

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

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Editors' Welcome to the Inaugural Issue of *Inclusive Practices*

Jennifer A. Kurth, PhD¹ and Andrea L. Ruppard, PhD²

Welcome and Introduction

We would like to join the leadership of TASH in welcoming you to this inaugural issue of the new e-journal, *Inclusive Practices*. TASH has long been a leader in promoting inclusive practices across the lifespan through advocacy, education, research, individualized supports, and legislation. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* has been a flagship journal in the area of extensive support needs and is a key vehicle for distributing sound research and promoting the TASH mission and values, and will continue to publish quality research articles. We also acknowledge that all professions have the responsibility to ensure their members are knowledgeable of current topics and best practices (Ludlow & Dieker, 2013) and that we share a responsibility for making this research accessible and useful for a wide audience. With this responsibility in mind, we are pleased to launch *Inclusive Practices* as a companion to *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*. In further alignment with the TASH mission, and given that many people with disabilities who have extensive support needs across learning, communication, social, and/or physical domains continue to disproportionately experience segregation within schools, employment, and community, the focus of *Inclusive Practices* will be centered on promoting inclusive practices for people with extensive support needs by directly communicating research-based strategies and current events to them and their supporters in a user-friendly, ready-to-implement format.

What Is *Inclusive Practices*?

We envision *Inclusive Practices* as an instrument for keeping practitioners, defined broadly as educators, direct support providers, self-advocates, and family members, informed and knowledgeable of emerging trends and best practices. *Inclusive Practices* aims to accomplish this through the publication of practitioner-focused material, in which cutting-edge, high-quality research is presented in a user-friendly format for people

working to promote the inclusion of people with extensive support needs in schools, homes, communities, and workplaces. We see this journal as an exciting opportunity to bridge the research-to-practice gap and give people tools and ideas to implement research, policy, and innovations in their work immediately. As an online journal, we anticipate this to be an accessible one-stop-place to get the most current information and strategies useful to practitioners.

As co-editors, we are committed to ensuring the highest quality practices are shared in *Inclusive Practices*. To accomplish this, all papers considered for *Inclusive Practices* will be subject to the peer review process, with timely reviews completed that represent sound and rigorously vetted ideas and information. *Inclusive Practices* will uphold the integrity of the peer review process and support the publication of material that promotes the inclusion of people with extensive support needs in schools, homes, communities, and workplaces. Emphasis will be placed on ready-to-implement practices that have sound research support and make an original contribution to the literature. Topics must be of importance to practitioners working in the field of significant support needs. A wide range of topics are likely relevant; for example, inclusion in the community, inclusive education, competitive integrated employment, self-advocacy, policy, integrated community living, diversity, human rights, and relationships.

Who Will Read *Inclusive Practices*?

The intended audience of *Inclusive Practices* are practitioners, including, for example, teachers of students with extensive support needs from birth to age 21, family members of people with extensive support needs across the lifespan, job coaches, advocates with and without extensive support needs, direct support providers, researchers, preservice professionals, and any other stakeholder who is promoting the inclusion of people with extensive support needs in all aspects of life. Our readership will therefore be wide-ranging, reflecting novices

through experts in the field of inclusive practices. The Editorial Board is interested in manuscripts that speak to this wide-ranging audience and address current and emerging topics that are important and relevant to our readers.

What Is Published in *Inclusive Practices*?

To accomplish the mission of informing stakeholders with up-to-date research-based best practices, *Inclusive Practices* will publish three types of articles: feature articles, leading edge articles, and perspectives articles. Descriptions of these types of articles and the author guidelines for submission are available on the journal website (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/inclusive-practices/journal203704>). The current issue includes examples of all three types of manuscripts. All manuscripts should directly support the purpose of *Inclusive Practices*: to promote inclusive experiences for people with extensive support needs across the lifespan through informing practitioners of best practices and current events. All articles should be relevant to the readers of *Inclusive Practices* and reflect current research-based practices. Articles should further provide detailed and specific information that are readily useful to practitioners, are free from jargon, reflect up-to-date research and current events, and are innovative contributions to the literature.

How to Write for *Inclusive Practices*

We welcome articles of all types from researchers, practitioners, and others who have important, timely, contributions that align with the purpose of the journal. All manuscripts should be written in the format specified by the current *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). Information about APA format can be found at: <https://apastyle.apa.org>. We also encourage authors to review guidelines for writing about people with disabilities, in particular, the *Guidelines: How to write about people with disabilities* (9th Edition), available at: <https://rtcil.org/products/media/guidelines>.

This inaugural issue of *Inclusive Practices* is also a useful resource for authors. We have invited leaders in diverse areas to provide articles across many of the domains that will be the focus of articles in *Inclusive Practices*. We suggest authors who are considering submitting a manuscript to *Inclusive Practices* read these articles to learn more about the topics covered in *Inclusive Practices* and how authors communicated these topics to readers, including how the topics are discussed, made engaging to readers, and are based on current events and grounded in current research evidence.

The Inaugural Issue

Dr. Erik Carter at Vanderbilt University is well recognized for his expertise in community inclusion, particularly in faith-based organizations, and he has provided a feature article describing how individuals with extensive support needs are welcomed as valued members of congregations. Dr. Virginia

Walker at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and her colleague Dr. Sheldon Loman at the Portland State University are recognized for their expertise in positive behavior supports and inclusive practices, and have provided a feature article describing strategies for including students with extensive support needs in all tiers of schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports. Dr. Alicia Saunders at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and her colleagues are each experts in providing curricular supports and instruction for students with extensive support needs, and have provided a feature article describing the use of universal design for learning framework to plan and implement grade-aligned mathematics instruction in inclusive classrooms. In addition to these three feature articles, Dr. Amy Hanreddy at the California State University, Northridge, an expert in inclusive education, provides a Leading Edge article focused on delivery of virtual learning supports for students with extensive support needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, an expert in school inclusion, Dr. Kurt Schneider, is interviewed by Dr. Diane Ryndak and colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro about lessons learned from large-scale system change for inclusive practices.

How Articles Are Reviewed for *Inclusive Practices*

Manuscripts submitted to *Inclusive Practices* are screened by the Managing Editor and Editor to determine (a) appropriateness for the journal, (b) conformation to APA and journal guidelines, and (c) adherence to page limits. Feature articles will adhere to the following peer review process: Manuscripts meeting the screening criteria will be forwarded to one of the Editors, who will then send the manuscript out for anonymous and rigorous peer review to two to three editorial board members, each of whom is selected for their particular expertise. A guest reviewer may also be invited to review the manuscript. Once all reviews have been returned, the Editor will make a decision about the manuscript taking into consideration the feedback from the reviewers, the Editor's own assessment of the manuscript, and the perceived importance, timeliness, and contribution of the manuscript to the field of extensive support needs. Decisions include (a) publish, (b) publish with revisions, (c) do not publish/invite revisions, and (d) do not publish. The editorial decision is communicated to the corresponding author along with a summary that supports the decision. The review process takes from 3 to 4 months. Manuscripts accepted for publication are published ahead of print on SAGE Online First.

Leading Edge and Perspective Page articles will adhere to the following peer review process: If a manuscript meets the screening criteria, the Editor will send the manuscript out for anonymous review to at least one Editorial Board member with expertise in the topic. Once this review has been returned, the Editor will make a decision about the manuscript taking into consideration the feedback from the reviewer, the Editor's own

assessment of the manuscript, and the perceived importance, timeliness, and contribution of the manuscript to the field of significant support needs. Decisions include (a) publish, (b) publish with revisions, (c) do not publish/invite revisions, and (d) do not publish. The editorial decision is communicated to the corresponding author along with a summary that supports the decision. The review process takes between 3 and 4 months. Manuscripts accepted for publication are published ahead of print on SAGE Online First.

Conclusion

It is our pleasure and privilege to introduce *Inclusive Practices*. This inaugural issue is an exciting opportunity to share current research and events, and we believe it is a strong indication of our ongoing and unrelenting commitment to promote inclusion by reaching a wide audience of practitioners who share our commitment to promoting inclusive practices for people with extensive support needs across the lifespan. We are dedicated to creating an accessible and engaging forum for sharing ideas, strategies, research-based practices, and current events to all people—novice and experts alike—and together support enviable lives in an inclusive world.

Conflict of Interest

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FEATURE

A Place of Belonging

Including Individuals With Significant Disabilities in Faith Communities

Erik W. Carter, PhD¹

Abstract: Faith is central to the flourishing of so many children and adults with significant disabilities and their families. For congregations striving to be a place of inclusion and belonging for their *entire* community, the theological call to welcome people with disabilities can introduce a host of questions: What does it mean to be a community marked by belonging? What strategies and supports should we adopt to include people well? How can others assist us in this essential endeavor? This article presents a framework for reflecting on the practices and commitments of local congregations that contribute to belonging within a community of faith.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, disabilities, belonging, inclusion, faith formation

Spirituality and religious involvement can hold an important place in the lives of people with significant disabilities. Indeed, a growing collection of studies illustrate the place and prominence of faith in the lives of children and adults with intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities (see review by Carter, in press-b). Like anyone else, they want to know and be known by God, to love and be loved by their neighbors, to serve and be served by others, and to discover and live out their calling. Like anyone else, they want to explore, share, and deepen their faith in the midst of a caring and committed community. In other words, faith is no less relevant or important because someone has a disability (Carter, 2021). As emphasized in the TASH (2003) resolution on spirituality, “all people with disabilities have the

right to spiritual expression including the reflection upon and sharing of spiritual purposes for their lives.”

For churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other local congregations, the call to welcome people with disabilities is also quite clear. The scriptures and tenets of many religious traditions emphasize belonging themes of inclusion, hospitality, vulnerability, care, and community (Melcher et al., 2017; Schumm & Stoltzfus, 2016). Moreover, the faithful are often enjoined to love their neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to overturn societal hierarchies, to see each person as indispensable, to move the margins to the middle, and to recognize the *imago Dei* in everyone. Many congregations who have responded to this call can speak firsthand of how the

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presence, gifts, friendships, and contributions of individuals with significant disabilities have enriched and enlivened their communities.

Yet stories of wounding and exclusion are still often heard alongside stories of welcome and embrace. As is true of schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and other community settings, faith communities have been uneven in the extent to which they have supported the presence and participation of individuals with significant disabilities and their families (Carter, 2016; Griffin et al., 2012). Many congregation leaders and members feel uncertain of how best to widen their welcome when it comes to disability. Others are reluctant or resistant to making the changes needed to remove

existing barriers to full participation. And some have never really thought about who might be missing from their faith community. How might congregations move forward in this area?

This article offers guidance to congregations on becoming communities of belonging for individuals with and without significant disabilities. There is growing recognition that the

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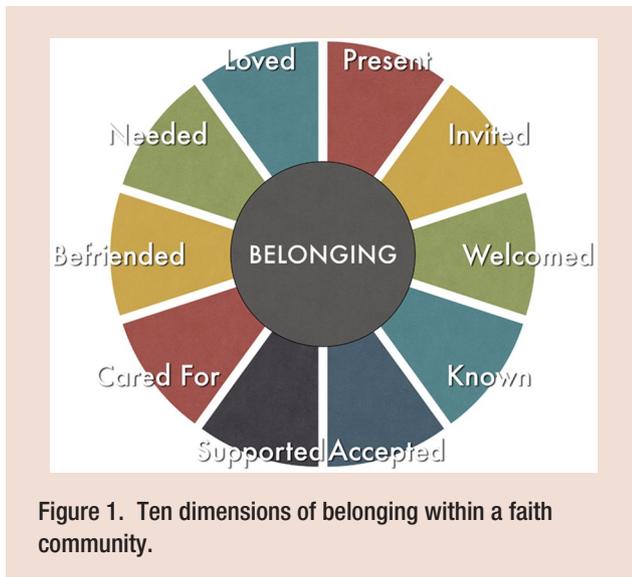


Figure 1. Ten dimensions of belonging within a faith community.

language of “inclusion” does not fully capture the depth of connection and mutuality people with disabilities desire (Carter, in press-a). In response, the concept of “belonging” has emerged as a fuller way of describing the intimacy, affiliation, membership, reciprocity, and relationships that people often yearn for within a community (Mahar et al., 2012; Swinton, 2012). But what does it really mean to belong within faith community? How can an abstract concept like belonging be actually experienced and promoted within a local congregation? In a series of studies, my colleagues and I asked individuals with disabilities and members of their families to reflect on the things that contributed to sense of belonging with their faith community (Carter, Biggs, et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2014). Although every person had a unique story to share, 10 dimensions of belonging emerged from across these numerous conversations. We heard that belonging was experienced when people were *present, invited, welcomed, noticed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved* (see Figure 1).

Pathways From Barriers to Belonging

These 10 dimensions of belonging provide points of reflection—and areas of potential response—for congregations wondering how to welcome well. In the remainder of this article, I address why each of these aspects of belonging matters so much and suggest steps you can take to ensure they are experienced by people with significant disabilities and their families. This reflection and response can be led by congregational leaders or undertaken by a team that brings different experiences and perspectives to this process. Figure 2 includes a set of guiding questions to help guide this reflection process.

To Be Present

Children and adults with disabilities are already present within the neighborhoods and schools of every city, county, and state (see

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci>). But do they have a presence in your congregation? Too often, individuals with significant disabilities are absent from the ordinary events and rituals that comprise life together in a faith community (Carter & Boehm, 2019; Whitehead, 2018). Yet belonging is born and built upon a foundation of shared presence. In other words, so many of the other dimensions—to be known, accepted, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved—are hard to experience in absence or from a distance.

Congregations can begin by reflecting on the extent to which individuals with disabilities and their families are already involved in the breadth of experiences they offer, such as worship services, religious education classes, small groups, youth programs, service projects, and social gatherings. Is their participation widespread, constrained to a few activities, or rarely observed? Wherever absence is found to be more common than presence, congregations should reflect on the factors that might be limiting this involvement. For example, barriers can be found in the areas of awareness, architecture, attitudes, expectations, supports, theology, and commitment. What specifically stands in the way of the presence of people with disabilities and their families?

To Be Invited

Invitations are the right remedy for absence. But they do much more than prompt presence. For individuals who often feel overlooked or ignored, an invitation reminds someone that she is actually noticed. It communicates that there are people who actually long for her company. Yet such invitations can remain quite rare for individuals with significant disabilities and their families. Although growing numbers of congregations are willing to include people with disabilities when they arrive, far fewer are actively pursuing people with disabilities when they do not. There is a distinct difference between these two postures.

Congregations must be proactive about inviting the involvement of individuals with significant disabilities. Review your website, social media, print media, and other outreach efforts to ensure they communicate clearly your commitment to welcoming people with disabilities and their families. Do your mission and materials mention disability? Are you advertising available assistance and supports? Is your choice of language and images (e.g., pictures, videos) likely to resonate with individuals and families? Ask local disability organizations, community agencies, and parent and self-advocacy groups to help share your information and materials through their networks. Although these general announcements can be valuable, personal invitations will be even more powerful. Hearing firsthand that your presence is actually desired can help quell any uncertainty about whether proclamations of “all are welcome” really do apply to you.

To Be Welcomed

The reception people receive whenever they arrive also impacts their sense of belonging. Are they greeted with a warm welcome or a cold shoulder? Does their presence elicit genuine delight or a reluctant response? Rich hospitality should be a hallmark of every congregation.

Are individuals with significant disabilities and their families:	What are we already doing well right now?	What could we do better or differently?	What should we start doing next?
Present <i>Are they participating in all aspects of congregational life?</i>			
Invited <i>Are we pursuing their presence through active invitations?</i>			
Welcomed <i>Are we communicating a warm—indeed extravagant—welcome whenever they arrive?</i>			
Known <i>Do we know them personally and for the strengths and gifts they possess?</i>			
Accepted <i>Are we receiving them unconditionally and graciously?</i>			
Cared For <i>Are we invested in their flourishing the other six days of the week?</i>			
Supported <i>Are we providing the assistance they need to participate fully and meaningfully?</i>			
Befriended <i>Are we creating opportunities for friendships to form and deepen?</i>			
Needed <i>Are we experiencing their talents, gifts, and contributions?</i>			
Loved <i>Are we loving them deeply and demonstrably?</i>			

Figure 2. Reflection tool for congregations.
Note. Adapted from Carter (2015).

But some faith communities still struggle to “welcome the stranger,” especially when a significant disability is involved. Their reluctance is seen as rejection. Similarly, some congregation members feel uncertain about what to say (or not say) and do (or not do) in the presence of people with significant disabilities. Their uncertainty is seen as avoidance. In the midst of each response, people with disabilities and their families come to feel unwanted—and they soon stop coming.

Hospitality can be surprisingly simple—introducing yourself, learning people’s names, seeking them out before services, asking about their week, inviting them to sit with you, introducing them to others, mentioning available supports, or reconnecting again later throughout the week. But it must also be intentional. Unfortunately, these ordinary gestures are not always extended to individuals with significant disabilities—sometimes deliberately, more often inadvertently. Provide

training and resources to congregation leaders and volunteers (e.g., greeters, ushers) who may feel reluctant or unsure about how best to welcome individuals who have complex communication difficulties, challenging or unusual behaviors, or extensive support needs. Sharing information about disability etiquette, appropriate language, thoughtful support strategies, and available congregation resources can foster both confidence and competence. Similarly, it is important to invite the input of people with disabilities and their families on other ways in which congregational activities and culture could be changed to further widen this welcome.

To Be Known

The ways in which people come to be known within a particular community also impact belonging. Most people long to be known personally and as individuals. Yet some people are

still known by the labels they have been given (e.g., “special needs children,” “differently abled adults”) rather than by their given names (e.g., Elena, Spencer, or Kamela). They are viewed only as members of a larger group rather than as unique persons—known about, but not really known personally. Similarly, most people want to be known by their strengths and positive qualities. Yet professional definitions and prevailing depictions of disability usually place the accent only on what someone cannot do or struggles to do. Each presents an incomplete or inaccurate portrait of a person, which shapes how they are viewed by others.

Faith communities should strive to know individuals with significant disabilities in a way that is strikingly different from contemporary society. The diagnostic labels used so widely within educational and professional circles should have no place within the discourse of a faith community. Instead, come alongside each person and invest time learning their story. Find out their interests, passions, strengths, virtues, and other positive qualities. Help them discern their spiritual gifts, talents, and calling—just as you might do for anyone else in the congregation. Parents, siblings, and other relatives can share their own insights into each of these areas, particularly when their family member has communication difficulties. Then, find ways of making introductions to others in ways that make these assets more obvious. Finally, offer inclusive experiences that provide contexts for others in the congregation to meet and get to know their fellow members with significant disabilities. Separate classes, programs, or ministry models inevitably limit the opportunities people with disabilities have to become personally known by the rest of their faith community.

To Be Accepted

People want to be part of communities in which they are embraced enthusiastically by others. They want to be assured of their acceptance—without condition and in the absence of any asterisks. Yet societal attitudes toward disability remain mixed and are often disheartening. Moreover, the same prejudices, stereotypes, and stigma that exist elsewhere can also be found within faith communities (Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016; Patka & McDonald, 2015). Theologies that define disability as the product of sin, conflate intellect with faith, define the *imago Dei* in terms of ability, or see people with disabilities as needing special healing can serve to further marginalize people. To experience belonging, people need to first experience acceptance.

Congregations can take a variety of steps toward promoting a culture of acceptance. Many promote awareness by hosting a regular worship service dedicated to the topic of inclusion or disability (e.g., “inclusion Sunday”) or participating in various disability and diversity awareness months (e.g., World Down Syndrome Day, Autism Awareness Month, National Disability Employment Awareness Month). Others disseminate awareness resources (e.g., bulletin inserts, videos) or incorporate curricular units within religious education programs to teach others about the gifts and lives of people with disabilities. Some also offer occasional training for program leaders and volunteers to

ensure they have the knowledge and skills needed to welcome and support individuals with significant disabilities effectively (e.g., Baggerman et al., 2015). Two key points should be emphasized here. First, acceptance must be seen as well as taught. When you model respectful interactions, use affirming language, communicate high expectations, and demonstrate love, others are more likely to follow this lead. Second, personal contact is the most powerful way of promoting acceptance (Scior & Werner, 2015). Getting to know someone personally spurs attitude change in a way that learning about a category of people more generally simply cannot.

To Be Supported

Most children and adults with significant disabilities will need ongoing support to participate in the spiritual and religious activities that are important to them. This might include transportation to events, modifications to activities, assistance during worship services, explanations of concepts, accessible materials, information about congregational offerings, behavioral supports, adapted equipment, a peer partner, or technology aids. The right combination of ordinary and specialized supports enables meaningful participation, but it also communicates a clear commitment to and desire for a person’s presence. Sadly, the inconsistency or unavailability of support within faith communities is a common lament among many families (Carter, Boehm, et al., 2016; O’Hanlon, 2013). Communities committed to belonging see the provision of support as essential rather than as optional. Moreover, they address needed supports as a forethought rather than as an afterthought.

The best supports are designed one person at a time. Congregations should meet with interested individuals with disabilities and their families—along with any friends or other supporters they identify—to develop a plan for supporting meaningful participation. Find out what areas of involvement they consider to be important at this particular time. Ask about their goals in areas like faith formation, social relationship, service to others, and degree of participation. Then identify the informal and formal supports that could help advance these goals and determine how they will be provided. Finally, equip others in the congregation to help provide these supports in respectful and effective ways. Recognizing that people’s priorities and preferences often change over time, support plans should be revisited periodically.

To Be Cared For

Healthy communities are invested in the flourishing of their members. For many individuals with significant disabilities and their families, the care and commitment of their faith community contribute substantially to their own thriving and quality of life (Biggs & Carter, 2016; Boehm & Carter, 2019). For example, some families access practical (e.g., respite, financial assistance, information), emotional (e.g., personal encouragement, advice, support groups), spiritual (e.g., prayer, pastoral counseling), and social (e.g., friendships, companionship) supports through their local congregation.

Similarly, some individuals with significant disabilities have received assistance from congregation members in areas such as employment, transportation, community participation, recreation, and relationships (Carter, 2011).

Congregations can have a direct impact on the thriving of individuals with disabilities and families all 7 days of the week, not just on the days you gather for worship. Begin by getting to know them and asking what they would consider to be most helpful. Avoid assumptions that may not reflect their preferences or priorities; care can be extended in both healing and wounding ways. Although some congregations launch more formal care initiatives (e.g., respite nights, parent or sibling support groups, family retreats), do not overlook the simple ways in which fellow congregation members can demonstrate care: providing a ride, stopping by to check in, sharing a meal, assisting someone to find a job, praying with them, attending a medical appointment, helping with a bill, sending a card, calling to say hello, assisting with housework or yard work, or just being present together. None of these actions require expertise or experience related to disability; they are part and parcel of what congregation members naturally do for one another. Encourage these same actions for people with disabilities and their families.

To Be Befriended

Belonging is rooted in relationships. Having people in our lives who know us, like us, accept us, need us, miss us, and love us is at the heart of our well-being. The same is true for individuals with significant disabilities. Their need for friendships and other supportive peer relationships is a universal need, one grounded in the core belief that humans were created for community. Yet studies find that friendships can be few or fleeting for individuals with significant disabilities (Brock et al., 2020). Instead, the social networks of many children and adults are composed primarily of family members and paid service providers. Faith communities can offer a much-needed remedy to the isolation and loneliness experienced by far too many people with disabilities.

Congregations should shine when it comes to fostering relationships. Friendships are most likely to form when people participate in shared activities based on common interests over a sustained period of time. Ensure that every individual with a disability receives the invitations and supports needed to participate in the full range of available congregational activities, such as worship services, small groups, fellowship activities, service opportunities, and more occasional events (e.g., retreats, summer camps, mission trips, celebrations). A commitment to inclusive practices exponentially expands the opportunities people with and without significant disabilities have to meet one another and discover new friendships. In addition, identify others in the congregation who share the individual's interests, hobbies, and passions and facilitate introductions. For children and youth, peer-mediated support models can provide regular opportunities for individuals with disabilities to spend time with and get to know their peers within religious education classes, social activities, or service projects. Similarly, adult leaders can actively facilitate social

interaction by designing collaborative activities, ensuring children with disabilities have a reliable way to communicate, providing needed information about each another, giving children with disabilities valued roles within congregational activities, and providing the right balance of support and independence.

To Be Needed

Every person is endowed with immeasurable worth, but not every person feels valued. So much of contemporary society still struggles to recognize the ways in which people with significant disabilities can enrich the lives of others and make important contributions within their community. So when a faith community comes to see people with significant disabilities as indispensable and crucial to its flourishing, it provides a powerful counterpoint to these prevailing views. Being part of a community that seeks out and affirms your gifts brings additional assurance that you really do belong there. Like anyone else, people with disabilities want to know that their presence matters, that they are needed by others, and that their absence evokes a longing for their return. As Swinton (2012) asserts, "To belong you need to be missed" (p. 183).

Identify and develop the gifts and talents of individuals with significant disabilities in your congregation. Then look for places where those gifts and talents are precisely what others need. For example, John's beautiful voice should have a place in the choir, Javier's contagious smile would serve the congregation well as greeter, Evon's obsession with detail could be useful on the set-up team, Aiden's servant spirit would be helpful in the soup kitchen, and Neva's faithfulness would enrich the prayer team. Similarly, create opportunities for individuals with disabilities to serve others, rather than remaining only on the receiving end of service. This might include volunteering as an usher or greeter, assisting with aspects of a worship service (e.g., reading scripture, leading a prayer), joining the choir or worship team, visiting those who are sick or homebound, helping in the nursery or with the children's program, assisting in community outreach programs, serving on a committee, praying with and for others, or assisting in any of the numerous other ways that fellow congregation members serve. Assuming valued roles within a congregation transforms how people with disabilities are viewed by others, as well as how they feel about themselves (Wolfensberger, 1983).

To Be Loved

Faith communities are quick to see the connection between love and belonging. We long to be part of a community that loves us deeply, unconditionally, lavishly, and patiently. And we are called to be the sort of people who love others in this same way. Love is a distinguishing feature of a faithful community. It is love—not law—that compels a congregation to invite, welcome, know, accept, support, care for, befriend, and need individuals with significant disabilities. And it is love that in turn grows out of these same efforts. Although special education and disability service systems can do many important and impactful things, they were not designed to love. Faith communities are.

In his article on inclusion and friendship, Hans Reinders (2011) suggests that

If “being loved” is the most important thing in our lives, then the most important thing is something we cannot do by ourselves or on our own. It is not a goal we can strive for, it is not something we can achieve. (p. 432)

Instead, love is a gift to be received from others. Congregations should be generous in this gift-giving. Look for ways of demonstrating love in concrete, ongoing, and transformative ways. Encourage others to do the same. Where love abounds, belonging is likely to follow.

Reflecting and Responding

These 10 dimensions of belonging—expressed by individuals with significant disabilities and their families—point congregations to potential areas of action and investment. But there is no simple recipe for this important work—no single strategy or scripted intervention to adopt. There are more than 300,000 congregations across the United States, each with its own commitments, culture, beliefs, resources, histories, and memberships. Similarly, there are more than 4 million Americans with significant disabilities, each possessing a unique set of strengths, needs, passions, personalities, beliefs, and goals. In other words, the pathway to belonging will look somewhat different for each person and in each place. Moving forward requires prayerful reflection on the particular movements that are most needed next.

Congregations should form a core team to undertake this reflection. This provides intentionality, promotes accountability, and prompts movement. Invite a cross-section of congregation members who collectively see the congregation from a variety of vantage points. This might include individuals with disabilities, family members, clergy, congregational staff, and other interested members. Similarly, involve ministry leaders who are familiar with programming for children, youth, adults, and seniors. Finally, seek out congregational members who have professional roles related to disability (e.g., educators, counselors, related services providers, health care professionals) or invite representatives from local organizations or agencies that serve individuals with disabilities (e.g., Centers for Independent Living; residential or employment providers; local chapters of The Arc, Down Syndrome Association, or Autism Society; university programs). Remember that individuals with significant disabilities and their families are the very best experts on what contributes to their belonging. Their perspectives should be prioritized throughout this process.

Figure 2 displays a simple tool that can help guide this reflection process. For each of the 10 dimensions of belonging, teams should address the following questions: *What are we already doing well right now? What could we do better or differently? What should we start doing next?* Team members can share their own experiences and observations in these areas.

They can interview or survey others in the congregation to solicit their input. And they can convene the entire congregation for a “community conversation” (Carter et al., 2017) or hold more focused listening sessions with particular stakeholder groups. Based on what they learn, the team crafts a written plan that addresses the steps the congregation will take moving forward. This process of prayerful reflection should be revisited regularly as new needs and opportunities emerge.

Conclusion

Belonging is not a special need, it is a universal need. Indeed, the 10 dimensions of belonging addressed in this article are relevant and important to people with and without disabilities alike. We all want to be present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved. Congregations that make strong strides in each of these areas on behalf of individuals with significant disabilities are quite likely to discover that they have become a more hospitable place for many others in their community as well.

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Bio

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Leveraging the UDL Framework to Plan Grade-Aligned Mathematics in Inclusive Settings

Jenny R. Root, PhD, BCBA¹, Bree Jimenez, PhD², and Alicia Saunders, PhD³

Abstract: Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that can be applied when planning inclusive mathematics to benefit all students in a classroom, including students with extensive support needs. This article provides a step-by-step process for using the UDL framework to plan instruction, meeting the needs of all learners. Strategies such as collaboration, prioritizing learning goals, contextualizing mathematics to make it meaningful to learners, and planning for variability across the three principles of UDL—multiple means of expression, representation, and action and expression—are discussed.

Keywords: inclusive education, mathematics, Universal Design for Learning, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, access to and progress in the general curriculum

Mr. Morgan is a special education teacher who co-teaches with Ms. Singer, an eighth-grade math teacher. Their classroom, like most, is a heterogeneous class of diverse students with multiple strengths and needs. Some of the diverse students include English Language Learners and students receiving special education services. A few of their students have extensive support needs (ESN) and take their state's alternate assessment aligned with alternate achievement standards. Nia is one of their female students who has a moderate intellectual disability. Within the mathematics classroom, she enjoys collaborating with her peers through partner work. She has difficulty remembering math facts but she is able to use

“UDL MINIMIZES NEEDS (BARRIERS) BY EMBEDDING THOSE RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES AND EBP INTO THE EVERYDAY MATHEMATICS CLASSROOM.”

manipulatives or a calculator to complete mathematical procedures.

The need for competency in mathematics in the 21st century is essential to ensuring high quality of life outcomes for individuals with ESN, such as competitive employment, independent living, and engagement in society (Browder et al., 2018). Despite this tremendous need for competency in mathematics, there is an equity problem when it comes to educating students with ESN in mathematics. Students with ESN have not, historically, performed well in the area of mathematics on alternative achievement tests. In a sample of seven states, only 4% to 8% of students were able to solve applied computational problems (Kearns et al., 2011). In addition, data collected by the National Center on Educational Outcomes found that based upon national evaluations of student mathematics proficiency performance on alternate assessments,

only an average of 6.0% of students were proficient and above in mathematics (Thurlow & Wu, 2016). The question then arises if this is a deficit problem, a lack of access to the general curriculum problem, or an instructional problem. It appears to be the latter two.

In a study that examined data from 15 states, researchers found statistically significant differences in mathematics performance for students who were included or in less restrictive environments than those in more restrictive settings (Kleinert et al., 2015). This is quite troublesome considering 55.3% to 73.1% of students with ESN spend most or all of their day in segregated settings, thus

receiving mathematics instruction by special education teachers who are not content experts in mathematics (Kleinert et al., 2015; McLeskey et al., 2012). Special education teachers of students with intellectual disability report they are not comfortable teaching

mathematics and feel unprepared to teach (Lee et al., 2016). This is likely due to two factors—lack of content knowledge of mathematics (Taub et al., 2017) and lack of knowledge of empirically sound strategies to teach the mathematics specifically (Spooner et al., 2019). As a result, teachers tend to stick to content they are familiar with teaching (e.g., discrete fact recall skills, time, money), rather than skills that are progressive in nature and move the student on a trajectory to be able to “close the gap” or do grade-aligned mathematics (Lee et al., 2016).

While students with ESN encompass a range of support levels and skill sets, they are able to learn mathematics when given strong instruction using sound pedagogical strategies. They also can learn higher level mathematics and demonstrate conceptual understanding (Spooner et al., 2017, 2019). Numerous literature reviews have unveiled evidence-based practices (EBP) for teaching mathematics to learners with ESN (e.g., Bowman et al., 2019; Spooner et al., 2019). Strategies that have shown positive academic gains in mathematics achievement for students with ESN include embedded trial instruction, dispersing the probes in naturalistic opportunities in the classroom (Collins et al., 2011; Heinrich et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2018), task analytic instruction (Heinrich et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2018), and systematic instruction strategies, including simultaneous prompting (Collins et al., 2011; Heinrich et al., 2016) and constant time delay (Polychronis et al., 2004). Despite these findings, a research-to-practice gap exists.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

One method for reducing barriers in inclusive settings for all learners is by applying the UDL framework, which proactively designs lessons to meet the needs of all learners in a classroom (CAST, 2011). The UDL framework consists of nine guidelines and 31 checkpoints that can be implemented flexibly to provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and action/expression (Meyer et al., 2014). The UDL framework plays a critical role in providing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities as indicated by its inclusion in the federal law—Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. The UDL guidelines center around providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2018). Within each of these three principles, the framework emphasizes providing access to the learning goal, building skills and knowledge, and empowering learners by internalizing self-regulation, comprehension, and executive functioning. Within each of the guidelines (e.g., recruiting interest, perception, language and symbols) suggested, ideas are provided called checkpoints.

Although there is limited empirical research due to UDL being a broad curriculum framework, many of the strategies that have been found to be research-based practices or EBP in mathematics for students with ESN meet the criteria for the three principles of UDL—multiple means of representation, engagement, and action and expression (Root et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2019). These strategies benefit a variety of learners in the inclusive setting, not only those with identified

disabilities. For example, when teachers are trying to represent abstract concepts in mathematics such as inverse operations, manipulatives such as scales or algebra tiles can provide concrete models (Bouck et al., 2014). To help aid in comprehension of a word problem, cognitive-strategy instruction using schematic diagrams/graphic organizers (e.g., schema-based instruction or modified schema-based instruction) can be used as a way to represent the problems and engage students in comprehending the underlying problem structure (Jitendra et al., 2016; Root et al., 2020). The embedded nature of UDL allows educators to curate learning environments in which “accommodations” or “modifications” are not seen as “added-on” work for the educator, but rather part of an inclusive structure that exists from creation (Jimenez & Hudson, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to help bridge the gap for practitioners by providing practical ways to plan for grade-aligned mathematics lessons in inclusive settings that plan for variability of all learners in the classroom. Throughout this article, we will highlight specific examples of how the UDL guidelines and checkpoints (as demonstrated in Tables 1–3) can be translated into the inclusive math classroom.

Using the UDL Framework to Plan and Teach

Step 1: Collaborate to Prioritize and Pinpoint Math Standard

Ms. Singer's class is beginning a unit on linear algebra because the concepts and skills in this unit lay the foundation for student success in high school Algebra. The state standard of focus is CCSS.Math.Content.8.EE.C.7: Solve linear equations in one variable. Ms. Singer prioritized this standard for the students in her class because of its importance in building the groundwork for creating equations that describe relationships, a key concept in high school Algebra.

General and special educators should collaboratively prioritize and pinpoint math standards (Saunders, 2021). There are often more standards per grade level than even a typically developing student can master. Therefore, some prioritization is needed, particularly focusing on essential standards that are pivotal for students with ESN to make progress across grade levels. For example, algebraic problem solving is a major emphasis in high school and is needed for real-world problem solving. Therefore, it should be a target for Mr. Morgan's eighth-grade students; whereas, statistics and probability is less emphasized and may not be a prioritized standard to teach. Special educators can draw on general educators' understanding of how skills progress or build to identify the pivotal skills students should learn to make progress in that domain and be prepared for the next grade level. At the same time, special educators can help prioritize standards for individual students based on their learning characteristics, preferences, and needs as identified in Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. Because standards are complex and often encompass numerous skills, it may be necessary to further narrow them down to target a specific component of the standard. This is known as

Table 1. Planning for Variability in Engagement

UDL guidelines and checkpoints for providing multiple means of engagement	Applications to inclusive mathematics	Example for Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer's linear algebra unit
Access <i>7. Provide options for recruiting interest</i> Optimize individual choice and autonomy (7.1) Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity (7.2) Minimize threats and distractions (7.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Contextualize targeted math skills within real-world application – Address multiple priorities – Include preferences – Increase predictability by indicating tasks required in work session (e.g., token economy or checklist showing how many problems to solve before break/done, including how many will be modeled, how many guided, how many independent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Problems feature student preferences and interests – Some problems have a budgeting context, aligning to transition goals and supporting generalization for all students – Visual schedule of how many problems will be modeled by the teacher, how many they will solve with a peer, and how many they will complete independently
Build <i>8. Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence</i> Heighten salience of goals and objectives (8.1) Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge (8.2) Foster collaboration and community (8.3) Increase mastery-oriented feedback (8.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Discuss learning goal at the beginning and end of every lesson – Maintain cooperative learning groups with clear roles and expectations – Directly teach how to request assistance from peers or teachers – Directly teach how to provide appropriate levels of assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students with ESN are partnered with typically developing peers – Partners review their goals together before beginning independent work – Universal expectation for all partners is to only provide help or assistance when asked
Internalize <i>9. Provide options for self-regulation</i> Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation (9.1) Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies (9.2) Develop self-assessment/reflection (9.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Embed routines for self-regulation within math tasks, such as self-monitoring task completion, problems solved correctly, or steps completed independently correct – Support self-graphing of progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – All students self-graph progress on Google sheets – Students choose emoji to represent how they felt during math – Partners encourage each other and celebrate achieving goals

Note. UDL = Universal Design for Learning; ESN = extensive support needs.

“pinpointing.” Alternatively, pinpointing can be accomplished by simplifying the standard, but “great caution” should be taken to ensure the standard has not shifted too far as to no longer be considered aligned (Saunders, 2021). An example of strong alignment would be if Ms. Singer and Mr. Morgan chose an activity where students practiced identifying how many hours it would take to work, earning a certain amount per hour, to purchase a high-cost item using an algebraic equation. For example, *if Jose makes \$10/hr and want to purchase a \$250 game console, how many hours would he need to work to make the purchase?* A non-example of alignment would be if

Mr. Morgan chose for his students to solve number sentences while Ms. Singer's students are working on linear algebra. As illustrated, collaboration between general and special educators is therefore essential to ensuring alignment between instruction, curriculum, and assessment (Courtade & Browder, 2016).

Step 2: Prioritize Learning Goals

Ms. Singer and Mr. Morgan developed a series of Learning Intentions (LIs) that will guide the upcoming math lessons. Then they prioritized Success Criteria (SC) for the first LI they will begin teaching next week.

Table 2. Addressing Variability in Representation

UDL guidelines and checkpoints for providing multiple means of representation		Applications to inclusive mathematics	Example for linear algebra unit
Access	<p>1. <i>Provide options for perception</i> Offer ways of customizing the display of information (1.1) Offer alternatives for auditory information (1.2) Offer alternatives for visual information (1.3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reduce physical effort needed to view and provide manipulative materials – Provide auditory options (e.g., text-to-speech software, talking calculator, voice-output devices) – Provide visuals and manipulatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learning sheets are loaded on the Go Worksheet app so students can use text-to-speech to listen to problems read aloud – Students have choice of virtual or concrete algebra tiles
Build	<p>2. <i>Provide options for language and symbols</i> Clarify vocabulary and symbols (2.1) Clarify syntax and structure (2.2) Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols (2.3) Promote understanding across languages (2.4) Illustrate through multiple media (2.5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Explicitly pre-teach vocabulary and symbols – Use considerate text – Teach “rules” or “chants” for remembering key concepts or vocabulary that combine physical actions with vocal phrases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Peer partners do various warm-up activities. One activity is explicit instruction on key vocabulary and practicing the “rule” for inverse operations
Internalize	<p>3. <i>Provide options for comprehension</i> Activate or supply background knowledge (3.1) Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships (3.2) Guide information processing and visualization (3.3) Maximize transfer and generalization (3.4)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use graphic organizers/schemas to highlight critical features and draw attention to relationship between math concepts – Explicitly teach students to discriminate between problem types/concepts using example/non-example training – Teach problem-solving routines – Provide explicit opportunities for generalization, review, and practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students use a color-coded schema that supports translating information from word problem into an equation

Note. UDL = Universal Design for Learning.

LI: Solve linear equations in one variable in slope-intercept form ($y = mx + b$)

- Essential SC: Identify the reciprocal operation to solve one-step equations.
- Ideal SC: Solve linear equations in one variable in slope-intercept form.
- Possible SC: Create linear equations with one variable in slope-intercept form with one and infinitely many or no solutions.

Students identify the LI and SC they are working toward at the beginning of each lesson (Checkpoint 8.1). The unit will begin by reviewing reciprocal operations before moving on to applying them to solve linear equations to ensure all students have the

background knowledge (Checkpoint 3.1) and vocabulary knowledge (Checkpoint 2.1) needed to achieve the ideal and possible SC. As a wrap-up activity at the end of each lesson, Ms. Singer will have students practice creating their own equations with a partner (Checkpoint 8.3), first with just one solution and then in later lessons equations with infinitely many or no solutions (Checkpoint 8.2).

UDL has a strong focus on student learning outcomes, as it challenges the notion of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to instructional design, which typically leads to disengagement. A core feature of UDL is giving ownership to the learner by providing flexibility and choice in the way they access information, materials, and how they “show what they know.” The use of LIs and SC are important when establishing lesson goals (Crichton & McDaid, 2016; Glasson, 2009). The LIs and SC

Table 3. Anticipating Variability in Action and Expression

UDL guidelines and checkpoints for providing multiple means of action and expression		Applications to inclusive mathematics	Example for Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer's linear algebra unit
Access	<p><i>4. Options for physical action</i> Vary methods for response and navigation (4.1) Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies (4.2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide options for students to “show what they know” – Give options for physical materials based on student preference and motor abilities – Provide augmentative and alternative communication options and response options for students to select 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Within Go Worksheet app, students have the option to type, draw, or record verbal responses
Build	<p><i>5. Options for expression and communication</i> Use multiple media for communication (5.1) Use multiple tools for construction and composition (5.2) Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance (5.3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use the concrete/virtual-representational-abstract sequence (CRA/VRA) – Provide options for virtual or concrete manipulatives – Provide response options – Use system of least prompts – Provide multiple options for checking work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – During small group instruction, Mr. Singer uses the VRA sequence to teach students how to use algebra tiles – During guided practice, Mr. Singer uses the system of least prompts (gesture, verbal, model)
Internalize	<p><i>6. Options for executive functions</i> Guide appropriate goal-setting (6.1) Support planning and strategy development use (6.2) Facilitate managing information and resources (6.3) Enhance capacity for monitoring progress (6.4)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide structure for setting and evaluate goals, such as task analyses with check lists – Model using think-alouds – Support student reasoning using sentence starters or response options – Support reasonable goal-setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Students have a two-column task analysis to self-monitor independent completion of steps – Students review goals at the beginning of each class and set new goals based on self-graphed progress at the end of each class

Note. UDL = Universal Design for Learning.

can help teachers ensure that their activities align with what they want students to know. The LI is the overarching learning outcome that all students will work to achieve during the mathematics unit (e.g., 2–4 weeks), written in student-friendly language (e.g., I can understand the structure of a coordinate grid and plot points in quadrants). The SC provide examples of expected performances that as a result of the lesson, bridge the learners' previous knowledge and their developing understanding. These student-friendly criteria are the knowledge and/or skills students will need to gain to meet the LI (e.g., communicate procedure to plot points, use correct vocabulary, plot and label a point). The LI tells learners what the intended outcome of the unit is. The SC specify exactly what they are expected to do or know. Identifying and communicating the LI and SC help make learning meaningful and motivating.

Each mathematics standard can be broken down into LIs and SC that will become the focus of the mathematics unit. While planning for the heterogeneous classroom, defining SC is an

essential component of planning. The SC are typically outlined for each lesson and can include learning goals dependent on the learner's prior knowledge and depth of understanding. When using the UDL framework, teachers proactively plan their lessons based upon their knowledge of their students' strengths and weaknesses, taking into consideration barriers to learning that “may or may not” present. It is not feasible for inclusive educators to foresee all barriers that may present themselves during math lessons; however, planning SC that are essential (necessary to know or perform), ideal (helps the learner perform the task or gain depth of knowledge), and possible (increased depth of performance or knowledge that allows learners to exceed that is absolutely necessary within their learning) can support planning, instruction, and assessment. Prioritizing learning allows the inclusive math teacher to support the diverse needs of all students in the classroom, not only those with disabilities or already identified as having “barriers of learning.”

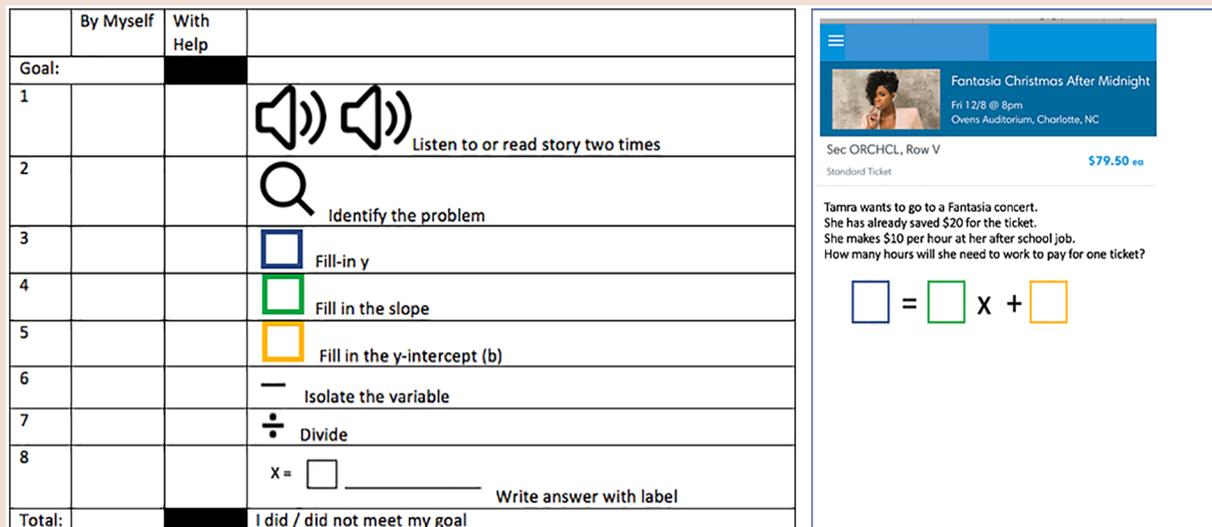


Figure 1. Dual-column task analysis (left) and worksheet with color-coded equation template (right).

Step 3: Give Standard a Real-World Context

Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer discussed the real-world applications of reciprocal operations and linear equations during their initial unit planning. Ms. Singer was able to provide many examples while Mr. Morgan identified links between these applications and their student’s current and future environments to enhance generalization (Checkpoint 7.2). As part of the planning process, they reviewed Nia’s transition goals, which relate to budgeting and management of money. Both teachers agreed that some of the problems in this math unit should focus on budgeting to make a purchase, something beneficial for all of their students. While discussing how students will use linear equations to budget, they review the Ideal SC, recognizing how vital it will be for students to understand and use the slope format with single variables. Mr. Morgan created word problems related to earning money and budgeting for a purchase that incorporated student interests and goals. Figure 1 shows an example of how he incorporated Nia’s interest of going to concerts and budgeting goals.

Once the learning goals are determined for a specific lesson or set of activities, educators must then determine how they will introduce the mathematics concept to students in a manner that is both useful and motivating. Traditionally, special educators used the “functional approach” of (a) identifying a skill or activity that will increase student independence (perhaps based on ecological inventory), then (b) identifying skills needed to complete the skill (e.g., task analysis), which may happen to include some math skills, then (c) teaching skills. However, a contextualized approach to math instruction (Root et al., 2018) provides a contemporary method to (a) determine “big ideas” in grade level standards, (b) identify real-life activity or natural routines that require use of big ideas/skills, and (c) teach with explicit connections and opportunities for generalization to real-life activity or natural routine.

By thinking about when, where, and how math skills or concepts are used within everyday life, teachers are able to address multiple instructional priorities for all students, which may assist in targeting IEP goals of students with disabilities (Root et al., 2017). To make instruction meaningful and personally relevant for learners, Trela and Jimenez (2013) emphasize the importance of designing learning activities that engage all learners, rather than “something different” for students with disabilities. A contextualized approach with principles of UDL places the emphasis on all learners (Humphreys & Jimenez, 2018). By designing lessons themes, activities, and word problems with all learners in mind, educators do not need to develop different activities for different learners, thus creating more work for themselves, because the content itself is universal and appropriate for all. For example, by developing high interest word problems for Nia and her classmates, real-world context is applied within the UDL guidelines and framework. A non-example of UDL contextualized math would include Nia reading a separate word problem about her favorite band.

Generalization is naturally considered within personally relevant contexts, allowing teachers to “work smarter, rather than harder” by providing their students multiple opportunities to apply their learning. By proactively planning for generalization, barriers that often exist when trying to move students across learning phases (acquisition to fluency to maintenance and generalization; Shurr et al., 2019) are minimized.

Step 4: Anticipate Variability and Proactively Design With UDL

“It is time for Universal Design to replace, or at the very least reduce, the need for ‘differentiation’ and totally negate the need for ‘different’” (Humphreys & Jimenez, 2018). The potential of

UDL allows inclusive educators to envision and proactively plan for heterogeneous classrooms. All too often variability has been considered as something “extra” to plan for, with the intent to individualize learning for all. While students with ESN will most often continue to need explicit supports that are individualized (e.g., voice-output device, direct instruction of early numeracy skills), UDL minimizes needs (barriers) by embedding those research-based practices and EBP into the everyday mathematics classroom. Variability should be embraced as part of the natural human condition, existing within all classrooms, schools, and communities. Tables 1 to 3 provide examples of how Mr. Singer and Ms. Morgan proactively plan for variability in engagement, representation, action, and expression among all of the students in their classroom.

Variability in engagement

Often called the “why” of learning, student engagement is the beginning point for planning for variability. When students are engaged, only then are they ready and motivated to learn. Based upon the UDL Guidelines (CAST, 2011), “multiple means” should be planned for providing students options that increase their choice and agency. These options should enhance relevance and value of the learning for the learner. Engaging students in clear LI and SC (see Step 2) is one option that helps to make the lesson goals salient to the learner (and teacher). Developing SC that are Essential, Ideal, and Possible also provide varied levels of challenge that help to engage students in learning at their own pace and/or level of depth. Although setting goals for mastery are important for assessment purposes, they can also be used to foster collaboration within the classroom community through student self-assessment and reflection (Root et al., 2020). Setting clear expectations for learners is a quick and easy way to optimize motivation.

The purpose of UDL is to acknowledge learner diversity and proactively try to reduce as many barriers as possible. Engagement is essential to learning, educators must try to proactively minimize distractions and other threats to learning that could potentially frustrate or make the learner less motivated to participate. For example, while Nia loves working in collaborative groups or with a partner, she gets nervous when working with new partners or if she has to ask a peer to be her partner. To maintain a supportive learning community (Checkpoint 8.3), Ms. Singer assigns peer partners at the beginning of each unit that stay the same each day. Table 1 provides specific translations of UDL guidelines for multiple means of engagement to inclusive mathematics for students with ESN and examples of how Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer applied the framework to their instruction.

Variability in representation

Often called the “what” of learning, representation is the way in which the information, concepts, and skills are presented to the learner. It is important for teachers to prioritize content by thinking about what information is necessary for the learner to meet the LI and/or SC. When planning for multiple means of

representation, it may be helpful for educators to think of students who would have needed something “differentiated” prior to using the UDL framework. By identifying those instructional design strategies used to provide access to the curriculum (e.g., pictures/images, graphic organizers, reduced text), teachers can then think about how those same “differentiated” displays of information can be woven into the inclusive lesson for all learners (e.g., when introducing math vocabulary, images are provided for all learners with definitions to aid in making connections).

The learning environment can create many barriers to learning for students with ESN. One common barrier within inclusive lessons is the excessive delivery of new content through auditory methods (e.g., lecture, long explanations, textbooks read aloud). Another barrier to learning that should be considered for students with ESN is the reading level of the content presented. When it is necessary for the student to read independently (English Language Arts standard), the original text may be necessary; however, when comprehension is the goal, an adapted version of the text or a read aloud are alternatives.

When designing inclusive mathematics lessons using principles of UDL and embedding research- and evidence-based strategies that have been shown to work for students with ESN into that lesson, opportunities are created for all learners to benefit from explicit and systematic representation of information. Teachers may embed strategies into the lesson that clarify syntax and structure, decode text or mathematical notation, promote cross-linguistic understanding, and illustrate key concepts non-linguistically. For example, using constant time delay or explicit vocabulary instruction on the mathematics terms will ensure that all students have the background and vocabulary necessary to meet the SC. Ms. Singer ensures all students understand key vocabulary and the “rule” for inverse operations through peer partner warm-up activities (Checkpoints 2.1 and 2.3).

By providing options for comprehension, teachers activate background knowledge, they highlight critical features or big ideas within the lesson (e.g., LI), and embed supports to help students process information and generalize. EBP for supporting mathematical learning such as graphic organizers and visual supports (Spooner et al., 2019) can be used to support comprehension of mathematics problems. Table 2 provides specific translations of UDL guidelines for multiple means of representation to inclusive mathematics for students with ESN and examples of how Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer applied the framework to their instruction.

Variability in action and expression

Often called the “how” of learning, action and expression focuses on the way in which students will be able to demonstrate their understanding and “show what they know.” For many students with ESN, communication of thoughts, needs, wants, and knowledge is a challenge. The learning environment not only should include ways of teaching and building these skills but also reduce communication barriers. Many students with and without disability benefit from a fluid and flexible environment that allows them to communicate in many ways.

For example, a student with limited verbal communication skills would benefit from a mathematics lesson designed with multiple means of communicating during large group discussion, such as the use of response cards or physical signals (e.g., thumbs up, thumbs down). While a student with ESN may struggle to communicate verbally, other students with or without disabilities may also benefit from a flexible approach to “show what you know,” especially when they are still in the acquisition phase of learning. Students with social anxiety, limited English proficiency, or struggling learners may benefit from response options that allow them to demonstrate their understanding of the content while reducing cognitive load, addressing barriers related to recall of vocabulary and working memory. Technology is one way to incorporate options for action and expression. Mr. Morgan showed Ms. Singer the Go Worksheet app, which allows students the option to type, draw, or record spoken responses to questions (Checkpoints 4.1 and 4.2).

Although a general focus of UDL is the act of providing students options, for engagement, representation, and action and expression, this within itself could be a barrier for many students with ESN. As students are learning new ways to obtain information, new routines for learning, and new communication strategies, it is important for teachers to not overload students with too many choices. Rather, teachers of students with ESN should strategically embed methods of responses, tools, and assistive technologies that complement the learning goal and could potentially benefit all students. For example, while Nia loves working in collaborative groups or with a partner, she gets nervous when working with new partners or if she has to ask a peer to be her partner. To maintain a supportive learning community (Checkpoint 8.3), Ms. Singer assigns peer partners at the beginning of each unit that stay the same each day.

The system of least prompts can be used to build fluencies through graduated levels of support and is easily delivered by both teachers and peers to support math problem solving (Davis, 2016). Action and expression options can support student engagement because it allows students to be active members of the classroom and their own learning, rather than passive spectators within the inclusive classroom. All students benefit from opportunities to demonstrate their understanding now, while also learning to use deeper or more complex applications of communication responses within the math classroom. When teachers plan lessons that allow all students to know what they are working toward (LI and SC), engage in learning in meaningful and feasible ways, students are more motivated to want to express themselves and engage in the learning community. Table 3 provides specific translations of UDL guidelines for multiple means of action and engagement to inclusive mathematics for students with ESN and examples of how Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer applied the framework to their instruction.

Step 5: Implement and Assess

Mr. Morgan and Ms. Singer want all the students in their class to develop self-regulation and goal-setting skills to prepare them for the increased independence expected in the high

school mathematics classroom. Using research on self-monitoring and goal-setting, Mr. Singer teaches all students how to set and monitor progress toward goals using a google sheets template (Checkpoints 6.1, 6.4, and 9.3). Students set goals with their partners at the beginning of their independent work time. Nia is working toward the essential SC and has set the goal of identifying the reciprocal operation correctly (Step 6 on task analysis in Figure 1) on three out of the four independent problems she solves. At the end of independent practice, students check their work and self-graph their progress using the google sheet, with the option of also including an emoji to represent how they feel about their progress (Checkpoints 9.1, 9.2, and 9.3).

The UDL framework should continue to influence the instructional cycle as teachers move into implementing, evaluating, and revising. Students should not only know the SC but also be able to monitor progress toward meeting it. Relatedly, they should know about the options they have to get there. While facilitating instruction, teachers can help guide students toward developing this capacity for self-assessment, self-regulation, and goal-setting. Teachers should observe and collect data on the following: (a) How are students using options, resources, and tools? (b) Where are they getting stuck (muddy points)? and (c) What areas might need reteaching? These data are then used to drive instruction as teachers consider whether students are making progress toward the SC and LI, and if necessary, what changes may need to occur to further support engagement, representation, or action and expression.

There is sometimes a misconception that because UDL is a proactive design strategy, it does not play a role in data-based decision making. On the contrary, it facilitates the complex interaction between planning, instruction, and assessment (Israel et al., 2014). Not only does data support teachers in refining instruction, but it also provides students with mastery-oriented feedback, affecting their goals, motivation, and performance as they increase their self-efficacy, persistence, and self-regulation (Israel et al., 2014).

Conclusion

By applying the principles, guidelines, and checkpoints of UDL, inclusive education teachers can minimize barriers while maximizing learning for ALL students in a classroom, including those with ESN. Often times, evidence- and research-based strategies that have been found to be effective for students with ESN, dually meet the checkpoints within the UDL framework for providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. When designing instruction using principles of UDL, it is critical to go about selecting strategies that align to learning goals and the criteria for meeting those goals. LIs, which provide learning goals in student-friendly terms, and SC, which specify the expected performance criteria, are two areas that should drive the instructional design. Finally, the Universally Designed math classroom should plan with intentionality. When educators

take the time to collaborate and work together to pinpoint math standards and prioritize learning goals, they not only support their students but also their own ability to build contextualized, intentional, and flexible instruction that engages all learners. Only then can teachers anticipate for variability and proactively designing instruction that they can implement and assess student outcomes.

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Strategies for Including Students With Extensive Support Needs in SWPBIS

Virginia L. Walker, PhD, BCBA-D¹ and Sheldon L. Loman, PhD²

Abstract: Schools that implement School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) offer a multitiered continuum of supports that increases in intensity to support the behavioral needs of all students within a school. Although the number of schools that have adopted SWPBIS continues to rise, students with extensive support needs (ESN) may be excluded from various aspects of SWPBIS at the Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels. Given that SWPBIS is intended to be fully inclusive, the purpose of this article is to provide educators and other staff with practical tools and guidelines for including students with ESN in Tiers 1 and 2 of SWPBIS. We also present additional considerations for self-assessment, collaborative teaming, and professional development for including students with ESN in SWPBIS.

Keywords: School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, SWPBIS, extensive support needs, severe disabilities

Including students with extensive support needs (ESN) in general education environments has been emphasized as a recommended practice for more than two decades (Morningstar et al., 2016, 2017). Students with ESN have disability labels of intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, or multiple disabilities and demonstrate significant and pervasive support needs across a range of domains (Taub et al., 2017). Although students with ESN experience positive academic and social outcomes in general education settings (e.g., Saunders et al., 2020), the data on the percentage of time

students are instructed in general education environments show that progress toward inclusion has been limited (Kleinert et al., 2015; Morningstar et al., 2017). This trend in educational placement may be attributed to a number of factors, with recent research suggesting that challenging behavior may affect decision-making around educational placement for students with ESN. For example, in a recent survey study, a majority of

school staff from schools implementing School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) reported excluding students with ESN from general education settings specifically due to challenging behavior (Walker et al., 2018).

Schools that are not systematically addressing challenging behavior by promoting positive social behaviors of students with ESN (e.g., under a SWPBIS framework) are essentially *systematically excluding* them from general education environments, as the exclusion of students with ESN on the basis of challenging behavior will likely persist if students are not supported in developing a repertoire of prosocial behaviors. Schools should seek to

systematically include students with ESN by considering the range of student support needs to intentionally design general education environments focused on preventing challenging behaviors while promoting prosocial behaviors. SWPBIS utilizes a well-established systems approach for developing a school culture that provides effective behavioral supports required for academic and social success for all students (e.g., Gage et al., 2017), especially for students considered at risk or high risk for chronic behavioral challenges (Bradshaw et al., 2015). By establishing systems and supports to include *all students* within SWPBIS, school environments can systematically and efficiently support students with ESN.

“BY ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS AND SUPPORTS TO INCLUDE ALL STUDENTS WITHIN SWPBIS, SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS CAN SYSTEMATICALLY AND EFFICIENTLY SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ESN.”

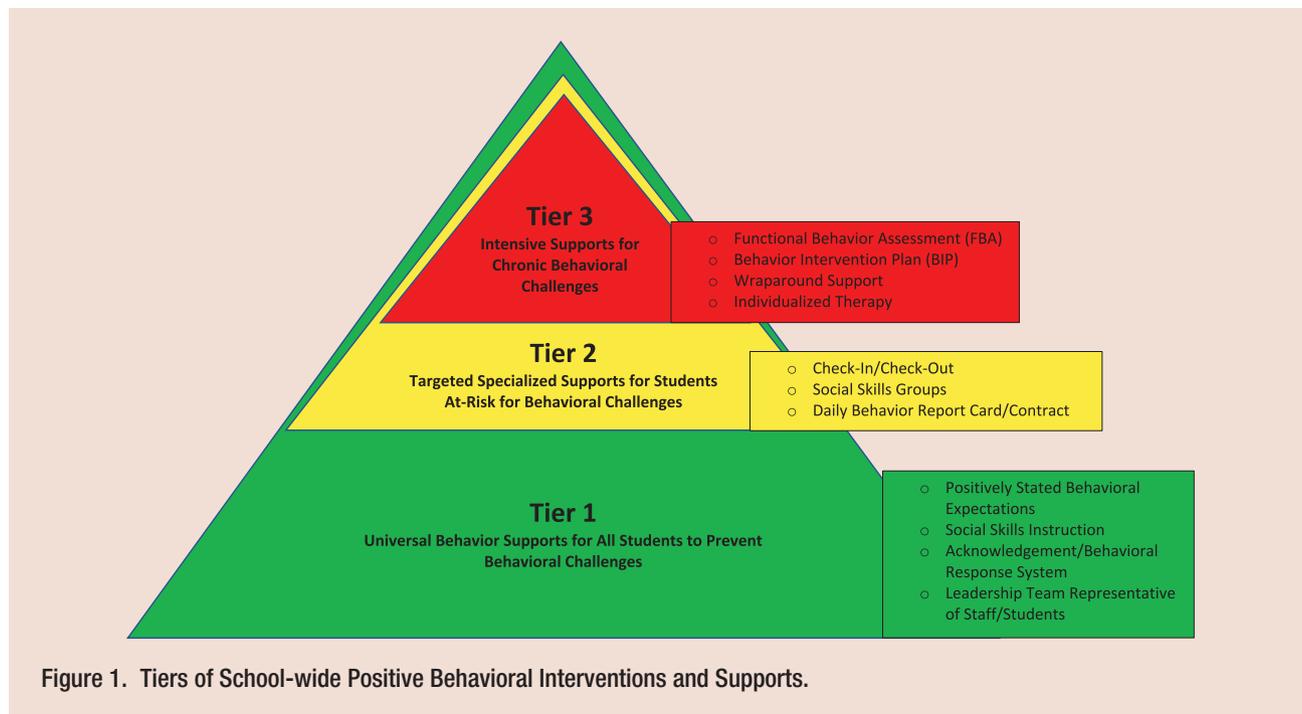


Figure 1. Tiers of School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Overview of SWPBIS

More than 27,000 schools have adopted SWPBIS as a framework that offers a multitiered continuum of supports beginning with the whole school (Universal/Tier 1) and extending to more selected (Targeted/Tier 2) through more intensive (Individualized/Tier 3) behavioral supports (see Figure 1). Although a detailed description goes beyond the scope of this article, we recommend that readers access additional information and resources about SWPBIS at <https://www.pbis.org>.

Tier 1

Tier 1 occurs when school-wide systems are in place for teaching and acknowledging school-wide behavioral expectations (e.g., Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible) for all students in a school. A team of representatives (e.g., administrator, general educators, special educators) within a school, commonly called the SWPBIS team, meet regularly to (a) ensure that expectations are posted publicly across settings (e.g., hallways, cafeteria), (b) recommend lesson plans to teach all students the expectations at the beginning and throughout the school year, (c) develop a system for acknowledging students engaging in positive behaviors and for responding to students who are not following expectations, and (d) review data to identify students and staff who require more supports. The purpose of Tier 1 SWPBIS is to prevent new cases of challenging behavior by providing high-quality learning environments for all students and staff and across all settings (i.e., school-wide, classroom, and nonclassroom). Tier 1 supports should be available to all students regardless of their disability labels, educational placement (e.g., self-contained classroom), and their involvement in other SWPBIS tiers.

Tier 2

Tier 2 occurs when systems are in place for identifying and providing efficient, targeted behavior support for some students who require support beyond that offered at Tier 1 (approximately 10%–15% of students). The purpose of Tier 2 is to reduce the number of existing cases of challenging behavior that are not responsive to universal, Tier 1 practices. Tier 2 offers more focused and frequent individualized or small group-oriented supports (e.g., social skills groups, self-management practices, check-in/check-out [CICO]).

Tier 3

Tier 3 occurs when systems are in place for identifying and providing intensive, individualized behavior support for the few students (approximately 1%–5% of students) who require support beyond that offered at Tiers 1 and 2. Typically, a behavior intervention plan is developed based on the outcomes of a functional behavior assessment (FBA). Wraparound supports that address the comprehensive needs of students (e.g., mental health services) also are considered at Tier 3.

Students With ESN and SWPBIS

Unfortunately, students with ESN often are not considered when schools are designing Tier 1 behavioral supports (Landers et al., 2012) and may not be considered for Tier 2 interventions (Walker et al., 2018). Furthermore, special educators who support students with ESN may not perceive SWPBIS to be beneficial to their students (Shuster et al., 2016), possibly due to factors concerning (a) whether existing supports adequately address students' physical and cognitive needs, (b) programmatic separation of special education and general

Directions: Please indicate the frequency of the following systems procedures, practices, and data collection activities.		Frequency Never = 0 Sometimes = 1 Always = 2
Systems Procedures	My school demonstrates commitment to teach students with extensive support needs (ESN) in inclusive settings (e.g., general education classroom) with their same-aged peers without disabilities	
	Special educators working with students with ESN are actively involved in the SWPBIS team at my school	
	General educators participate in professional development activities applicable to students with ESN	
	Special educators working with students with ESN attend SWPBIS professional development activities with other educators and school team members	
Practices	Students with ESN are taught the school-wide behavioral expectations (e.g., matrix)	
	Students with ESN are included with their same-aged peers without disabilities when the behavioral expectations are taught (e.g., start of year kick-off, booster sessions, lesson plans)	
	The expectations posted within our school are accessible to all students despite severity of disability (e.g., includes pictures, braille, simplified language)	
	Students with ESN receive public acknowledgement like other students within my school (e.g., recognized at assemblies, receive school-wide tokens)	
	Students with ESN are considered when designing teaching, acknowledgement, and consequence systems	
	Students with ESN are considered for Tier 2 interventions within our school (e.g., CICO, social clubs)	
Data Collection	Office discipline referral data includes students with ESN	
	The data system used by the SWPBIS team is effective in problem solving for students with ESN	
	Data on students with ESN are reviewed during SWPBIS team meetings	
	Students with ESN are included in SWPBIS fidelity implementation assessment (e.g., interviewed for the SET)	

Figure 2. Including students with extensive support needs self-assessment.
 Source. Adapted from Walker et al. (2018).

education, and (c) special educators' limited involvement in SWPBIS. Yet, all students, including those with ESN, should be included in and benefit from SWPBIS (Loman et al., 2018; Zagona et al., in press).

Given the strong evidence-base that supports Tiers 1 and 2 as the foundation for Tier 3 (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2012; Bruhn et al., 2014), it is critical that each SWPBIS tier be designed for all staff, to support all students (regardless of their disability label), across all school environments (regardless of their educational placement; Kurth & Enyart, 2016). As is the case for all students in a school, students with ESN are likely to benefit from Tiers 1 and 2 in that these tiers serve to prevent new cases (Tier 1) and reduce existing cases (Tier 2) of challenging behavior such that intensive Tier 3 supports are unnecessary. For example, Loman et al. (2018) found that adapted Tier 1 supports significantly improved challenging behavior for students with ESN who may have otherwise been eligible to receive more intensive supports at Tiers 2 and 3. In this article, we describe several factors that should be considered by SWPBIS teams as they engage in planning activities and specific procedures and tools that school staff can use to effectively support students with ESN within Tiers 1 and 2 of SWPBIS.

SWPBIS Planning Considerations

In this section, we highlight several considerations for SWPBIS planning that will ultimately contribute to a more inclusive SWPBIS framework for students with ESN.

Conduct Self-Assessments to Prioritize Inclusion

We encourage schools to conduct a self-assessment of their current practices to identify areas for improvement related to the involvement of students with ESN in SWPBIS. Figure 2 provides an example of a self-assessment that explores SWPBIS (a) systems, (b) practices, and (c) data collection strategies (Walker et al., 2018). Once areas for improvement have been identified, the SWPBIS team can develop an action plan with assistance from educators and other professionals who regularly support students with ESN. For example, the team might identify the need for improvement in the accessibility of their SWPBIS posters to consider students with ESN. Therefore, the action identified could be that the SWPBIS team will collaborate with specialists within the school to create posters that include simplified language of the school-wide expectations along with visuals to represent the expected behaviors within those school environments (see Figure 3).

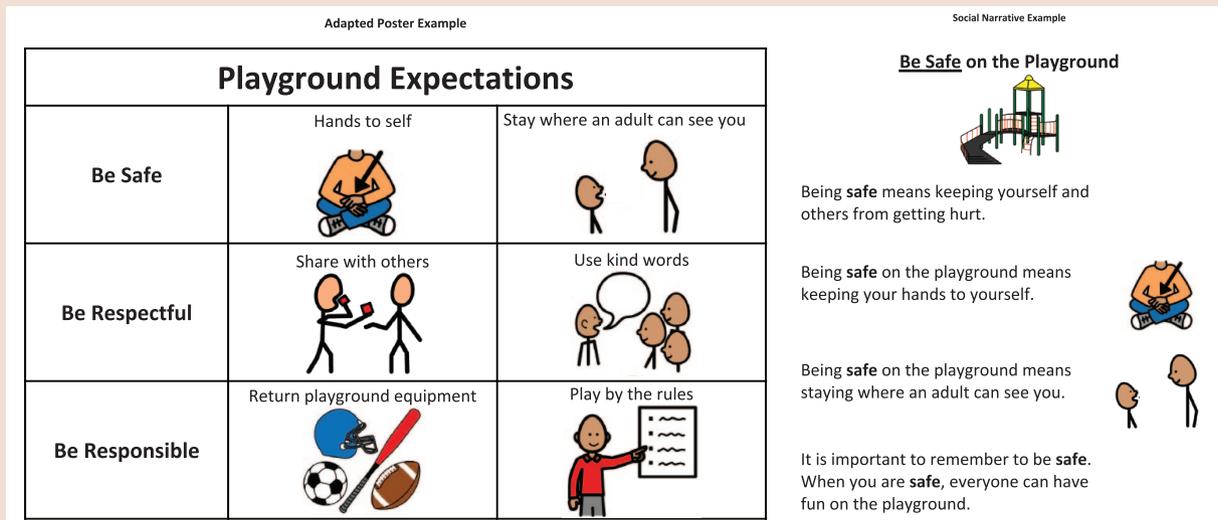


Figure 3. Visual support examples.

Collaborative Teaming

A collaborative teaming approach (Browder et al., 2014) will play an important role in action plan implementation to fully support students with ESN under Tiers 1 and 2. Due to the wide range of support needs spanning different domains among students with ESN, supports planning often involves input from an interdisciplinary team composed of professionals with varying areas of expertise (Brown et al., 2020). As such, professionals in these varied roles can provide valuable insight to inform planning around SWPBIS. For example, special educators can lend their expertise in pedagogy for students with ESN by recommending appropriate evidence-based practices to embed in adapted SWPBIS lesson plans (Loman et al., 2018). General educators can implement identified supports within general education classrooms and offer contextual information about inclusive settings to guide planning efforts (e.g., educator knowledge and skills specific to students with ESN, classroom academic and behavioral expectations; Thompson et al., 2020).

Related services providers (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech language pathologist) will be a valuable asset to the team in terms of identifying creative solutions to promote accessibility, including physical access through, for example, assistive technologies and recommending appropriate receptive and expressive communication supports. For instance, a speech language pathologist might advise the team to embed in the SWPBIS lesson plan supplemental video models to provide concrete examples of each expectation and opportunities to demonstrate understanding through the student's augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)

device. Paraprofessionals can provide assistance to educators and other professionals in the provision of SWPBIS by teaching school-wide expectations, delivering reinforcement through the school-wide acknowledgment system, supporting student participation in various Tier 2 supports, and collecting data to inform data-based decision-making. Finally, school administrator leadership and support will be instrumental in adopting practices to support students with ESN and recruiting support among staff (Pinkelman et al., 2015).

Professional Development

Special educators and others who support students with ESN should participate in relevant professional development opportunities and receive training in SWPBIS to establish and further expand their knowledge and skills in SWPBIS. Likewise, educators and other professionals who work or interact with students with ESN should receive targeted training to develop skills necessary for implementation of adapted Tiers 1 and 2 supports. For instance, general educators and paraprofessionals, who often provide one-to-one support to students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Suter & Giangreco, 2009), will likely require additional training to ensure that adapted supports are implemented with fidelity in general education classrooms. Beyond professional development, targeted training approaches such as coaching with performance feedback (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010) and behavioral skills training (Reed et al., 2018) may be helpful to those educators who require additional levels of support. For example, a special educator might implement behavioral skills training to support a general

educator in their implementation of an evidence-based practice (e.g., response prompting system) to teach the school-wide behavioral expectations by (a) providing a description of the practice, (b) modeling the practice, (c) role-playing the practice, and (d) providing performance feedback based on the role play (Reed et al., 2018).

Strategies to Promote Access to SWPBIS at Tiers 1 and 2

In this section, we describe how to expand the scope of Tiers 1 and 2 to better include students with ESN in general education environments.

Tier 1 Strategies

Teaching school-wide expectations

Educators and other staff teach school-wide expectations to all students across all school environments. Schools usually create a positive behavioral matrix to clearly define, display, and teach expectations (e.g., Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible) across specific settings (e.g., classroom, hallways, cafeteria). With the help of the SWPBIS team, educators use lesson plans within natural school contexts to provide opportunities for students to practice positive social behaviors specific to those environments (e.g., teaching how to wait in line to order food in the cafeteria). It is important that all environments within a school be designed with all learners in mind and that supports promote accessibility while not being overly intrusive or stigmatizing.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that can assist educators and other staff in their planning efforts to include students with ESN in SWPBIS. UDL features include multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to promote effective instruction for all students (Hitchcock et al., 2005). Multiple means of representation involves presenting information in a variety of ways. For example, rather than posting behavioral expectations in written text alone (e.g., “Be Safe on the Playground”), schools can use other visual supports as examples (e.g., photographs of students keeping hands to self). Multiple means of expression involves providing opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding of content in different ways. For example, when teaching behavioral expectations, students with complex communication needs can use alternative communication methods (e.g., AAC such as voice output devices and sign language) to express their understanding of the expectations. Finally, multiple means of engagement involves utilizing materials and instructional strategies that are meaningful to the student. For example, when teaching behavioral expectations, educators might acknowledge students for displaying expected behavior by using strategies tailored to the student’s preferences (e.g., verbal approval, high five, a highly preferred tangible reward). To learn more about UDL as an instructional design tool, please consider exploring the following website: <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>.

When using UDL for planning and teaching school-wide expectations, student strengths and support needs must be

considered to promote cognitive and physical accessibility. For example, the posters of the behavioral matrix that are posted in specific environments should be placed at eye level for students who may use wheelchairs and visuals should be used to clearly cue expectations for students who are emerging readers. In addition, well-established evidence-based practices for students with ESN should be considered, given the success of these strategies across different contexts (Browder et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2015). For example, different response prompting systems that fall under the scope of systematic instruction (e.g., time delay) can be used to systematically teach expectations. Task analysis is another practice that can be used to break down the steps of SWPBIS routines (e.g., walking in the hallways) and outline chaining strategies (e.g., forward or backward chaining) for teaching students with ESN throughout school environments. Peer-mediated supports is yet another example of an evidence-based practice that also could be used to engage students with ESN in learning SWPBIS expectations. To learn more about these and other evidence-based practices, please consider exploring resources from the CEEDAR Center (<https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/portfolio/evidence-based-practices-for-students-with-severe-disabilities/>) and Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>).

The use of the SWPBIS Lesson Design Worksheet (Figure 4) can assist in creating lessons that consider students with ESN when teaching positive behaviors in school environments at Tier 1. For a specific environment or routine, this tool can be used to improve instruction by clearly identifying the outcomes (Column 1), how students will demonstrate learning specific to those outcomes (Column 2), and what is currently done to teach these outcomes (Column 3). Once these columns are completed for the specific outcome within a specific environment, the remaining columns prompt educators to consider (a) multiple ways the information could be presented to students (e.g., use of picture symbols, social narratives, video models); (b) multiple ways students can act or express understanding of the content (e.g., use of voice output devices, pointing or gestures); and (c) multiple ways to engage and motivate students within the lessons (e.g., peer-mediated supports, use of materials that are of interest).

In the example in Figure 4, the identified outcome (Column 1) was based on the “Be Safe” expectation for the playground, which was defined as “keep hands to self and stay where an adult can be seen” (Column 2). The current strategies for teaching expectations to all students included showing students the poster and reminding them of the rules (Column 3). The educators then considered the use of UDL to develop multiple ways (a) to present the information so that it was accessible (e.g., picture prompts, video examples, role play, social narratives; Column 4), (b) students could demonstrate their understanding (e.g., develop their own posters or videos, use AAC; Column 5), and (c) engage and motivate students during lessons (e.g., peer-mediated supports, self-management; Column 5). Figure 3 provides examples of visual supports as described in Column 4.

SWPBIS Lesson Design Worksheet

Routine/Environment: Playground Instructor(s): Mr. Snyder and Ms. Owen

Key School-wide Social Skill Goals/Outcomes	What We Want Students to Do to Demonstrate Learning	What We Do Now	Applying UDL: Representation of Content	Applying UDL: Student Actions/ Expression	Applying UDL: Student Engagement/ Motivation
Note: From the 3-5 SWPBIS expectations (e.g., “Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible”)	Note: From the behavioral matrix developed by the SWPBIS team				
Students will be safe at the playground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep hands to themselves Stay where an adult can see them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show students the poster at the playground Remind them of the rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide pictures as prompts of the expectations. Use video examples of the expectations Role play and practice examples and non-examples Develop and use social narratives and/or Powercards to explain the expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students can use different ways to communicate their understanding of expectations (e.g., create posters or videos, use voice output devices) Students can illustrate what the expectations should look like and sound like 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meaningful reinforcement (finding incentives that students prefer). Peer-mediated Interventions where students can partner with other students in supporting safety at the playground Self-management and reinforcement strategies where each student can give themselves a “thumbs up, thumbs sideways, or thumbs down” for how they were safe at the playground

Loman & Walker (2020). Adapted from Tamarkin, D. (n.d.), Universal design for learning: Applications in biology. Springfield, MA: At Ease Project, Springfield Technical Community College.

Figure 4. SWPBIS lesson design worksheet example.
 Note. SWPBIS = School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

School-wide acknowledgment systems

In addition to learning about the school-wide expectations at Tier 1, all students participate in their school’s public acknowledgment system, which involves delivering reinforcement when students demonstrate the school-wide expectations across school environments. In most cases, students receive tokens that can be accumulated over time and exchanged for a reward. Some students with ESN may require adaptations to meaningfully participate in their school’s acknowledgment system. These adaptations should promote physical and cognitive accessibility in general education settings while addressing the student’s unique support needs. For example, individualized reinforcement may be necessary when available rewards are not reinforcing to particular students or when tokens are too abstract. Educators will need to conduct preference assessments to identify potentially reinforcing items or activities that can be feasibly delivered in lieu of other rewards (e.g., see <https://ebip.vkcsites.org/preference-assessments/> and <http://www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/transition-assessment—severe-disabilities/>

preference-indicators). Because preferences can change over time, preference assessments should be conducted on a regular basis to improve the effectiveness of student acknowledgment.

The frequency and immediacy with which reinforcement is delivered also might need to be adjusted, especially when students are initially learning the school-wide expectations. This means that educators and other staff will need to reinforce expected behavior as often as possible to strengthen the newly learned behavior. As the student begins to demonstrate higher levels of expected behavior, reinforcement can be delivered less often. Finally, all acknowledgment events (e.g., field trip, pizza party) should be fully inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with ESN. Educators who are familiar with students’ unique needs will need to work with the SWPBIS team to ensure that such needs are taken into consideration during planning activities.

Tier 2 Strategies

Although all Tier 2 supports can be adapted to meet students’ unique needs (e.g., see Kern et al., 2020), we have

Typical Daily Progress Report Card Example

Name: Sami M. Daily Goal: 35 points Daily goal reached? Yes No
 Date: September 24th Points received: 27 points

GOALS	Period 1 Math	Period 2 English/ Literature	Period 3 Foreign Language	Period 4 Lunch	Period 5 Biology	Period 6 History	Period 7 Writing
Be Safe	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 0 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2
Be Respectful	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2
Be Responsible	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 0 1 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 0 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2	0 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 2	0 1 <input checked="" type="radio"/> 2
TOTAL	2	5	2	6	5	2	5

Key: 2 = met expectations; 1 = met some expectations; 0 = met few or no expectations

Adapted Daily Progress Report Card Example

Name: Sami M. Daily Goal: 20 points
 Date: September 24th Points received: 20 points
 Period: Biology Daily goal reached? Yes No

GOALS	Activity 1 Warm Up	Activity 2 Independent Reading	Activity 3 Group Discussion	Activity 4 Lab Work
Be Safe 	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
Be Respectful 	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
Be Responsible 	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
TOTAL	5	5	5	5

Key: 😊 = met expectations (2 pts); 😊 = met some expectations (1 pt); ☹️ = met few or no expectations (0 pts)

Figure 5. Daily progress report examples.

focused on guidelines for adapting CICO, one of the most common Tier 2 supports (Bruhn et al., 2014). To learn more about Tier 2 supports, please consider exploring resources from the CEEDAR Center (<https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Behavior-Management-tier-two-and-three-strategies.pdf>). Students who participate in CICO receive a daily progress report that is used to monitor their engagement in school-wide expectations across the course of the school day. Educators deliver feedback based on a numerical rating scale (e.g., 2 = *met expectations*, 1 = *met some expectations*, 0 = *met few or no expectations*) at predetermined intervals (usually each class period) and assigned mentors (e.g., counselor or other staff member who does not provide instruction to the student) check in with students at the start of the school day for goal setting and check out at the end of the school day to review progress toward goal attainment. Figure 5 provides an example of a typical daily progress report. Some students with ESN may require adaptations to meaningfully participate in CICO. As is the case with Tier 1 supports, adaptations to Tier 2 supports should promote physical and cognitive accessibility while taking into account each student's unique support needs. Relatedly, it is important to note that assigned mentors should understand student strengths and areas of need to effectively communicate with and support students during check-in and check-out times. Students might communicate using AAC and/or may benefit from simplified language during check-in and check-out times. As such, mentors will need to work closely with the student's case manager and others who are most familiar with the student to prepare for this mentorship role.

Educators can adapt CICO by altering the intensity or dosage of core aspects (Commisso et al., 2019). In Figure 5, the typical daily progress report is designed such that the student will receive ratings for each class period throughout the school day. However, some students will benefit from more frequent opportunities to earn feedback on their behavior. Educators will need to identify a schedule to follow that is appropriate for the student. For example, students with ESN might require feedback across each within-class activity (e.g., ratings for history class provided after the warm up activity, independent work time, and group discussion) or across shorter predetermined intervals of time (e.g., ratings provided every 5 min). Likewise, some students may benefit from additional check-ins with mentors beyond those offered at the start and end of the school day to stay on target. The adapted daily progress report example in Figure 5 provides the student with increased opportunities to receive feedback by including ratings for expected behavior across each within-class activity during their biology class. This same adapted daily progress report also allows the student to earn a reward for meeting a goal specific to each class period as opposed to a daily goal, thereby strengthening expected student behavior on a denser schedule of reinforcement.

Core CICO aspects also can be tailored to align more closely to (a) student support needs to improve accessibility and (b) the function of student challenging behavior (Commisso et al.,

2019). As noted previously, many students with ESN benefit from visual supports. In the case of a daily progress report, symbols other than text (e.g., picture symbols, photographs) that are familiar to the student can be included to provide a more concrete representation of each expected behavior. This type of support is especially critical for students who are nonreaders or early readers (Hudson et al., 2013). In addition, replacing or supplementing the numerical rating system with visuals that are more concrete can provide students with better representation of progress and goal attainment. Educators must remember that utilizing visual supports is not a "one-size-fits-all approach." In other words, not all students will benefit from the same type of visual support and, therefore, educators must carefully determine which visual supports will best promote accessibility. As an example, the adapted daily progress card in Figure 5 includes Picture Communication Symbols® familiar to the student that represents the behavioral expectations and a rating system consisting of a smiley-face scale to track progress during the biology class.

A final strategy for adapting CICO is to design the intervention around the behavioral function of the student's behavior. For instance, if a student's challenging behavior serves an escape function (e.g., challenging behavior results in escape from a difficult or undesired activity), the educator might provide the student with an opportunity to take a break or engage in a preferred activity (see preference assessment recommendations in Tier 1 section) contingent on the student meeting their goal. An FBA will need to be conducted to explore possible behavioral functions, and we recommend that educators review FBA guidelines before engaging in the process (e.g., <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/functional-behavior-assessment>). However, for more intensive challenging behavior, educators should collaborate with the SWPBIS team and/or a behavior specialist, following school district policies, to complete the FBA process and determine whether Tier 3 intervention is necessary in addition to Tier 2.

Conclusion

SWPBIS is a widely implemented framework that supports positive social and academic outcomes for students. To ensure that students with ESN benefit from SWPBIS, it is important that schools take the following actions: (a) evaluate the extent to which students with ESN are included in SWPBIS through self-assessment, (b) engage in collaborative teaming to utilize expertise among a range of professionals (e.g., general and special educators, speech language pathologists), (c) include general educators and other professionals in training focused on including students with ESN in SWPBIS, and (d) identify effective practices and monitor implementation of adapted SWPBIS supports to improve accessibility for students with ESN across Tiers 1 and 2.

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Distance Learning and Students With Extensive Support Needs

(Re)Defining Access to Education From a Distance

Amy Hanreddy, PhD¹

Abstract: Students with Extensive Support Needs (ESN) experience multiple barriers in accessing distance learning educational programs during school closures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These barriers include inaccessible formats, a lack of access to adequate support to access instruction, and a lack of available assistive technology. Access issues may result in further isolation of students and reduced access to general education peers and curriculum. Promising practices include close collaboration with families, connecting Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals to students' daily routines, supporting access to the general education curriculum, strategic participation in online classes, meaningful engagement with typical peers, and the adaptation of progress monitoring strategies for distance learning formats.

Keywords: distance learning, special education, inclusive education, extensive support needs

When public schools across the United States were forced to close to in-person instruction in the spring of 2020 due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, students from a variety of marginalized backgrounds and their families were confronted with multiple issues of equity and access to instruction (Samuels, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Disparities in access and achievement among students on the

basis of language, race, economic status, and eligibility for special education services, already well documented (e.g., Kohli et al., 2017; Kurth et al., 2015; Noguera & Alicea, 2020), were immediately amplified without the ability for schools to provide in-person instruction (Brown, 2020; Peterson et al., 2020).

Although *distance learning* has become common in the lexicon of public education in 2020, the design of distance learning programs may vary significantly across classrooms, schools, districts, and states (Hall et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2020). Despite this variability, most distance learning programs consist of a combination of synchronous (real-time) instruction through video conference platforms in addition to activities to be completed more independently, and might also include parent training or support components (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Although students with disabilities have been identified as one of the groups most likely to experience challenges within a distance learning format (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Schuck & Lambert, 2020), exploration of specific

strategies for addressing the unique needs of students with extensive support needs (ESN) and their families who do not have access to in-person instruction is an area that is rapidly evolving (Stenhoff et al., 2020).

Despite the promise of a COVID-19 vaccine, it is likely that the cycle of reopening, hybrid instruction, and fully online approaches will remain a feature of public education to some

“ AS THE FIELD OF EDUCATION EVOLVES TO MEET THE CHANGING DEMANDS OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS, MANY HIGH-LEVERAGE, EVIDENCE-BASED, AND PROMISING PRACTICES REMAIN AS RELEVANT DURING DISTANCE LEARNING AS THEY WERE IN PERSON.”

degree until the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed (Boone, 2020; Gross et al., 2020). Students with some health conditions may elect to participate in a fully online program longer than some other populations. Furthermore, as new approaches for teaching students with ESN are refined, distance learning may remain as a more viable option for students whose health or medical conditions prevent access to school (whether temporarily or permanently). For these reasons, it is essential to determine how existing evidence-based, high-leverage, and promising practices can be implemented within distance learning programs, and to explore new promising approaches currently being defined by educator-innovators on the digital front lines.

Defining the Challenges of Distance Learning for Students With Significant Needs

Students with *ESN*, by definition, generally rely upon a high level of support to access their educational programs. In addition to the complex communication, medical, sensory, and learning needs that may be experienced by these students, they are also frequently underestimated and are disproportionately educated in restrictive settings (Agran et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2019; White et al., 2007).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, wide discrepancies in access to services and the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) across racial, economic, and linguistic categories were already well documented (Blanchett et al., 2009; Grindal et al., 2019). In addition to inequities in access to services, distance learning has introduced new challenges attributed to the inaccessibility of the formats and curriculum used, lack of access to needed care and a lack of qualified support both during and beyond school hours, and the unavailability of assistive technology and training to use both hardware and software (Brandenburg et al., 2020; Whitley, 2020). Although the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has reiterated that students should continue to receive the services and supports outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) during distance learning (Jameson et al., 2020; Nadworny & Kamenetz, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2020), many aspects of students' programs and services are not easily translated to a distance learning format. Related services such as physical and occupational therapy, orientation and mobility, and adapted physical education are a challenge to provide in a virtual format, and for students with extensive needs, may rely heavily upon coaching of family members to adjust support based on feedback from therapists (Jeste et al., 2020; Ries, 2020).

In addition to the issues related to access and support, many students with ESN have experienced an extended period of social isolation. For students with and without disabilities, school is traditionally a place where relationships with peers are developed and enriched through the opportunities afforded by extended time spent with one another. Although the isolation of teaching and working at home is frequently cited as a challenge associated with distance learning for all students (Curtis, 2020;

North, 2020), students without disabilities are more likely to interact with other children in their neighborhood, use technology to text/video call with friends, and/or participate in "learning pods" in which children participate in distance learning in small supervised groups (Blanco & Dunne, 2020). While students who spent all or most of their time in general education may have a strong network of social support, the vast majority of students with extensive needs are educated in segregated educational programs (Kurth et al., 2015; Morningstar et al., 2016). For students with ESN whose social circles may have already been limited prior to school closures (Feldman et al., 2016), the absence of close friendships may be amplified (Stavridou et al., 2020; Strauss, 2020).

While the issues of access and isolation present formidable challenges to students during distance learning, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on many family members of individuals with ESN as well. To provide adequate care prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, families of students with extensive needs often rely on multiple agencies and programs, as well as informal networks of support in addition to schools (Chadwick et al., 2002; Jansen et al., 2018; Kyzar et al., 2012). Without the respite provided by school during the day, as well as the additional risks presented by in-home supports from other agencies or even extended family, many parents report feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of meeting the academic, physical, and emotional/behavioral needs of their child amid competing responsibilities for work, household tasks, and caring for other children in the home (Boyd-Barrett, 2020; Neece et al., 2020). Linguistic barriers for families whose home language is not English and economic barriers affecting access to care and services are likely to further compound the stresses placed upon families.

Promising Practices and Strategies

Despite the multiple and intersecting barriers facing students with ESN and their families during distance learning, many opportunities exist for leveraging the increasing collaboration between educators and families, for learning from evolving practices to address barriers experienced by students and families, and for aligning existing evidence-based and high-leverage practices to distance learning. Several emerging practices shared anecdotally among teachers and teacher-educators in workshops, communities of practice, and online educator communities hold promise for increasing educational access, family support, and inclusive education. Some exemplar strategies follow, along with their connections to existing evidence in the field:

1. *Develop Distance Learning Plans Collaboratively with Families/Caregivers.* Close collaboration with families of students with ESN is considered a "High Leverage Practice (HLP)" (Brownell et al., 2018) and is supported by a strong body of evidence in both inclusive and culturally responsive education (Harry, 2008; Jansen et al., 2017; Olivos et al., 2010). Family-focused planning

centers the culture and home language of caregivers, rather than being driven by the agenda of school staff (Olivos et al., 2010). Given the critical role that families play to support access to instruction during distance learning, and the fact that all or most distance learning instruction typically takes place in the home, many educators already report a high level of collaboration with the families of their students with ESN as a key component of their online programs (Frederick et al., 2020; Ondrasek, 2020). Through regular conversations with families, educators can learn about families' priorities and goals during distance learning, as well as the specific barriers and successes related to support and learning for their child with ESN. Educators can then adjust a student's program around these goals, strengths, and needs. For example, when possible, the timing of synchronous instruction can be used to align with the times when support is most available at home, and educators can collaborate with families to embed literacy practice into regular activities in the home.

2. *Connect IEP Goals to Regular Activities in the Home.*

Embedded instruction is an evidence-based practice in which target skills are taught in the context of naturalistic activities (Jimenez & Kamei, 2015; McDonnell et al., 2006). During distance learning, embedded instruction can be accomplished by prioritizing goals with families and working together to create an IEP Goal/Activity Matrix (Grisham-Brown et al., 2002) or participation plan (Kurth et al., 2020) in which key skills are embedded throughout the student's daily routine. For example, a student who has a goal focused on making comments using an augmentative communication device can practice this skill while on a walk around the neighborhood, at mealtimes, and when watching TV with their family. Educators can assist parents by demonstrating how to model the target skill, and provide both prompting and reinforcement in a manner that is comfortable and natural for the family member. During regular check-in meetings with families, parents can have an opportunity to discuss progress and ask questions.

3. *Support Access and Involvement in General Education Classes and Curriculum.* The critical importance of inclusive educational approaches is well established for students with ESN (e.g., Cosier et al., 2013; Feldman et al., 2016; Ruppert et al., 2017). During distance learning, access to general education instruction continues to hold promise to support connections with peers, promote high expectations for learning, and to access a robust curriculum well aligned with the Common Core standards. To promote access and engagement in general education distance learning instruction, educators will need to consider applications of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in which engagement is prioritized, and students are provided with multiple formats to support receptive understanding as well as multiple ways to express their

learning (Novak & Thibodeau, 2016). By considering potential barriers to instruction, educators can proactively promote accessibility for the full range of students they are teaching.

4. *Strategic Participation Strategies During Synchronous Instruction.* Often, the pace and forms of participation common within general education whole-class online synchronous instruction present particular barriers to students with extensive needs. In addition to UDL, students with significant support needs may benefit from participation strategies that are tailored to their unique needs. Strategic participation strategies apply embedded instruction within a general education context to support meaningful involvement during whole-class synchronous instruction. Opportunities to actively participate promote belonging and class membership (Carter & Hughes, 2006). Putting the student with ESN in the position of a leader can also support self-determination and promote higher expectations (Bigby & Beadle-Brown, 2018). For example, a student might select a number to be used in a math problem by the whole class, periodically re-state the "big idea" of a chapter either verbally or with a communication device, and/or monitor the class schedule and assist with transitions from one activity to the next by advancing a slide or announcing what is next. These strategies should be predictable, aligned with individual goals, consistent to promote increased autonomy over time, and should contribute to the lesson or activity (Buchinsky et al., 2020).
5. *Support Social Interaction and Meaningful Engagement with Typical Peers.* Although families and students across the country are experiencing social isolation regardless of disability status, as a result of safety measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, students with ESN are at particular risk for social isolation (Stavridou et al., 2020). To develop and sustain relationships with peers, students need time and shared experiences with one another (Feldman et al., 2016). Educators can support meaningful engagement between students with and without disabilities during distance learning by dedicating time during the school week to interaction and fun with one another. Facilitated small-group activities can be accomplished during synchronous class time using breakout rooms, and "lunch clubs" or other online enrichment activities can provide an opportunity for students to play games, hold dance parties, or even watch videos with one another (Brady, 2020). By selecting activities that leverage the strengths and goals of students with ESNs and actively facilitating interactions (at least initially), educators can support the development of positive relationships that can be built upon when students return to school.
6. *Monitor Progress Toward Individualized and Curricular Goals.* Effective assessment is a critical component of effective instruction (Black & Wiliam, 2004; Mitchell,

2008). Educators are not only bound by requirements in both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to gather evidence of student learning, but the careful monitoring of progress throughout instruction will assist educators in determining whether current approaches are promoting learning, will allow them to adjust instruction accordingly, will support the development of new learning goals, and will result in more effective communication about student progress with families (Brownell et al., 2018; Etscheidt, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). Many educators have already adapted in-person progress monitoring strategies for distance learning, such as the use of anecdotal observations and digital data collection sheets (e.g., using Google Forms). In addition, approaches that lend themselves to a distance learning format include video observation (Joseph et al., 2014) and digital portfolios (Bruce et al., 2018; Denham & Lahm, 2001), both of which can be completed collaboratively by families together with educators.

By aligning approaches to distance learning with existing evidence in the field, educators can ensure that teachers have the guidance they need to ensure meaningful and high-quality instruction for their students. While alignment with HLPs provides assurance that distance learning instruction is built upon a solid foundation, additional research is urgently needed to learn from new innovations, refine practices, and disseminate effective approaches more broadly in the field.

The Future of Distance Learning and Students With ESN

Despite the many barriers and challenges associated with distance learning for students with ESN, alternatives to in-person instruction will continue to be essential until all students can return to school safely. In addition, distance learning may become an increasingly viable option for students with ESN whose health or medical conditions interfere with regular school attendance beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. As educators continue to explore strategies for meeting the needs of students with ESN via distance learning, we must investigate and document promising practices to strengthen the evidence base for this emerging field. Teacher educators will need to incorporate new considerations and strategies for distance learning within educator preparation programs, and local education agencies (LEAs) will need to embed professional learning to support coherence of practices across school sites and programs and alignment with ethical and evidence-based practices.

As the field of education evolves to meet the changing demands of students and schools, many high-leverage, evidence-based, and promising practices remain as relevant during distance learning as they were in person. As we improve approaches for distance and hybrid learning, LEAs and Institutes

of Higher Education (IHEs) can demonstrate that students with ESN, as well as students from other historically marginalized groups, are valued members of their school communities by collaborating and problem-solving to design, articulate, and evaluate approaches in terms of inclusion, equity, and access. With these guiding principles in mind, new and redefined systems can be designed for all students from the outset.

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Bio

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An Interview on District and School Transformation

Practical Approaches to Facilitating Sustainable Systemic Change

Kurt A. Schneider, PhD¹, Suzanne Sands, MEd¹, Kristen Endre, BA¹, Dale Baker, MEd², Kristin Burnette, MEd², and Diane Ryndak, PhD²

Abstract: Illinois has an education system that includes regional cooperatives charged with supporting member districts in the provision of special education services for students from birth to age 22. Such support can include both direct services (i.e., early childhood services, special education classes in a separate building or in special education classrooms of the member districts) and indirect services (e.g., consulting services, professional development and coaching, assessment, related services). This interview is with three leaders in one such cooperative of 18 K-8 and high school member districts of varying size across 3 regions in 2 counties.

Keywords: systems change, access to and progress in the general curriculum, leadership, system transformation, re-imagining special education

Illinois has an education system that includes regional cooperatives charged with supporting member districts in the provision of special education services for students from birth to age 22. Such support can include direct services (i.e., early childhood services, special education classes in a separate building or in special education classrooms of the member districts) and indirect services (e.g., consulting services, professional development and coaching, assessment, related services). This interview is with three leaders in one such cooperative, consisting of 18 K-8 and high school member districts of varying sizes across 3 regions in 2 counties. Dr. Kurt A. Schneider is the superintendent of the Northern Suburban Special Education District (NSSED) in Highland Park, IL. He holds undergraduate and master's degrees in

special education, and a PhD in educational leadership and policy analysis. He has extensive general and special education experience in designing integrated comprehensive education systems and has held his current position since 2016. Suzanne Sands is the president of the NSSED Leadership Council, as well as member of the School Board of District 67 in Lake Forest, which is one of the 18 member districts of NSSED. Kristen Endre is the president of the NSSED parent leadership group for the Association of Parents and Staff, which comprises parent representatives from each of the 18

member districts, as well as NSSED district administrators. For many years, this association has participated in and offered learning opportunities to advance inclusive practices and shared parent perspectives with leaders as they make decisions about services and the students of NSSED. This is part of their story about their experiences with re-imagining their system's implementation of special education and related services.

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Question (Q): What issues faced NSSED and the 18 member districts that led to this change process?

Suzanne Sands (SS): It had become clear to us the needs of our 18 member districts had become “as diverse as the learners we serve.” A couple of districts were thinking about leaving NSSED and were wondering whether they were prepared to educate the students historically served by cooperative programs. Districts were wanting to keep their students in the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability, which meant fewer students were being sent to our self-contained programs, resulting in reductions to tuition revenue for NSSED. While this appeared to reduce expenses for the districts, it cut the primary source of revenue for NSSED to operate. Ultimately, these districts ended up staying members of NSSED,

Table 1. Northern Suburban Special Education District Mission and Vision.

Mission and Vision

Mission: Committed to the possibilities of every learner, every day.

Vision: Northern Suburban Special Education District is a national leader and highly valued partner with a courageous commitment to inclusive communities that equally value all people and inspire them to be active participants in our world.

but we realized we had some work to do if we were going to better meet the diverse needs of our member districts, and make NSSED sustainable in the long-term.

In addition to the financial ramifications, we faced issues related to the identity of NSSED. For years we had been a leader in the state, reflecting a long history of being on the cutting edge of special education and related services. We wanted to continue being cutting edge, which further drove us to consider rethinking our structure. With Dr. Schneider's leadership we learned that, rather than focusing on placements and locations, and "taking back programs," we needed to focus on using the cooperative to assist with providing instructional supports and services within general education curriculum and classrooms, so students could be meaningfully included in their home schools and communities. When we started re-imagining ourselves, our services for some secondary students comprised them coming to a self-contained building, sometimes for large portions of their day, being taught skills in isolation of integrated employment. After exiting the education system, disproportionate numbers of students in Illinois moved on to a segregated day program for adults. Dr. Schneider helped the board understand this was not best practice and was, instead, a response to traditionally well-meaning systems in place within the Illinois system. These systems, however, were not meeting the needs of people with disabilities to live, work, and play in an integrated community. Through re-imagining the role of NSSED we have recommitted to preparing and expecting our secondary students to succeed in competitive integrated paid employment, maximizing the number of hours they work. Our staff are employment specialists who provide job coaching at real work sites and track our graduates' success.

Q: Describe the changes that NSSED and your member districts wanted to achieve.

SS: Regardless of where you are philosophically, it was evident there was need for a new plan for sustainability, which led us towards the path we are on now. It was becoming clear for NSSED to be sustainable and meet the needs of districts that wanted their students to access the general education curriculum and classrooms within their own schools, we needed to change how we were doing things. We began a strategic journey towards re-imagining the way NSSED could serve its 18

member districts. Developing a culture of high expectations for everyone was one outgrowth of that work which led to a new mission and vision (see Table 1).

Q: How did you begin and build your change process, and who was involved in it?

SS: The first step in our process was to find, recruit, and hire a superintendent for NSSED who had a vision for re-imagining our role in special education and related services with our districts and we found Dr. Schneider. He led the NSSED Board in a full year of learning through reading articles, listening to experts, and discussing what we were learning. During that first year, we also invited superintendents from our member districts to come and describe what they needed from NSSED. This grounded our Board in the reasons this work was so critical.

Kurt Schneider (KS): In prior district roles I held previous to this process at NSSED, I had observed several superintendents in trying to lead systems change work. So, I knew this needed to be a slow process with a deep level of learning so people could understand the issues, the changes needed, and the change process. As I talked with the member district superintendents of NSSED, it was clear that the majority of them were expressing the thought that "Yes, this is exactly what we've been trying to talk about." There was so much great energy and they have been wonderful colleagues!

SS: By the end of the first year with Dr. Schneider, Board members all understood IDEA, the history of the legislation, the impact it had on school systems, the ways in which funding had fallen short, and had a deeper understanding of the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and its intent. The people at our table began to understand why inclusive education was important, that every student was a general education student and deserves an enviable life, and that community connection was critically important. In the second year of the change process, we began to apply our learning and discuss what we really want for our schools. More importantly, we discussed what we want for our students and their families; this really is the key question. While we still varied in our opinions about the best way forward, Dr. Schneider brought in a facilitator who helped design a strategic planning process that allowed for a lot of small and large group discussions and synthesized our thoughts into a plan with some pretty aggressive goals (see Table 2).

Table 2. Northern Suburban Special Education District Strategic Plan Goals.

Strategic Plan Goals
<p>Goal 1: Professional Culture of Excellence & Excitement for Learning</p> <p>Goal 2: Equity and Access for Every Student, Every day</p> <p>Goal 3: Fiscal Responsibility and Resource Allocation</p> <p>Goal 4: Learning Opportunities that Empower Every Student</p> <p>Goal 5: Building Collaborative, Trusting Relationships and Communication</p> <p>Goal 6: Unity within Member Districts and the Community</p>

KS: We needed to adjust our processes so that decisions were based on tangible data and current research, rather than on opinion and emotion. There were tools that needed to be tweaked or built, such as an administrative organizational chart, a finance model, a professional learning framework, and a comprehensive data system. It was all about the **six goal areas** in the layout of the plan. We built a continuous improvement cycle, so that each goal leader had a team. Those leadership teams come together regularly through the year to talk about how their work is going, and together form our District Leadership Team. There are periodic updates to the Leadership Council, ensuring transparency of information. We modernized a website and built a dashboard to publicly show documents and content of the Leadership Council meetings.

SS: There are aspects of our re-imagining work that are internal to NSSED, as well as aspects that engage all 18 member districts. For instance, we have a regular communication cycle to ensure we meet the needs of our 18 districts. The Learning Goal Leadership Team established a structure for communication. For example, annual profile meetings with each member district in the fall are held to talk about member district goals, partnership opportunities between organizations throughout the year, and local, regional, and state data trends. NSSED and each member district meet again later in the winter to forecast usage from the cooperative for the upcoming year. This allows organizations to plan and budget in a way that positions NSSED to be able to provide the continuum of programs, services, and supports needed by our member districts.

KS: After a year of learning and a year in which we collectively designed a 3-year strategic plan, we now are finishing year three of that plan.

Q: How did implementing the strategic plan help shift the culture?

SS: Even though a recommitment of a philosophical shift to even more inclusive educational practices was occurring, serving students in self-contained settings was still valued by families, the districts, and the community. Dr. Schneider came in wanting to respect that, as well as the history of the organization, while pushing for the changes toward research based best practices, and the intent of federal laws, that would improve outcomes for our learners.

Kristen Endre (KE): NSSED was thoughtful about considering each unique subculture community or ecosystem of its member districts. Each district was able to consider their individual needs and priorities and bring those to a larger, collaborative discussion.

KS: The philosophical shift accounts for some of the excitement we have seen and are continuing to build; that and each district's community taking more of the lead from their own administrators, but with the support services from the cooperative being integrated into the member district to maximize student's access to inclusive experiences. The re-imagining of our role in special education services has not been an initiative; it is a culture shift. We continue to build a culture in which the values and practices associated with inclusive education is just the work that we do. For instance, we now are talking about onboarding new Leadership Council members and personnel for next year, using continuing members and personnel as mentors for new people joining NSSED. We also are strengthening our Articles of Agreement with member districts, using language that strengthens the foundation for this work, and continuing to revisit our financial model.

SS: The way we have gone about this work has shifted the way our organization operates, as opposed to just an initiative; we shifted in every aspect of NSSED and how it operates. We made changes, adjustments, and shifts towards doing the work differently to support inclusive education practices. You could not unravel the changes; they are ingrained in the system.

KE: Families have been integral to this cultural shift. The foundation of NSSED has always been based on pushing educational boundaries for students with disabilities. Families have always been a part of these efforts and partnered with NSSED often in the initiating or driving the changes they wanted to see.

Q: What impact have this re-imagining and culture shift had on students and families?

KE: An important piece for the families in this process was when Dr. Schneider led us through the learning during the first year. We sat there and said, "We have been saying this about

our own children for decades.” We are reaching out to teachers, schools, and districts. While LRE was the language the families already spoke, it became important for us to collectively embrace the history of LRE implementation and the context. That deeper understanding and the difficult conversations that followed were essential building blocks for family support for these organizational shifts.

KS: One of our parent leaders was wonderful. She had all this emotion, because her educational systems had always been saying something different from what she believed. She now had a conceptual framework, research, and policy to support her parental instincts. She would often say this was so validating, after years of feeling oppressed. She became a fierce advocate and resource for the culture shift we were trying to achieve. I knew at the end of the day it would be the parents who would push, at key times, our system where it needed to go, and I needed to spend as much of my time with the parents as I spent with the NSSED Board. This is not to say that we do not need our staff to achieve the culture shift, but the roles that parents and Board members play are the most impactful on systemic changes. The parents, though, are the ultimate cavalry.

SS: Parents came in and shared their stories with the Board. It was difficult for other stakeholders to argue with those stories, because they were aligned with research on best practices and resulted in student changes we valued. We were able to get a vision for what we were striving to achieve, and that vision was flexible enough to support each stakeholder, that is, wherever they entered the change process, each stakeholder felt they would continue down a good path. The vision and strategic plan did not leave anyone behind, drag anyone to a starting point for which they were not ready, or pull anybody back.

KS: One day Kristen called me and said, “My kid got homework. I’m like every other parent.” You don’t think of things like that. As a profession, it often reflects a low bar we set for students with disabilities.

KE: I remember that. My son was sent home with the same book as every other kid in his class. He got homework and he hated it, just like every other kid. It was the best night of my life.

Q: What insights can you share with others engaged in similar re-imagining?

KS: We learned to continuously link our work to our students. We start every Board meeting by recognizing a student who is a part of that work. Staff, family, and students all come to celebrate the student and their accomplishments. Connecting the student to the work reminds us why we are meeting and sets the stage for the work at hand.

SS: At the APS Best Practices Awards, an event hosted annually by NSSED’s parent board, a general education

teacher in my district was recognized. He is a beloved teacher, and instead of sharing his thoughts with the audience he said, “My students have been sitting for a long time. I’m going to invite them up here.” As each student came up to him this teacher said something unique about each of them. It doesn’t matter who you are when you walk into his class, he’s going to meet you where you are and cherish you. That is what every learner needs.

KS: While there is sometimes hesitation and debate, I would say it is critical to involve everyone from the beginning and invest time in conversations because you have to unlearn and relearn some new information. To accomplish this, the Board engages in three strategic events every year: The National Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity Institute, held by UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee faculty, the national TASH Conference, and the National School Boards Association Equity Symposium and Conference in D.C. While in D.C. the Leadership Council members meet with their representatives to advocate for policy and funding changes to support inclusive education. From a Leadership Council perspective, this engages them in the bigger process, and they are developing a sense of pride in their work.

SS: Taking the time for learning is critical, and boards often do not do that. If you want impactful change, it is critical that you take the time needed to ground your Board in knowledge about best practices. Bring in experts and have them talk. The first year I went to the TASH Conference I brought back information. I said to my superintendent, “I don’t know where this information has been, but this is what we need to be doing if we really want our teachers and administration grounded in why we are doing this work.”

KS: During this work, it is very important to tap into the kids without disabilities and their parents. Change really occurs through the general education door. The more principals, classroom teachers, and parents know, the more successful you will be with this work and shifting the perception and paradigm of students with disabilities. This shift even led us to take on the topic of the name of the organization and we listened to the students to help us make this decision. They essentially said, “If you’re going to change the name, do it with meaning behind it, not just as camouflage. We don’t want to be segregated and isolated, but if you’re going to just change the name, but not the practice, then don’t waste anybody’s time.” So, as of July 1 we will be known as TrueNorth Educational Cooperative 804. The name change emphasizes the collaborative effort of our mission and vision for our dream of an inclusive education for all, and in which we are engaged with our 18-member districts on this journey towards that destination.

If you would like more information about the re-imagining work being done at NSSED and its 18 member districts, you may contact Dr. Kurt Schneider (kschneider@nssed.org).

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Kristen Endre has been the president of the Association of Parents and Staff, NSSED's parent leadership group, since 2010. After

leaving a professional career in writing and communication, she and her former husband co-parent two new high school students, one of whom has complex developmental and medical needs.

Dale Baker is a PhD student in the Department of Specialized Education Services at UNC Greensboro, and working with two federally funded inclusive education grants. She received her MEd in reading and her undergraduate degrees in special education and general education.

Kristin Burnette is a nationally board certified special education teacher and is currently completing her PhD in special education at UNC Greensboro, working with the two federally funded grants to study education and systemic change for practices that support inclusive education. She received her undergraduate and master's degrees in special education.

Diane Ryndak is a professor of Special Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her work focuses on teacher and doctoral level preparation, with a focus on collaborative teams meeting the complex needs of students with extensive and pervasive support needs through the use of evidence-based practices that result in access to grade-level general education curriculum, contexts, instruction, and classmates.