DIVERSE LEARNERS

SPECIAL EDUCATION PLAYBOOK FOR SYSTEM LEADERS

SEPTEMBER 2023

DEPARTMENT of EDUCATION
louisiana Believes

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Louisiana Department of Education is devoted to the notion that Louisiana students are just as capable as all students in America. Students with disabilities in Louisiana are simply **students** first. Louisiana is a state that believes in inclusion, not as just a place or a program, but as a sense of belonging by giving each student what they need to succeed in a high-quality teaching and learning environment. Together with our educators, support professionals, leaders, community members, and families, it is our responsibility to make sure every student reaches their full potential as we actualize **Louisiana's six critical goals**.

This playbook aims to ensure that all students with disabilities are challenged, held accountable, and provided with the necessary tools and support to reach their maximum potential. Across the state of Louisiana, staff, school-based and school system leaders, and community members are committed to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Despite this effort, many are not yet mastering grade-level content.

Research and the experiences of gap-closing schools point to a set of instructional best practices that can greatly accelerate learning for students with disabilities. This guidance is intended to promote the widespread adoption of these best practices and is focused on teaching and learning strategies for students with disabilities; leadership of cross-departmental teams is required to implement these best practices. The following stakeholders are encouraged to review this guidance: general and special education teachers and leaders, central office staff, school-based leaders, school system and school-based instructional leadership teams, Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members, paraprofessionals, and pupil appraisal staff.

Additional equally important topics go beyond the scope of this document; however, they will be addressed in the future through separate guidance documents to be released on the Louisiana Believes website. These topics include

- identifying disabilities early and accurately;
- strengthening instruction and learning through effective **related services and specialized supports**;
- coordinating effective transition planning and implementation;
- providing effective student **well-being** supports;
- providing access to high-quality early childhood education and early childhood educators to **young children with disabilities**; and
- addressing the needs of students with **significant cognitive disabilities**.

Legal Disclaimer: The information provided in this document does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal or regulatory requirements; instead, all information, content, and materials are intended to support school systems with improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THREE INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICES

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing body of knowledge of "what works" to teach students to read and comprehend and to accelerate the learning of students who struggle. Research suggests that the same strategies used for typically developing students may also be effective for students with disabilities.

All students are unique and the following instructional best practices alone may not be appropriate for every student. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) must be written to meet the individual needs of each student. Often, students with cognitive disabilities or severe needs will benefit from some practices, supports, and programs that differ from the best practices more appropriate for students with mild to moderate disabilities. All students with disabilities must be included to the maximum extent appropriate with students without disabilities in all educational environments and opportunities.
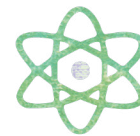
The instructional best practices summarized in this document are discussed at length, including the underlying research, in *Six Shifts to Improve Special Education and Other Interventions* (Harvard Education Press, 2020) and **Staffing and Scheduling Best Practices Guidance** (Louisiana Department of Education, 2021). The instructional best practices align with the research by John Hattie's Visible Learning and the *What Works Clearinghouse*. The three key instructional best practices discussed in this document are the importance of core instruction, the need for extra time, and the critical role of highly skilled, content-strong teachers.

FOCUS ON CORE INSTRUCTION	**EXTRA TIME TO LEARN**	**CONTENT STRONG TEACHERS**

INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICE 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF CORE INSTRUCTION

Students who struggle benefit from high-quality core instruction, high-quality curriculum, and instructional materials. Special education and intervention services should be in addition to, not instead of, core instruction, especially in reading, English language arts, and math for many students.

INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICE 2: THE NEED FOR EXTRA TIME INTERVENTION OR SUPPORT

Most students who struggle academically will require extra instructional time to master prior content, address skill gaps, pre-teach or re-teach current year content, experience material in multiple ways, and clarify misunderstandings. Extra instructional time most often requires direct instruction that is connected to a high-quality curriculum, rather than time spent on primarily independent work or computer programs utilized as a replacement for direct instruction. The quality of the instruction matters as much as the amount of instruction.

This extra time intervention is more impactful if the students are flexibly grouped by similar areas of need, such as a group of students struggling in phonics, a group struggling in comprehension, or a group struggling with number sense.

The need for extra time intervention or support applies to both elementary and secondary students.

INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICE 3: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF HIGHLY SKILLED CONTENT STRONG TEACHERS

It is well known that teacher effectiveness is highly correlated to student achievement, and this holds true for students who struggle, including those with and without IEPs. Students who struggle academically benefit from having both core and academic intervention/support teachers who possess content expertise, interest, aptitude, and training in the subjects they teach.

Implications for IEPs

Given that these best practices benefit many students with disabilities, the IEP teams should consider the following when developing an IEP:

The Importance of Core Instruction

- Specifying that a student won't be pulled out of specific core instruction, such as reading and math, thus ensuring they receive 100% of crucial core instruction. Related services, math support, reading support, etc., will still be provided, but during non-core instructional periods.

- Delivering and managing various accommodations during core instruction time through the core classroom teacher, instead of the student being pulled out to receive these accommodations. For example, accommodations such as text-to-speech or word-prediction software can be accessed on the student's laptop to ensure the student can access and benefit from core instruction in the general education setting.

- Ensuring students with disabilities have access to the same high-quality curriculum and materials utilized by students without disabilities, with appropriate modifications, accommodations, and additional supports/interventions, as determined by the IEP team..

The Need for Extra Time Intervention or Support

- Providing high-quality extra time intervention to all struggling students, including special education students (even when taught by general education teachers).

- Receiving extra time intervention may be a preferred support compared to supports that do not provide any additional instructional time.

- Convening small support groups of students with similar academic needs, such as groups focused on phonemic awareness, comprehension, or number sense.

- Affording students with disabilities the same, effective learning approaches (e.g., accelerated learning, explicit direct instruction, etc.) students without disabilities receive.

- Identifying all struggling readers and providing high-quality reading intervention delivered by a skilled teacher of reading.

- Avoiding writing generic "special education minutes" in IEPs or treating special education services as subjects of their own. IEP language should clearly define the content area or skill-gap that needs to be addressed.

The Critical Role of Highly Skilled Content Strong Teachers

Teachers with deep content expertise, training, interest, and aptitude should provide extra time supports. This may include special educators with the requisite skills and expertise, certified reading teachers, certified math teachers, or appropriately trained and highly effective general education teachers.

Paraprofessionals should primarily support behavior, health, and safety needs, not academic needs, unless they are content strong in an academic subject (earned a college degree or certified in the subject matter). However, those paraprofessionals who do have deep knowledge and robust training may be appropriate providers of academic support with regular coaching and monitoring.

INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICE 1: PROVIDE AND ENSURE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CORE INSTRUCTION

Despite substantial effort and some learning recovery for students with disabilities, the data in Table 1 shows significant and persistent achievement gaps. Approximately 90% of students with disabilities have not yet demonstrated mastery of state standards.

Disruptions caused by the pandemic, hurricanes, or even student absences resulted in many students' significant learning loss. This was particularly problematic for students with disabilities. As the data in Table 1 reveals, students with disabilities continue to perform below typically developing peers with an achievement gap of over 20%.

Table 1: Percent Mastery LEAP Assessment Results Combined ELA, Math & Science Grades 3-11
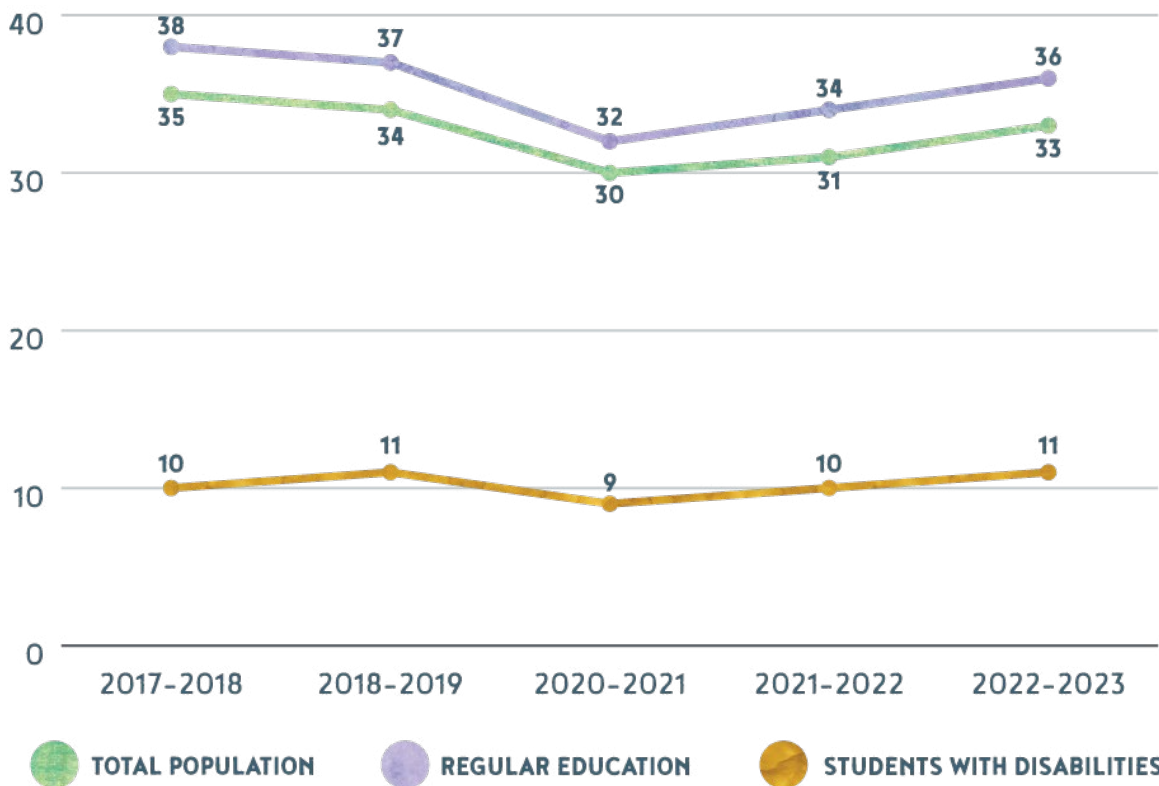
Given the significant learning loss that occurred during the disruption from the pandemic, it can seem rational to lower standards or focus on "catching up" students with disabilities. However, this will only keep students behind rather than **accelerate** their learning. Best practices, for nearly all students with disabilities, call for rigorous grade-level instruction that is scaffolded and supplemented by intervention/acceleration/supports.

Start with a Culture of Achievement and Inclusion

A requisite for students with special needs is the premise that all children belong and can thrive in general education settings,when given the proper instructional supports and when adults uphold a culture of achievement and inclusion. Schools play an important role in helping staff recognize the potential of each student. This occurs when all the adults in the building are collectively responsible for the achievement of every student, including those with disabilities. Students with disabilities are not the sole responsibility of the special education team. This shared responsibility requires collaboration among educators to solve complex problems, and to ensure that all students receive high-quality core instruction.

The Department's **Professional Learning Roadmap** outlines best practices for building structures to increase collaboration among educators:

- Include a special education lead educator on the school's Instructional Leadership Team,

- primarily to support teaching and learning best practices.

- Provide weekly teacher collaboration time for general and special education teachers.

- Special educators who teach academic content or provide academic interventions join grade-level or department collaborative planning that may already exist in many schools.

- Include special education teachers in training on standards, curriculum, and assessments.

- Provide training for general education teachers on interpreting IEPs and implementing instructional accommodations.

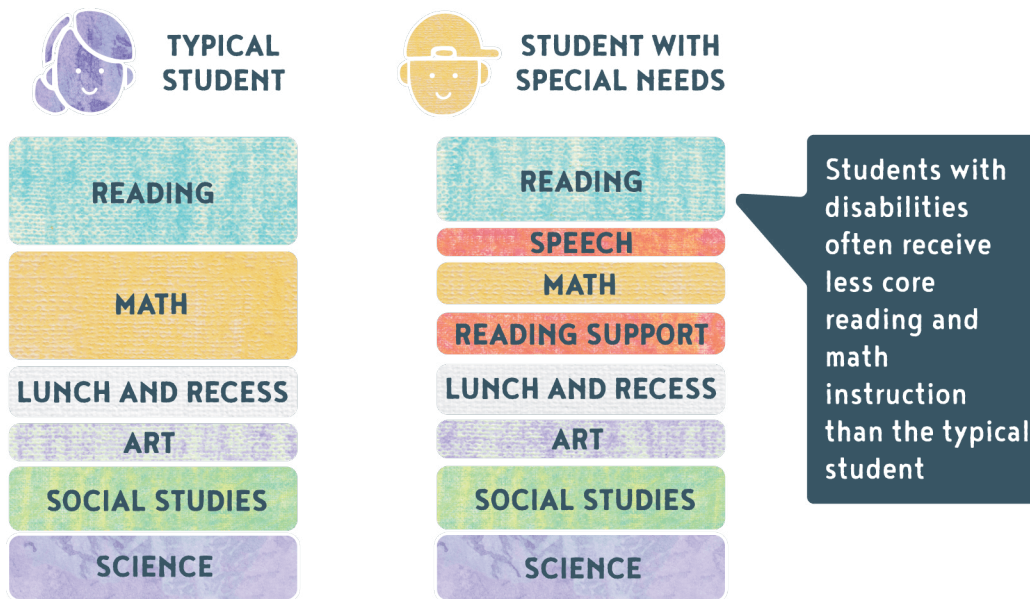## Ensure Access to Rigorous Core Instruction

Many students with disabilities will benefit from intervention, but nearly all need high-quality rigorous core instruction as a foundation. Some refer to this as "core plus more."

Protect Core Instructional Time

- Students with disabilities access to high-quality rigorous core instruction can be impeded when students are intentionally pulled from core instruction for extra help;

- scheduled into lower-level classes for reading, math, ELA, or other subjects; and/or

- pulled from core instruction for related services or other supports.

Ensuring high-quality core instruction is fundamental to addressing academic challenges. While extra instructional time, intervention, and special education services are important, they are not a replacement for high-quality core instruction.

In many schools, students with disabilities actually receive less core instruction than their peers who are not struggling academically. Too often, students with academic challenges are pulled out of core reading, math, or ELA for related services or other supports, which results in less core instruction received.

TYPICAL STUDENT

| READING |
| MATH |
| LUNCH AND RECESS |
| ART |
| SOCIAL STUDIES |
| SCIENCE |

STUDENT WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

| READING |
| SPEECH |
| MATH |
| READING SUPPORT |
| LUNCH AND RECESS |
| ART |
| SOCIAL STUDIES |
| SCIENCE |

Students with disabilities often receive less core reading and math instruction than the typical student

A systems-thinking approach to scheduling can ensure students receive 100% of core reading and math, plus all other needed and required services. See **LDOE Staffing and Scheduling Guidance** for more details.

Consideration: There are Drawbacks to Providing Push-In Services During Core Instruction

Some schools try to protect core instruction by providing push-in services. High-quality core instruction is only effective, however, if a student is able to fully pay attention and participate in it. While push-in may seem like a clever alternative to pulling out during core, it often impedes meaningful access to core instruction.

Push-in can cause the same shortcomings as pullout – less core instruction. Push-in often creates an invisible barrier between students with an IEP and the general education teacher. If a student is receiving related services or special education services during core instruction, access to the general education teacher is impaired. When both the general education teacher and special educator are communicating with a student at the same time, student confusion is likely.

Concentrating on the special education service provider limits a student's ability to concentrate on core instruction, which can cause the student to miss some of the whole class lesson.

A Second Consideration: More Services Aren't Always Better

It is important to remember that every time a student gets an extra minute of support, they are missing something else. Students should receive all the services and supports they need to be successful, but IEP teams should actively consider what a student will lose for each minute of services gained. Fading services, as they are no longer needed, should also be valued as a step forward, not as a loss.

Core Instruction Must be on Grade Level, Always Rigorous, and Provided in the Least Restrictive Environment

It is essential that core instruction remains on grade level or students will fall further behind. This is true for students with and without disabilities. A small number, circa 1% of students with significant cognitive disabilities, will benefit from a modified curriculum. Nearly all students who struggle, including those with disabilities, will benefit from accelerated learning. (Jones et al., 2020)
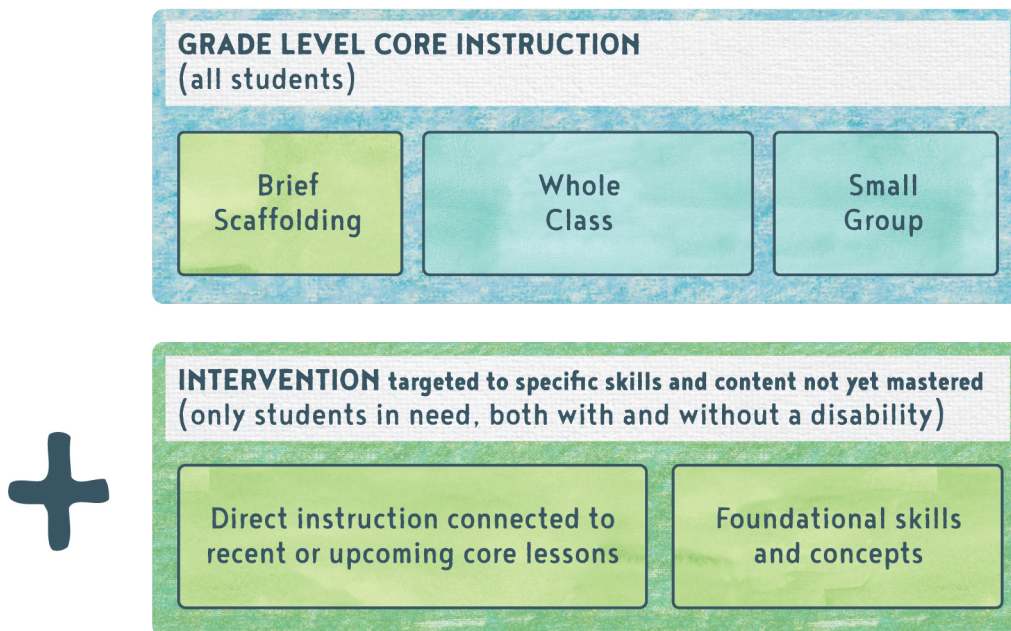
Accelerated learning is both a mindset and an approach to teaching and learning rather than a service, place, or time. Accelerated learning is the prioritization of access to high-quality, grade-level instruction for all students.

In mathematics for example, this approach leverages a high-impact cyclical instructional process that connects unfinished learning in the context of new grade-level learning by utilizing high-quality materials to provide timely, individualized supports throughout a variety of flexible instructional settings and groupings.

Lowering of expectations locks students into staying below grade level achievement. These students will need time during the day for additional instruction to address skill gaps and to learn content from prior years, but that should be *in addition to*, not instead of, rigorous core instruction. Instead of diluting the rigor, core instruction must be augmented with extra instructional time and scaffolding to address academic challenges.

The pressure to teach below grade-level content has increased given the significant amount of missed instruction during the pandemic. Grade-level core instruction will be more impactful with brief scaffolding of prior year content and skills woven into grade-level lessons.

ACCELERATION FRAMEWORK

GRADE LEVEL CORE INSTRUCTION
(all students)

| Brief Scaffolding | Whole Class | Small Group |

+

INTERVENTION targeted to specific skills and content not yet mastered
(only students in need, both with and without a disability)

| Direct instruction connected to recent or upcoming core lessons | Foundational skills and concepts |

The needs of every student with a disability are of course unique, and IEP teams are charged with customizing the supports and services needed for that student. In most cases, the ultimate goal is for the student to master ambitious grade-level content and skills by providing supports and services that allow for mastery. The bar isn't lowered or changed, but the support provided to reach the goal is specially designed as needed.

Most General Education Teaching Best Practices are also Best Practices for Students with Disabilities

The best practices for teaching students without disabilities are also appropriate and useful for most students with special needs. Teachers can and should use the teaching best practices they already know to also serve students with disabilities. They benefit from best practices, just like their nondisabled peers. At the same time, students who struggle but don't have a disability equally benefit from the same teaching best practices. The core of the Universal Design for Learning concept is that good teaching is good teaching, and it helps nearly all students.

GENERAL EDUCATION (AND SPECIAL EDUCATION) TEACHING BEST PRACTICES INCLUDE

- beginning a lesson with a short review of previous learning
- presenting new material in small steps with student practice after each step
- asking many questions and incorporating multiple opportunities for student response
- thinking aloud and providing models
- guiding students as they begin to practice
- checking for understanding and providing systematic feedback and corrections
- providing **scaffolds** for difficult tasks
- encouraging students to express their ideas verbally as scaffolding for writing
- offering ongoing opportunities for review and practice
- teaching skills and strategies that increase self-determination, so students achieve their goals with greater independence
- aligning instruction to what students should know and be able to do

HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM IS IMPORTANT

High-quality core instruction requires that all classrooms utilize high-quality curriculum and materials. This was true before the pandemic and continues to be true. LDOE's document, **High-Quality Materials and Resources**, provides more information. High-quality general education curricula serve all students, with or without disabilities.

READING IS THE GATEWAY TO ALL OTHER LEARNING

All topics covered by core instruction are important, but without mastery of reading, students may struggle in most academic subjects. Moreover, third grade reading proficiency is a strong predictor of lifetime achievement. Difficulty with reading is the most common reason for students to be referred to special education.

Best practices for **teaching reading**, for students both with and without disabilities, are well established. The National Reading Panel, What Works Clearinghouse, the science of reading, and achievement-gap closing schools all agree on a clear set of best practices, which is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Elementary Reading Best Practices

STANDARDS	• clear and rigorous grade-level expectations • identification of students with unfinished learning in reading beginning in early grades • frequent measurement of achievement
CORE INSTRUCTION	• at least 120 minutes per day of core instruction in grades K-2 and • at least 60 minutes per day in grades 3-5 • explicit teaching of the foundations of language and literacy
INTERVENTION	• at least 30 minutes per day of additional time for all students who need acceleration • tight connection of acceleration to core instruction
EFFECTIVE TEACHING	• highly skilled and effective teachers of reading • K-3 teachers trained in the science of reading

Special education services and supports should reinforce and amplify these best practices. Strategies to address IEP goals in reading should closely align with the science of reading.

A common misconception: Some teachers have equated the science of reading with phonics. While phonics is a key element of the science of reading, it is much more than just phonics. It is a comprehensive bundle that includes the teaching of background knowledge, phonemic awareness, language comprehension, and more. For a more comprehensive understanding of the science of reading see **LDOE 's Science of Reading FAQ**.

Teacher Collaboration can Supercharge the Effectiveness of Core Instruction

Teacher Collaboration (TC) is a research-based school improvement best practice that emphasizes teacher development through weekly, job-embedded learning and is facilitated by a skilled educator serving within the building. Teachers collaborate with peers to discuss

• the implementation of high-quality instructional materials;

• relevant, current student and teacher needs as evidenced by data/work samples; and

• the best strategies to use in meeting students' needs throughout instructional settings and groupings (whole group, small group, or individual)

The needs of students and teachers drive the new learning in TC meetings. These meetings are facilitated in cycles of structured professional learning. Effective meetings include the analysis of student work; unpacking, planning, discussing, and annotating units and lessons from high-quality curriculum; planning for and addressing the needs of diverse learners; and addressing unfinished learning through acceleration. Ideally, collaborations occur among small groups of teachers in grade levels or content areas.

TC should always follow the high-quality professional learning cycle. This cycle allows for a clear purpose to be set for the meeting that is driven by teacher and student needs, for teachers to receive new learning from a skilled facilitator (a member of the school level **ILT**), and for internalization of new learning. Following TC, teachers implement new learning and collect student work to determine the impact of that implementation. This impact informs the next set of instructional decisions that teachers make to best serve the needs of all students.

TC meetings are designed to enable teachers to embrace collective teacher efficacy, thus creating the "collective self-perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities" (Hattie, 2016). Teacher ownership of the TC structure will ensure teachers enter meetings prepared to plan, discuss, and truly engage in purposeful conversations to address the needs of all students.

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Must Meet the Needs of Each Individual Student but Needn't Exclude Best Practices that Help Other Students

At the core of special education is the concept that services should be individualized to meet the needs of each student with an IEP. The "I" in IEP stands for *individualized*. If a service, support, accommodation, or modification is needed, it must be provided. If it is needed by a single student, it must be provided for that one student. A focus on what each student needs is central to specially designed instruction (SDI) as outlined in IDEA regulations.

Unintentionally, the concept of SDI, i.e., giving every student with a disability exactly what they need, has been misinterpreted by some to *exclude* providing services and supports if they are also provided to students *without* special needs. This is unfortunate because SDI is intended to increase options, not decrease them.

For example, imagine a student with a specific learning disability who struggles in reading and deficits have been noted in phonics. For this student, their SDI should include everything they need, including intervention that targets phonics. A teacher who is an expert at teaching reading and utilizes best practice teaching strategies, such as presenting new material in small steps with student practice after each step, is exactly what this student needs.

Additionally, the student might also need extra time intervention from a reading teacher in a small group of students who all struggle in phonics. This is exactly what the student with a disability needs, targeted specifically to their needs. This is SDI for this student, even if it includes some general education instruction and general education intervention that students without special needs also receive.

Can SDI be a service or support that is also provided to other students who don't have a disability? Yes, if it's what the student needs and no, if it's because that's simply "what we do in this school".

Can the support be provided by a general education teacher? Yes, if that's the best person to provide what the student needs and no, if it's because there is no one else available.

If a student with a disability receives general education supports, must they also receive special education supports in the same area? No, duplication of supports reduces a student's access to general education instruction.

All available services and providers should be considered, none excluded, including supports provided by core classroom teachers and general education interventionists, as well as supports and services provided by special educators and related service providers.

School and Staff Schedules Must Support the Best Practice Strategies

The best practice strategies outlined in this guidance often can't be shoehorned into existing school and staff schedules. Instead, schedules should be intentionally designed to facilitate the implementation of the recommended strategies.

Elementary Master Schedules Must Enable Staff to Avoid Pulling Students from Core Reading and Math for Special Education and Related Services

Imagine a special educator or related service provider who wants to embrace all of these best practices, but the school master schedule wasn't designed with these goals in mind.

For example, if all the teachers in the school teach reading from 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. then every speech therapist, occupational therapist, and physical therapist must pull some students out of reading to receive services. If, on the other hand, the schedule staggered the reading block and math block throughout the day, these related service providers can provide services without denying students 100% of core reading and math instruction.

When the Entire Elementary Grade has Intervention at the Same Time, Grouping by Area of Need is Easier

Imagine a special education teacher forming a group of five students struggling with phonics. These five students are likely to be distributed across three or four different first grade classrooms. This highly focused group is only possible if grade 1 interventions occur simultaneously.

If the Whole School has Intervention at the Same Time, it is Harder to Provide Content Strong Teachers for the Extra Instructional Time

If the whole school has intervention at the same time, then a large number of students need extra help at once. There typically aren't enough special educators to work with all the students who need support during this time; therefore, some groups will inevitably be supported by paraprofessionals. If the intervention blocks are staggered by grade but common across the grade, say first grade at 9:00 a.m., second grade at 10:00 a.m. and so on, then a much smaller number of students need support each hour.

Similarly, when middle or high schools have a schoolwide or even gradewide extra help block, too many students need extra instructional time to be supported by staff with content expertise.

STAGGERED ACCELERATION

ACCELERATION SPECIALISTS

KINDERGARTEN	FIRST GRADE	SECOND GRADE
READING	READING	READING
ACCELERATION	MATH	MATH
LUNCH & RECESS	LUNCH & RECESS	LUNCH & RECESS
MATH	ACCELERATION	ART
ART	ART	ACCELERATION
SCIENCE	SCIENCE	SCIENCE
SOCIAL STUDIES	SOCIAL STUDIES	SOCIAL STUDIES

Secondary Schedules Should Include Extra Time Intervention Courses

Unlike elementary schools, most middle and high schools build their schedules around a course catalog. Often intervention is not part of the official lists of courses and exists parallel to all other courses, which unintentionally magnifies the divide between special education and general education.

Many schools have found it easier to implement extra time interventions taught by content strong staff when this intervention is treated as a course. Students, both with and without an IEP, can be scheduled into these extra time interventions just like any other course.

Best practice calls for these courses to

- be content specific, e.g., math lab, reading comprehension, or writing support
- address a narrow range of needs, e.g., one class for students with challenges in math fundamentals such as fractions and number sense, and a different course for students struggling with equations
- off credits at the high school level

While these are general education courses open to all students, they can be written into IEPs as the means to address a student's academic needs. Students who are enrolled in general education intervention classes should not also receive additional special education services for the same needs.

At the secondary level, it's also important to protect electives and Career Technical Education courses that may align with a student's transition plan or strengths. For example, a student who plans to enter the carpentry industry after graduation should not miss woodworking for extra academic support. Similarly, students who excel in or enjoy a specific elective should remain in that class as much as possible. Knowing which classes outside of core are most impactful or important to the student will facilitate the creation of a more student-centric schedule that maximizes student growth and achievement.

MORE OF THIS	LESS OF THIS
• Use high-quality materials to accelerate learning and use student formative data to determine where supports will be needed	• Use lower-level materials or removing students from core instruction
• Use scaffolding techniques to support student success	• Avoid challenging activities altogether
• Collaborate and intentionally plan (sped and content) for instruction supports prior to each lesson; annotating lessons for specific student supports	• Omit individualized supports and avoid intentional lesson planning
• Provide accommodations consistently during classroom instruction to support students in mastering grade-level content	• Only provide accommodations on statewide assessments

Relevant Resources

- **10 Steps to Implementing Inclusive Practices**
- **Vendor PD Course Catalog**
- **Louisiana's Staffing and Scheduling Guidance**
- **Professional Learning Roadmap**

INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICE 2: PROVIDE ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL TIME EACH DAY FOR STUDENTS WITH ACADEMIC NEEDS

Students who have not mastered grade-level content need more than core instruction. They need extra support, which can come in many forms.

Extra support often has many names: acceleration, special education services, resource room support, intervention, scaffolding, specially designed instruction (SDI), remediation. There is much confusion about whether these terms are synonymous. To further complicate matters, different people have different definitions for each of these terms. It is easiest to understand these terms by defining three categories of extra support.

- **Scaffolding during core instruction:** Many students will benefit when teachers briefly preface current year content with a short, circa 10-minute, mini-lesson that refreshes or reintroduces prior year content and skills needed for mastery of the day's lesson. This is also referred to as acceleration by some; however, acceleration covers a broader range of strategies, and scaffolding during core instruction is just one part of a comprehensive acceleration strategy.

- **Providing extra instructional time:** Fundamental to effective academic support is students receive extra time to learn beyond core instruction. Special education services, resource room support, or pullout services cannot be used instead of core instruction or during core instruction; they are not extra instructional time strategies. The same type of services provided at a different time in the schedule can be extra instructional time.

  Extra instructional time strategies that are also available to students without special needs can be used for students with IEPs. Extra instructional time need not exclusively be a special education service.

- **Teaching content from previous years:** Often times, remediation or lower-level courses focus on teaching prior year content that replaces the current year's content. This can result in students not having the opportunity to progress to the current grade level content or expectations as their nondisabled peers.

YES: scaffolding during core

YES: special education services, resource room, pullout support or general education in **addition** to core

NO: special education services, resource room, pullout support or general education **during** core

NO: teaching only or mostly prior year content

Students with Academic Challenges Need Extra Instructional Time in Addition to High-Quality Core Instruction

Core instruction is the foundation of all learning, but students with unfinished learning or academic challenges will require more than just core instruction. Many students will need extra instructional time during the school day to master grade level content.

Academic support cannot take place only during time dedicated to grade-level core instruction. There simply is not enough time to teach current year material, as well as skills and content from prior years. It is unrealistic to expect a student with disabilities to master, for example, grade 7 math plus prior skills and content not yet mastered during the same time allotted for nondisabled peers to master grade 7 math. These students have more to learn and it will take them more time.

Most students requiring extra instructional time need at least 150 minutes a week (5 x 30 minutes) at the elementary level and 225 extra minutes a week (5 x 45 minutes) at the secondary level. Shanahan et al. (2010).

Extra Instructional Time Should be Direct Instruction, Specifically Targeted to a Student's Specific Needs and Misunderstandings

There is no one-size-fits-all game plan for what to teach during the extra instructional time. The specific skill and content needs of the students should drive instruction. For example, data from classroom assessments and universal screeners can be used to identify the specific academic deficiencies for each student. The extra instructional time is devoted to teaching these specific gaps.

The pacing of which skills and content to teach should be influenced by the pacing of core instruction, with extra instructional time addressing precursor skills and knowledge needed in the upcoming week(s).

Most students with disabilities will benefit most from direct instruction during this time, instead of homework help, completion of current year assignments, or computer-generated instruction.

Presenting the material in multiple ways can be very impactful, rather than repeating the same lesson or explanation presented during core instruction. Students, especially those with disabilities, don't all learn the same way. Multiple ways of presenting the content increases the likelihood of students understanding the material.

LDOE has a robust set of lessons for math and ELA at the K-2 level and 3- 10 level that can serve as a guide for this type of extra time support. The Literacy Interventions and Foundational Tools (LIFT) Toolkit houses a library of resources for foundational reading skills including diagnostic tools and activities/lessons around phonemic and phonological awareness. The extra instructional time can come in many forms:

• during an elementary school's intervention period or What I Need (WIN) time

• a course at the secondary level, like "extra help math 10," taken in addition to a core math class

• reading intervention

• pullout with a special educator outside of the core reading block

A caution: As the list above makes clear, effective intervention is direct instruction. Seldom will a laptop, a computer program, or a student working alone be an effective means of intervention.

Extra time instruction need not be exclusively a special education service, nor even provided by special educators. What matters is that it's extra instructional time designed to meet the needs of students.

Additional Academic Support in Reading, ELA, and Math, Provides Support Across all Academic Subjects

Reading, ELA, and math are fundamental topics and skill sets that spiral throughout other subjects. Science, social studies, and world languages are difficult to master without strong skills in reading, writing, and math. Focusing first on strengthening these three areas will support learning in all subjects.

For some students, it may be advantageous to concentrate support into the single subject of greatest need so that substantial time and effort is provided. A focused effort is most likely to generate demonstrable learning gains, which will help motivate and engage the student.

Grouping Students with Similar Needs Increases Impact of Extra Instructional Time

IEPs often call for small group support, but seldom address who should be in the group. Creating groups of students with similar needs makes the instruction more targeted, impactful, and easier to plan and deliver. Since extra instructional time for academic challenges should target the specific needs of the students, narrowing the range of needs can be beneficial for students and teachers alike. For example, at the elementary level, an extra instructional time group can be created for students who need additional support in phonics while another group may be created for students who need additional support in fluency.

At the secondary level, an extra instructional time group/ course in math might include students who need support with basic algebraic functions. While a separate group serves students who need support with fractions, number sense, and other more foundational concepts. Groupings should not be static and should be modified and updated on a regular basis as students move through content and develop additional needs.

Intentional grouping by similar areas of need allows teachers to target specific content standards and skill sets more easily than in a mixed group. (Levenson, 2020). It also provides more time to address a student's specific needs than in a group that must address a wide range of needs.

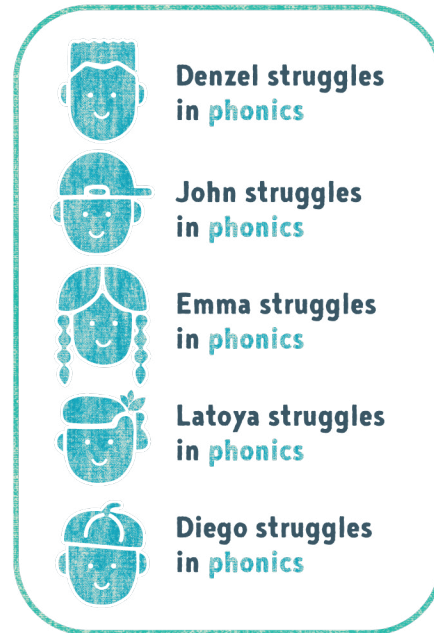## Grouping by a Similar Area of Need Matters More than Group Size

Traditional special education supports often prioritized small groups over need-based groups. Consider the two groups below. Group A is smaller and consists of only three students, but with varying needs. Group B, alternatively, is slightly larger but consists of five students who have been grouped according to one common need (phonics). Because Group B has been grouped according to similar areas of need, these students are more likely to grow academically compared to their peers in the smaller, but mixed Group A.

SMALL GROUP

Olivia struggles in **comprehension**

Denzel struggles in **phonics**

Jose struggles in **Fluency**

OR

SLIGHTLY BIGGER "SMALL GROUP"

Denzel struggles in **phonics**

John struggles in **phonics**

Emma struggles in **phonics**

Latoya struggles in **phonics**

Diego struggles in **phonics**

At the elementary level, research has shown that in comparison to group size, the training and background of the instructor, the length of extra instructional time provided, and the type of instruction presented are more significant factors for increasing student achievement.

- Studies by the *What Works Clearinghouse* show that small instructional groups of up to five students are as effective as one-on-one instruction.[1]

- Similarly, studies by the National Institute of Health show that groups of three students can be as effective as one-on-one instruction, and that even groups of up to ten students can provide benefits, although with smaller outcomes on achievement (notably, this study did not test or include groups of 4-9 students).[2]

- More specifically, the RTI Action Network recommends utilizing groups of 5-8 students for the majority of students who struggle (~15% of all students receiving 30 minutes of additional instruction 5x a week), and recommends smaller groups of 1-3 students for only students with severe reading disabilities (approximately ~3% of all students).[3]

  (Refer to the framework of tier 3 interventions which are designed to address significant difficulties for students needing intensive interventions; often utilizing a direct, systematic approach to instruction with increased practice opportunities.)

In keeping with this research, an elementary extra instructional group size of up to five students is recommended, as it allows students to succeed while providing support which maximizes available resources.[4]

1   Gersten, R., Compton, D., Connor, C.M., Dimino, J., Santoro, L., Linan-Thompson, S., and Tilly, W.D. (2008). *Assisting students struggling with reading: Response to Intervention and multi-tier intervention for reading in the primary grades. A practice guide.* (NCEE 2009-4045). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/.

2   Vaughn, S., Denton, C., & Fletcher, J. (2010). Why Intensive Interventions Are Necessary For Students With Severe Reading Difficulties. Psychol Sch., 47(5), 432-444. doi:10.1002

3   Harlacher, J., Sanford, A., & Walker, N. (2015). Distinguishing Between Tier 2 and Tier 3 Instruction in Order to Support Implementation of RTI.

4   Vaughn, S., Wanzek, J., Murray, C. S., Roberts, G. (2012). Intensive interventions for students struggling in reading and mathematics: A practice guide. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

Extra Instructional Time does not Include Low-Level Courses, Push-In, or Co-Teaching

In many schools, students with academic challenges are placed in courses with lower standards or provided with push-in or co-teaching support during core instruction. These strategies do not provide extra instructional time and often reduce the role of the general education teacher in providing core instruction.

Best practices for students with academic challenges ensure they attend grade-level core content classes and have additional instructional time in their schedules to master prior skills and content. Co-teaching and push-in augment extra instructional time, but not replace it. Extra help courses that address prior skills can be effective but should not replace core instruction for most students.

A common misconception: All students who struggle benefit from extra time intervention, including students with disabilities. A common misperception is that only special educators can deliver services and supports to students with disabilities to help them access FAPE. This misconception leads to either excluding students with disabilities from high-quality intervention or duplicating the services and removing the student from other general education instruction. General education staff can provide instruction and supports to address IEP goals. For instance, a general education teacher who is a content expert in math can provide interventions to a student who has an IEP goal that targets a math skill. Students with IEPs can and should receive general education interventions.

MORE OF THIS	LESS OF THIS
• intervention is connected to core class instruction	• support during intervention is disconnected from core instruction
• active, hands-on, individualized supports are utilized	• activities are not individualized to match learning styles of each learner
• emphasis on *forward movement*; goal is for students to *learn on time* with peers	• emphasis on *backward movement*; goal is for students to catch up to peers
• foundational skills are hand-picked just in time for new concepts and opportunities to build key prior knowledge are provided ahead of time	• instruction attempts to reteach every "missing" skill or concept

Relevant Resources
- **Literacy Library**
- **Small Group Instruction**

INSTRUCTIONAL BEST PRACTICE 3: BOTH CORE INSTRUCTION AND EXTRA INSTRUCTIONAL TIME ARE MORE IMPACTFUL WHEN PROVIDED BY CONTENT STRONG STAFF

Who provides core instruction and extra instructional time matters as much as *how much* core instruction and extra instructional time is provided. It is not sufficient to simply have the right number of full-time equivalents (FTE) in these critical roles, or the right number of minutes. It is important that they have the appropriate skills. Jim Collins in his book Good to Great said it best, "It's critical to have the right people on the bus in the right seats."

Knowing the Content Deeply Improves Instruction and Learning

Research shows that the content expertise of a teacher has significant bearing on the student's likelihood of mastering the material taught. (Hattie, 2013).

Content strong staff can teach concepts multiple ways, identify missing skills, correct misconceptions, and break down complex ideas in ways that are more accessible for students with learning disabilities. Because students with academic challenges have been taught a concept in the past but haven't yet mastered it, the teacher will need multiple means of reteaching the concept. Reteaching material in the same manner may not be beneficial to the students.

Ideally, content strong teachers will be able to infer a student's misunderstanding of a concept. For example, if a student thinks the answer is 7, but it is actually 11, a teacher with deep content expertise could infer that the student divided by 2 in the second step instead of multiplying by 2 and could then pinpoint the instruction to address this misunderstanding.

Extra instructional time is most effective when math is taught by teachers with expertise in math, writing by teachers skilled in teaching writing, and reading by staff specifically trained in teaching reading. This holds true for struggling students both with and without disabilities.

Middle and high school students who struggle academically are in especially great need of teachers with deep content expertise. These students need content presented in multiple ways by staff who can reteach content from many prior grades and can infer specific misunderstandings from wrong answers.

Extra instructional time should be taught by staff with content expertise. Some special education teachers are content strong teachers and are well-equipped to deliver highly-effective content specific support, while others may not be. Special educators have a wide range of expertise including academics, case management, the law, behavior support and more. Few, however, can be expected to have expertise in everything.

Indications of content expertise could include

- certification in the subject
- college major in the subject
- extensive professional experience such as engineering for math or journalism for ELA; and
- 9 hours of college or graduate level coursework in the science of reading or ACT 108 training

CORE INSTRUCTION AND EXTRA INSTRUCTIONAL TIME ARE MORE IMPACTFUL WHEN PROVIDED BY CONTENT STRONG STAFF	
WHY	**HOW**
• have formal training in the content they teach • possess a love and aptitude for the subject matter • able to see a mistake and infer the misconception • can teach a concept three or more ways	• believe that all students, with the appropriate supports, can achieve • participate in teacher collaboration structures • attend professional development on high-quality curriculum • ongoing feedback cycles

The Best Indicator of a Content Strong Teacher is Past Student Growth

Skills, training, and aptitude matter.

Required skills of the extra instructional time provider should be considered. For example:

• **Elementary teachers of reading:** Teaching students who struggle to read and comprehend well is a skill. At the elementary level, effective teachers of reading may possess different types of certifications, but most have specific training in the science of reading and past success in helping students who struggle to read. Training in the science of reading and related best practices are beneficial to all struggling students, including most students with dyslexia and other disabilities that impact reading. Some content strong staff are certified reading teachers, many are general education classroom teachers, and some are special educators or speech language pathologists. A highly effective teacher of reading can be expected to help struggling readers gain at least 18 months in reading in a single school year, as measured by literacy screeners.

• **Secondary teachers of reading:** Unfortunately, many middle and high school students across the country and the state struggle to read and comprehend. Teaching these students requires specialized training, but the skills needed to teach older students to read differ from those required to teach younger readers. While all students who struggle to read benefit from increasing their background knowledge, this is doubly true for students at the secondary level. Many older students may not need the same emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness as their younger peers. Their fluency and comprehension will grow as their mastery of relevant background knowledge grows.

• **Content strong secondary math and ELA teachers:** The complexity of middle and high school content has led nearly every secondary school to have general education teachers teach just one subject. Unlike at the elementary level, few would expect a high school teacher to teach English, math, social studies, biology, chemistry and physics. Specialization based on content expertise is the norm. Students who struggle academically at the secondary level will benefit from staff with subject specific training and expertise.

Some Special Education Staff are Content Strong Teachers and Others Are Not. That's OK.

There are special educators who have deep content expertise and are well equipped to provide extra instructional time. Special educators who do not already have content expertise could have the interest and aptitude, but have not been provided the opportunity to develop expertise in a specific subject. Including special educators in general and content specific professional learning communities, instructional coaching sessions, department meetings, and other professional development can increase the number of content experts in a school.

Not all special educators, however, need to be content experts. There are a multitude of other critical responsibilities necessary for the successful implementation of special education programming, such as IEP development, related services, compliance monitoring, and case management. Students and staff are best served when special educators are allowed to work to their strengths and when school systems don't assume every special educator is strong in every subject and aspect of an overly broad job description.

Too often students with disabilities receive extra instructional time from staff who lack content expertise. At times IEPs are written for students to receive extra help from special educators or paraprofessionals even if these staff members lack content expertise or subject specific training. This is not as likely to lead to accelerated learning, closing the achievement gap, or mastery of grade level content. (Nathan et al., 2020).

Content Strong General Education Staff Should Play a Major Role in Providing Extra Instructional Time for Students with Disabilities

Increasing the role of content expert general education staff can improve results for students with disabilities and students with academic challenges.

All students with academic challenges benefit from extra instructional time taught by teachers with content expertise, which includes general education staff. Too often schools and systems incorrectly assume that only a special educator can provide support to a student with an IEP. While special educators have content expertise in some areas, they may not be experts in all subjects. Many schools with successful accelerated learning use content strong general education staff to provide the majority of extra instructional time, including for students with disabilities. The general education teacher maintains frequent collaboration with the special educator to ensure that the students' needs are being supported and met.

For example, middle and high school students with disabilities who struggle in math benefit from extra instructional time with a certified general education math teacher. This may include a math support class in addition to a core math class. Similarly, at the elementary level, a student with an IEP and reading challenges, including most students with dyslexia, can benefit from reading support from a certified general education reading specialist. (Reenie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2009).

Some schools and school systems have assumed that students with IEPs must receive all of their supports from special educators or special education paraprofessionals. This is not an accurate understanding of the requirements. IDEA's emphasis on serving students in the least restrictive environment reinforces the need and right to include students with disabilities in appropriate supports that are available to students without disabilities.

If a general education teacher is providing support to a student with special needs, the special educator continues to play an important role which can be reflected in the IEP as consultation, instead of direct service.

Small Group Intensive Tutoring Also Requires Content Strong Tutors

Utilizing small group tutoring for extra instructional time to address academic challenges has grown in popularity since the pandemic. This strategy has recently been discussed widely in education journals and has been endorsed by extensive research and LDOE guidance. (National Student Support Accelerator. (n.d.). **https://studentsupportaccelerator.com/research/to-date**).

Some have assumed that tutors can be a typical paraprofessional or community volunteer. While a few effective tutoring models use non-certified staff, it is important to note that such staff are usually college students or recent college graduates with deep content expertise in relevant fields. For example, tutors who are college students majoring in math or engineering might support math, while English or history majors might support ELA and writing.

When staffing tutoring, the following hierarchy can best ensure skilled staff members are supporting students with disabilities or academic challenges:

1. Content strong certified teachers

2. LDOE approved vendors

3. College graduates with specific, relevant expertise

4. Current college students with specific, relevant expertise

5. Well trained and closely supervised paraprofessionals (although, their impact is marginal compared to options 1, 2, 3, and 4)

Paraprofessionals Should Not be Tasked with an Instructional Role Exceeding their Training and Expertise

Paraprofessionals play an important role in the lives of many students with disabilities. They support inclusion, manage behaviors, monitor health and safety issues, and serve students with severe special needs. Across the state, however, many paraprofessionals are charged with helping address academic challenges in reading, math, and ELA for students with special needs.

Some paraprofessionals are, in fact, content strong. They possess the requisite training and content expertise and are, of course, appropriate to provide academic support. However, paraprofessionals lacking deep content expertise should not be expected to provide extra instructional time or other academic supports.

IEP Language Must Support the Best Practices

For students with special needs, language used in their IEPs can unintentionally impact their learning trajectory and, ultimately, achievement outcomes both in the short and long term. Although IEPs are intended to describe the *who, what, when* and *how* services are to be delivered, traditional IEP writing practices can undermine best practices. The service table or grid shown in IEPs are often limited to small spaces and checkboxes to document services, providers, start and end dates, and service minutes. For this reason, special educators should use the "comments" section of the LDOE IEP forms to describe in more detail the types of services provided, by whom, and the reasoning behind the decisions.

Sample Statement of Service Delivery Language in IEPs:

> Given (student's) learning disability in the reading areas of phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension, the reading specialist will provide extra reading support (30 minutes/daily) outside core instruction in reading and math. The special education teacher will serve in an indirect consultative role with (student's) general education teacher and reading specialist for 15 minutes/week to review progress and adjust practices, if necessary.

> (Student) will receive 100% of core reading and math instruction daily with special education and related services provided at other times.

> (Student) will participate in the high school's "38th week" summer program, which is an intensive week-long program intended to help students gain high school credits for catch-up and/or acceleration purposes. This summer program is available to all students who wish to participate, including students with special needs, and will include intensive intervention support as needed.

> (Student) will be pulled out daily for 30 minutes of math intervention, focusing on operations, measurement, and algebraic thinking. The student will not be pulled from core math class while receiving additional math intervention support outside the general classroom to prevent interruption of new learning.

> Phonemic awareness skills will be taught by the speech-language pathologist and a reading specialist in addition to 100% of core reading and math.

> During the school's 45-minute WIN (What I Need) block available to all children, (student) will receive extra reading support by content interventionists or a general education teacher. The special education teacher will consult with these interventionists regularly, at least 60 minutes monthly.

> (Student) will be enrolled in the Math Lab course, taught by a general educator qualified in teaching math, with twice monthly progress checks conducted by the special education teacher to determine program effectiveness and adjustments, if needed. This is in addition to grade level core math class.

> A college student majoring in math or sciences will provide high school math tutoring outside core math instruction to (student) for 60 minutes on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays with regular progress checks by the special education teacher on a bi-weekly basis.

> Communication skills taught by the speech-language pathologist will be reinforced by the assigned classroom aide who is trained on the techniques required to support (student's) skills in the natural classroom setting.

> Math instruction in (student's) classroom utilizes a small-group rotated approach intended to pin-point the math-related needs of all the students; therefore, specially designed instruction conducted by the grade 3 team of general educators will address direct math services during the fall semester. This approach will be reviewed, along with the student's progress, on a regular basis by the special education teacher through consultation (30 minutes/monthly).

> Due to significant regression of reading skills over prolonged breaks from instruction, (student) qualifies for the Extended School Year (ESY) summer program that will focus primarily on maintaining reading skills as taught by the reading specialist. Progress checks will occur throughout ESY.

A Caution: It's important to avoid writing in generic "special education minutes" in IEPs. Special education should not be treated as a subject of its own and IEP language should clearly define the content area or skill-gap that needs to be addressed.

This playbook aims to ensure all students with disabilities can thrive in Louisiana and reach their full potential. These research-based instructional best practices set the foundation for the services and supports needed to greatly accelerate learning for students with disabilities.

Implementing this guidance will require the efforts, skills, and leadership of cross-departmental teams and will take time.

Relevant Resources

- **Content Leader**
- **Literacy Professional Growth**

BEST PRACTICE REFERENCES

This guide draws on the wisdom of much published research and the success of gap closing schools and districts. Some of the key research materials include

General Best Practices

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