

PCG's Special Education Effectiveness Framework

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When implemented with a systems-thinking approach, the six domains of the Special Education Effectiveness Framework from Public Consulting Group (PCG) will help superintendents and district leaders improve educational and functional outcomes for students with disabilities.

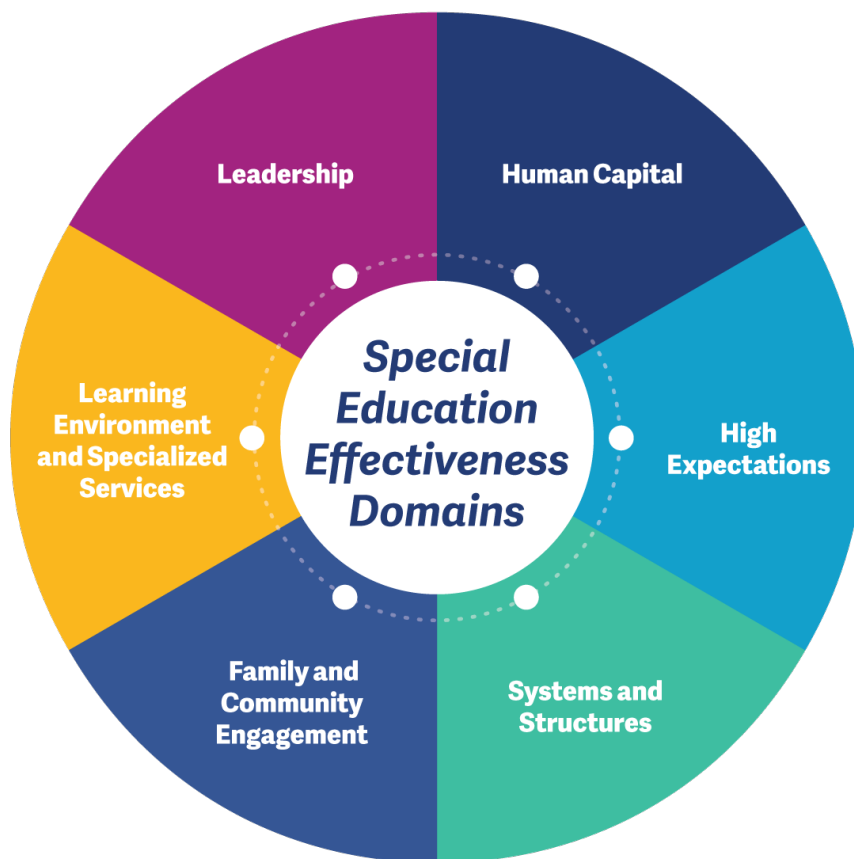
There is an urgent need to raise expectations and improve educational outcomes in special education, which has been a pressing issue since before the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Despite the federal Office of Special Education's shift to a Results Driven Accountability (RDA) model in 2014, the initial objective of RDA—to improve academic and functional outcomes for students with disabilities—has not yet been realized. Unlike the improvement that occurred in the first seven years after the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reauthorization, when only compliance factors drove state and local district accountability, improvement under RDA has been relatively stagnant in the last six years. Only eight states have achieved a "Meets Requirements" rating for all six years under RDA, and none of the largest states (California, New York, and Texas), which together serve approximately 25 percent of the nation's students with disabilities, have received a "Meets Requirements" determination in any year of RDA. In other words, "just 17 percent of the nation's students with disabilities are educated in states that achieve results."¹ Compounding this challenge is the fact that the number of students found eligible to receive special education services continues to grow, increasing 11 percent between the 2000–01 and 2017–18 school years to more than seven million students nationwide.²

As the number of students who qualify for special education services continues to rise and as more of them are being served in general education classrooms at least part of the day according to the latest U.S. Department of Education's annual report to Congress,³ the

bar for the standard of education for students with disabilities has increased as well. In their 2017 landmark case, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, the Supreme Court affirmed that schools must be "more than de minimus," or "appropriately ambitious," in meeting the needs of every child with a disability through their Individualized Education Program (IEP). Making certain that a growing number of students with disabilities meet appropriately ambitious learning standards can be challenging. The only way to effectively do this is to have school districts develop clear roadmaps for what it means to operate effective, high-quality special education programs and then to enact these roadmaps with intentionality and commitment. High-quality programs for students with disabilities provide differentiated

“Students of all abilities and backgrounds want classrooms that are inclusive and convey respect. This is our urgent call to action to design school systems that achieve these goals.”

services and supports in inclusive environments with a clear focus on successful student outcomes. They emphasize a shared approach to accountability and are designed with intentionality around key performance indicators that matter, such as parent engagement, access to high standards for all students, and qualified staff. The efficient use of funding continues to be a key component for schools to successfully deliver the learning experiences that are needed to support student achievement—and school districts need to embrace the use of technology and other tools as means to improve outcomes.



Building on extensive research and our collective experience and expertise serving school districts and state departments of education nationwide, PCG has developed this Special Education Effectiveness Framework to assist school districts in catalyzing conversations about, and reviewing and improving the quality of, their special education programs. It is designed to provide school district leaders with a set of practices to strengthen special education services and supports, and to highlight the multidisciplinary, integrated nature of systemic improvement. An intentional focus on improving outcomes for students with disabilities leads to improved outcomes for ALL students. We have intentionally used the term "all students" throughout this document to promote inclusivity and high expectations for ALL .



Learning Environment and Specialized Services

Delivering instruction and interventions within an inclusionary framework and with Individualized Education Program (IEP) fidelity, leading to increased access and progress in grade-level learning standards and reducing disproportionality.

Access to the General Curriculum

- The district has a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework that is consistently implemented and appropriately supportive of struggling learners.
- Teachers utilize collaborative planning and instruction that includes application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and formative assessment.
- Staff have access to and training on a wide range of instructional technologies and software resources for use across a variety of settings (in person, hybrid, virtual).
- All students have access to rigorous curriculum, with a full continuum of services and programs, in the general education setting.
- Teachers use student data to select and implement evidence-based teaching and learning strategies.
- Schools provide high-quality inclusive programs and activities based on high-leverage practices.

Positive Behavior Supports and Social-Emotional Learning

- Positive behavioral supports are a part of the school culture.
- Students learn tools and replacement behaviors for how to engage in the classroom and school productively and positively.
- Students feel safe in the learning environment.
- Teachers use appropriate language (verbal and nonverbal) and apply trauma-informed practices and appropriate de-escalation strategies.
- Expectations, routines, and procedures are culturally responsive, age appropriate, and posted and modeled in the classroom and school.
- Schools implement, and students are taught, restorative practices as alternatives to punitive disciplinary practices (e.g., suspension and expulsion).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Development

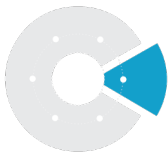
- IEPs include goals designed to increase the amount of time students spend in general education settings.
- IEP teams use formative assessment to collect baseline data and monitor goal progress. Staff complete IEP documents to meet compliance requirements.
- Services are consistently delivered and documented according to required timelines.
- All IEP team members participate actively to make informed decisions.
- Students are active participants in their IEPs.

Individualized Supports

- Teachers design, provide, and assess the effectiveness of specially designed instruction and adjust delivery as needed.
- The Assistive Technology (AT) evaluation team matches the appropriate AT/Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools to student need and trains staff on implementation.
- Appropriate classroom accommodations and modifications are provided so that students can access grade-level content.
- There are opportunities for teachers and related service providers to model skills to students.
- Related services and behavior supports are individually designed, implemented, and monitored to align to student need and desired outcomes.

Coordinated Early Childhood, School to School, and Post-Secondary Transition Activities

- Schools use a student-centered planning approach and incorporate family input.
- Schools have a formal articulation process to share relevant instructional information with teachers and providers at receiving elementary, middle, and high schools.
- Families are provided the support they need to connect their children to appropriate transition services.
- Multiple providers are involved in transition planning, when appropriate.
- Students with disabilities are engaged in service learning/community-based instruction that is linked to the general curriculum, classroom instruction, and student interest.
- Transition planning and exploration of postsecondary opportunities begin when students enter high school, if not earlier.
- Skill and interest inventories are conducted for students with disabilities, specifically to inform postsecondary planning.
- Students with disabilities are provided appropriate instruction in career development and opportunities to participate in work-based learning.



High Expectations

Increasing expectations of students with disabilities by presuming competence and incorporating culturally relevant, growth-oriented practices.

Growth Mindset

- Staff embrace the tenet that intelligence exists in every student and can be developed with appropriate supports and services.
- Staff praise student effort and process, not results, and replace the statement of “a student can’t...” with “a student can’t ...yet.”
- Staff display completed student work and share drafts or work that is in progress so students can see how work evolves with effort and feedback.
- Growth mindset visuals are posted for staff and students throughout the school environment.
- Staff encourage students to share mistakes and lessons learned.
- Educators create grading rubrics which focus on the process and the outcomes.
- Staff provide students with frequent and specific feedback in a variety of forms (e.g., written, verbal, nonverbal).

Presumed Competence

- All students have meaningful access to grade-level curriculum.
- In the absence of conclusive evidence, teachers assume that all students can participate (with appropriate supports) in an age-appropriate general education curriculum and form meaningful relationships.
- Staff support a consistent mode of communication (e.g., assistive technology—low, mid, high tech) for each student.
- Schools use appropriate assessments to measure and show what students can do with the proper supports.

Culturally Relevant Practices

- Teachers approach their students and instruction with an asset-based mindset, affirming the validity of students’ backgrounds and identities.
- Teachers make authentic connections between academic learning and students’ prior knowledge, native language, culture, and values.

- Curriculum includes content that is representative of all students, legitimizing students' backgrounds and abilities, while also exposing them to new ideas and worldviews different from their own.
- Rigorous course of study is accessible to all students.
- Staff educate themselves about students' communities, cultures, and histories.
- Teachers recognize how their own identities and experiences affect their beliefs and actions and engage in self-assessment to better understand how their biases and perceptions influence their teaching practices.
- Tools and supports to address behaviors (racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, unearned privilege, Eurocentrism, etc.) are available and accessed by staff.

Positive Learning Environment

- School leadership and all school staff are invested in the success of all students.
- Processes exist for collecting and using perception data from key stakeholders (e.g., staff, students, parents).

Student Engagement

- All students are included in all school activities.
- All students are held to high expectations for regular attendance.
- All students, with and without disabilities, have embedded opportunities to interact with each other in academic and non-academic settings.
- All students are actively engaged in their own learning.
- All students are included as stakeholders in decision-making processes.
- Students with disabilities are engaged in the development of their IEPs and have knowledge and understanding of their goals and accommodations.



Family and Community Engagement

Embracing partnerships to make informed decisions and provide equitable opportunities for all students.

Communication

- Staff communicate and work effectively with families.
- Staff support families through their child's transition between grade levels.
- Families receive required notifications and invitations, and they attend meetings.
- Staff are skilled in communicating effectively with families about their child's disability.

Collaboration

- Families are included in development of school materials, with attention paid to language and culture.
- High percentage of families of students with disabilities are active in the parent-teacher organization.
- Family input and needs are collected through a variety of data-collection tools.
- Families of students with disabilities are involved with the school community activities.
- Concerns of parents/families are resolved in a timely manner.
- The district has a special education parent/family advisory group.

Resource Center and Training

- A family resource center, with staff skilled in special education, is available to all families.
- Staff receive training on working in partnership with families.
- Training for families on the IEP process is provided.

Access

- Families receive IEP documents (e.g., progress reports, meeting invitations, prior written notices, and procedural safeguards) in their native language.
- Families receive information in multiple formats, including electronically.
- Virtual IEP meetings and electronic signature functionality are available.

Community Partnerships

- The district forms partnerships with community colleges, local businesses, and nonprofit organizations to create work-based training and employment opportunities for students.
- The district leverages community partnerships and expertise to complement the academic curriculum with real-life experiences.
- The district understands the community resources to support families.



Leadership

Supporting students with disabilities (including increased collaboration and ownership of school administrators and staff) and coordinating efforts with community organizations to improve results.

Shared Accountability

- Leaders guide staff toward a common vision and values and embrace the principle that holding all students to high expectations is the shared responsibility of all staff.
- Leaders empower students, staff, parents/families, and the community to share responsibility for teaching, learning, and student outcomes.
- Leaders model reflection by testing assumptions, learning from data, and adjusting instructional practices accordingly.
- Leaders emphasize that building a shared responsibility for student learning is an ongoing, continuous process.

Team Building

- In partnership with staff and community stakeholders, leaders create a vision for team collaboration and partnerships.
- Leaders develop a plan for communicating the vision with staff, families, and the community to gain support and buy-in.
- Leaders equip staff with effective team communication strategies including developing goals and facilitating open communication and building trust.
- Staff celebrations are openly shared and discussed at staff meetings, within professional learning communities, and during one-on-one check-ins.
- Leaders model the norms of collaboration, including paraphrasing, posing questions, providing data, and presuming positive intentions.

Student-Centered Decision Making

- Leaders create a culture of data-centered decision making using formative assessment.
- Leaders share beliefs with staff that all students have potential to succeed and improve, and that all staff are responsible for providing the appropriate supports and services.
- Leaders equip staff to develop student-centered classrooms, which includes planning, implementation, and assessments.
- Classrooms allow student input and participation in decision-making process.

Collaboration

- Leaders intentionally design schedules and provide professional learning opportunities that promote collaboration between educators, related services providers, and paraprofessionals.
- Leaders support meaningful collaboration with families and train staff on how to schedule, organize, and facilitate an effective meeting with professionals and families.
- Leaders use positive verbal and nonverbal communication, encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives, demonstrating active listening, and soliciting feedback from staff, stakeholders, and community partners.
- Staff are trained to apply collaboration strategies such as sharing ideas, active listening, questioning, and problem solving.
- Special education leaders are part of the district leadership team and collaborate with other departments.



Human Capital

Investing in people from recruitment to retirement to ensure highly qualified and effective staff have the skills/training needed to provide services and support to promote the success of diverse learners.

High-Quality Staff

- Staff hold full credentials/licensure and advanced degrees, micro credentials, or skills in specific content areas.
- Staff are experts in working with students with and without disabilities.
- Staff collaborate with specialized instructional support personnel as needed.

High-Quality Professional Learning

- Administration prioritizes professional learning (PL) through effective scheduling.
- PL activities meet the needs of staff in their roles.
- PL activities are embedded and include classroom observations, peer observations, and self-check inventories.
- PL is aligned with evidence-based and promising practices, and with state mandates.
- Support staff receive appropriate training to support student academic and behavioral needs.
- PL includes a balance of instructional and special education specific topics.
- Universal and targeted supports and coaching that include synchronous and asynchronous opportunities through virtual, face-to-face, or blended formats.

Equitable Recruitment Practices

- Advertising for diversity occurs through professional organizations, and job listings and websites contain affirmative action policy statements.
- Targeting recruitment activities to underrepresented populations occurs through continuously recruiting (even when there are no openings) and using a diverse hiring committee.
- Organization offers compensation (or other benefits) for participation in diversity recruitment and community outreach endeavors, including participation in conferences, committees, or coalitions related to diversity and the reduction of disparities.

Staff Wellness and Self-Care

- Individual and collective self-care is encouraged and contributes to an overall culture of well-being.
- Schools/districts sponsor resources or activities for staff, such as health assessments, physical activity opportunities, substance abuse prevention, and an Employee Assistance Program.
- There are adopted policies that encourage wellness and support a healthy school and district environment.

Flexible Career Pathways and Staff Retention

- Opportunities for growth, additional training, and career advancement are publicized.
- Mentorship programs are available for all staff.
- There is an ongoing staff evaluation process that incorporates multiple data points, such as classroom observations, student growth measures, IEP implementation, and personal goals.
- Staff are involved in student-centered activities or participate in at least one school or district committee annually.
- Difficult-to-staff schools or districts have an incentive pay structure that rewards new teachers with a graduated sum of money for each year they return.



Systems and Structures

Defining expectations for service delivery, resource allocation, and data management infrastructure to guide data-driven decisions.

Vision and Strategic Plan

- Special education initiatives are embedded in the district's strategic plan.
- The special education department has a clearly articulated and well-communicated vision, mission, and action plan with goals for three to five years, and schools have specific goals that are aligned to the plan.
- The district engages in a continuous improvement review process at least every five years to assess the effectiveness of its special education program.
- Central office staff across departments and school-based leaders are held accountable for consistently implementing special education policies and procedures.

Equitable Funding and Staffing

- The equitable distribution of school-based special education funding is based on the resources used to serve students with disabilities, such as teacher or aide salaries and supplies, and takes into consideration the varying costs that depend on type of disability, placement, and student need.
- Administrators take proactive steps to coordinate funding of special education services within the larger school program.

- IDEA grant expenditures are tracked and intentionally tied to specific programmatic goals.
- Staffing ratios support an inclusive instructional service delivery model and can be adjusted mid-year to accommodate changes in student need.

Policy and Procedures

- An electronic, user-friendly, and accessible special education policy manual for school teams and families exists on a publicly available site and is updated annually.
- Internal guidance and procedures are documented, accessible to all staff, and updated regularly.

Data Quality, Culture, and Capacity

- Benchmark, goal progress, and continuous progress monitoring provide timely information for programmatic and student-centered decision making.
- Dashboards are easily accessible to general education and special education staff, principals, and others so they can routinely monitor identification rates, placement levels, and discipline rates by school and grade.
- The district uses an electronic case management system to document provision of all special education services including progress, track IEP documentation for compliance, and provide access to indicators and other data for monitoring and trend analysis.
- School and district staff are well versed in the State Performance Plan (SPP) indicators, have easy-to-use reports to monitor them, and conduct data reviews of progress.
- Staff receive training on how to use data systems to make decisions.

About Public Consulting Group

Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) is a leading public sector solutions implementation and operations improvement firm that partners with health, education, and human services agencies to improve lives. Founded in 1986 and headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, PCG employs over 2,500 professionals in more than 40 offices worldwide. PCG offers education consulting services and technology solutions that help schools, school districts, and state education agencies/ministries of education to promote student success, improve programs and processes, and optimize financial resources. To learn more, visit <http://www.publicconsultinggroup.com/education/>.

In partnership with clients, PCG designs and delivers training and technical assistance to build strong leaders, increase educators' ability to improve instruction, develop standards-based curriculum, and meet the needs of diverse learners along the pathway to college and career readiness. PCG supports practitioners at all stages of standards implementation and school improvement.

About the Authors

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To learn more about PCG's Special Education Effectiveness Framework, contact us today.



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Endnotes

- 1 Our Kids Count, June 28, 2019 <https://www.advocacyinstitute.org/blog/?m=201906>
- 2 Pew Research Center, April 23, 2020: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/23/as-schools-shift-to-online-learning-amid-pandemic-heres-what-we-know-about-disabled-students-in-the-u-s/#:~:text=1%20The%20nearly%207%20million,for%20which%20data%20is%20available>. National Center on Educational Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/>
- 3 From 2008 through 2017, the percentage of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, who were educated inside the regular class 80 percent or more of the day increased from 58.5 percent to 63.5 percent.

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