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (last updated May 2023), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>.
- <sup>2</sup> Allison Gilmour, Douglas Fuchs, and Joseph H. Wehby, "Are Students with Disabilities Accessing the Curriculum? A Meta-Analysis of the Reading Achievement Gap Between Students With and Without Disabilities," *Exceptional Children* 85, no. 3 (2019): 329–346, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402918795830>. A pre-publication version of the article is also available at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Allison-Gilmour/publication/327653148\\_Are\\_Students\\_With\\_Disabilities\\_Accessing\\_the\\_Curriculum\\_A\\_Meta-Analysis\\_of\\_the\\_Reading\\_Achievement\\_Gap\\_Between\\_Students\\_With\\_and\\_Without\\_Disabilities/links/5b9bd83c299b3e603155c5/Are-Students-With-Disabilities-Accessing-the-Curriculum-A-Meta-Analysis-of-the-Reading-Achievement-Gap-Between-Students-With-and-Without-Disabilities.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Allison-Gilmour/publication/327653148_Are_Students_With_Disabilities_Accessing_the_Curriculum_A_Meta-Analysis_of_the_Reading_Achievement_Gap_Between_Students_With_and_Without_Disabilities/links/5b9bd83c299b3e603155c5/Are-Students-With-Disabilities-Accessing-the-Curriculum-A-Meta-Analysis-of-the-Reading-Achievement-Gap-Between-Students-With-and-Without-Disabilities.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Evie Blad, "Special Education During the Pandemic, in Charts," *Education Week*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/special-education-during-the-pandemic-in-charts/2022/10>.
- <sup>4</sup> The What Works Clearinghouse, sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences, is an extensive, up-to-date resource library; see <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/early-childhoodinstruction3>.
- <sup>5</sup> National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups*, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000), <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> John Hattie, "Global Research Database," Visible Learning MetaX, version 1.2, updated June 2023, <https://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/Influences>.
- <sup>7</sup> Sandi M. Cole et al., "The Relationship of Special Education Placement and Student Academic Outcomes," Study Phase 2, University of Indiana Center on Education and Lifelong Learning (n.d.), <https://iiedc.indiana.edu/cell/what-we-do/pdf/Inclusion-Study-Phase2.pdf>. See also Sandi M. Cole et al., "The Relationship of Special Education Placement and Student Academic Outcomes," *The Journal of Special Education* 54, no. 4 (2021): 217–227, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466920925033>.
- <sup>8</sup> Bruce Joyce, *Student Achievement Through Staff Development*, 3rd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002).
- <sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Students and Their Families," President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002, [https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/calls/2010/earlypartc/revitalizing-special\\_education.pdf](https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/calls/2010/earlypartc/revitalizing-special_education.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation," 2012, <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy>.
- <sup>11</sup> Levenson, Nathan et al., "Ensuring More Students Read on Grade Level: Cost Effective Strategies," in *Spending Money Wisely: Getting the Most from School District Budgets* (Boston: District Management Council, 2014).
- <sup>12</sup> Jeanne Wanzek et al., "Effects of a Year Long Supplemental Reading Intervention for Students with Reading Difficulties in Fourth Grade," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 109 (2017): 1103–1119, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED581509.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> Hattie, "Global Research Database."
- <sup>14</sup> Stephanie M. Jones and Jennifer Kahn, "The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development," National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, The Aspen Institute, 2017, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/evidence-base-learn/>.
- <sup>15</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "More Than 80 Percent of U.S. Public Schools Report Pandemic Has Negatively Impacted Student Behavior and Socio-Emotional Development," press release, July 6, 2022, [https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press\\_releases/07\\_06\\_2022.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp).