

Five School Leadership Moves to Increase Success for Students With Disabilities



Why Leadership Moves?

As a school leader, you make decisions each day that shape how students with disabilities (SWDs) learn, participate, and thrive in school. Supporting the needs of SWDs can feel complex and overwhelming, but a small number of core moves can guide the majority of your work and create a foundation for success. By understanding these core moves, leaders can implement them to strengthen instruction and improve school culture.

How Can I Use These Leadership Moves?

Each Leadership Move is designed to support day-to-day leadership decision-making. Leaders can use the moves to reflect on current practices, guide conversations with teams, and prioritize actions that strengthen outcomes for students with disabilities (SWDs). Each section defines the Leadership Move, connects to the relevant [IDEA Leadership Essentials](#), and includes bite-sized steps and references to peer-reviewed research to support thoughtful, evidence-informed implementation.

Leadership Moves

Foster student belonging
as the starting point

Hold SWDs to high expectations to
jump-start progress

Champion evidence-based practices to
drive student success

Implement positive behavior supports
and ensure that learning continues

Build and sustain
highly effective educators

IDEA Leadership Essentials

Professional, Legal,
& Ethical Practices



Educator/Provider
Supports



Instruction &
Intervention Leadership



Vision Setting &
Strategic Leadership



Institutional
Leadership



Family & Community
Engagement



Leadership Move: Foster student belonging as the starting point



The Big Picture

SWDs thrive when they learn alongside same-age peers and feel valued in the school community. Belonging—feeling accepted, connected, and included—is linked to stronger student outcomes. Well-designed general education settings that promote engagement and full participation strengthen belonging more than self-contained settings. Leaders can build this by designing environments that integrate SWDs and reduce isolation.

Why This Matters

When SWDs learn with same age peers, they experience a stronger sense of belonging and achieve better outcomes. By planning with the needs of SWDs in mind—including service hours, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and aligning teachers' strengths to student needs—leaders ensure structures remain student focused.

IDEA Leadership Essential Aligned Moves



Set the vision

Develop a school vision with staff that clearly articulates what your school values about students and affirms differences, community, and belonging.



Build commitment

Clearly articulate staff beliefs and values in speech and writing, and consistently model the mindsets you expect.



Model behaviors

Interact with students and families in ways that demonstrate shared ownership and belonging, and make these interactions visible to staff.

Leadership Check-In

- ✓ What do staff believe about SWD's?
- ✓ What do your words, actions, and priorities communicate about belonging for SWDs?
- ✓ What do staff beliefs reveal about expectations, intergration, and shared responsibility?
- ✓ How do structures (teams, schedules, data meetings) support or hinder belonging?

Leadership Move: Design learning conditions that reflect high expectations and support progress for SWDs.



The Big Picture

When teachers hold high expectations for SWDs, they provide appropriate supports that help students access and make progress in the general curriculum. These expectations are shown through goal-setting, designing appropriate tasks, and increasing access through scaffolding, differentiation, accommodations, and modifications.

Why This Matters

School leaders shape the culture and instructional practices that sustain high expectations for all students. For SWDs to succeed, educators must believe they belong and can thrive in general education settings. Federal law entitles SWDs to a free appropriate public education (FAPE), requiring schools to design and implement IEPs that promote meaningful, appropriate growth aligned to each student's needs.

IDEA Leadership Essential Aligned Moves



Monitor instruction and data routinely

Monitor data regularly to ensure teachers are differentiating instruction in the general curriculum and SWDs are making progress.



Provide actionable feedback

Provide support and feedback to strengthen teacher instruction and push students to set and reach ambitious goals.



Anticipate pushback

Change is hard, and staff beliefs are often shaped by personal experience. Listen to staff, remove barriers, and support the development of positive mindsets about teaching SWDs.

Leadership Check-In

- ☒ How are students with disabilities progressing in the general curriculum in your school, and what evidence supports your conclusions?
- ☒ How might you support staff who are not convinced that SWDs can achieve at high levels?
- ☒ What coaching, professional learning, or mindset work is needed?

Leadership Move: Champion research based practices to drive student success



The Big Picture

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) and high-leverage practices (HLPs) for SWDs are linked to stronger progress gains in reading, math, behavior, communication, and social-emotional skills for SWDs. Using approaches validated through rigorous research increases the likelihood that students will make meaningful progress toward the goals of their IEPs.

Why This Matters

High quality instruction is essential to ensure SWDs have access to learning and make progress toward meaningful outcomes. EBPs and HLPs provide research validated approaches that promote consistency and effectiveness across classrooms. Because IDEA requires specially designed instruction grounded in research, leaders are responsible for creating the structures and supports that enable educators to use EBPs and HLPs well. Sustained professional learning, coaching, and collaboration are critical to building staff capacity and supporting implementation.

IDEA Leadership Essential Aligned Moves



Prioritize three to five EBPs or HLPs

Select 3–5 EBPs or HLPs to anchor professional learning, and provide staff with time and opportunities for engagement and implementation.



Build a professional learning plan

Provide ongoing, job embedded learning on IDEA, EBPs, and HLPs with training, observation, reflection, peer learning, and coaching.



Observe to monitor use of EBPs and HLPs

Regularly observe instruction to determine whether EBPs and HLPs are being used, and use observations to guide professional learning.

Leadership Check-In

- ✓ How do you ensure that high-quality instruction is consistently delivered to SWDs in every classroom?
- ✓ What structures ensure that professional learning on EBPs and HLPs is ongoing, job-embedded, and supported through coaching and observation?

Leadership Move: Implement positive, preventive, evidence-based behavioral supports and ensure continued access to instruction.



The Big Picture

School leaders are responsible for ensuring continued access to instruction during disciplinary incidents. SWDs cannot lose access to specially designed instruction guaranteed under IDEA. Proactive behavior supports—such as Multi Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)—reduce removals and strengthen social, behavioral, and academic outcomes.

Why This Matters

Disciplinary removals that interrupt instruction undermine students' rights and learning. Exclusionary practices disproportionately harm students with disabilities and limit access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Leaders must ensure disciplinary decisions uphold students' rights and that instruction continues—even during behavior incidents.

IDEA Leadership Essential Aligned Moves



Implement preventive frameworks

Implement evidence based frameworks such as MTSS to design coherent, schoolwide systems that anticipate and prevent behavior challenges



Use data to inform disciplinary decisions

Regularly collect and use data on student behaviors and positive behavioral strategies to inform school disciplinary decisions.



Support disability informed discipline

Establish policies, guidance, and routines that support staff in accounting for student disability and protecting educational rights during disciplinary actions.

Leadership Check-In

- ✓ What systems and procedures are in place to ensure FAPE is protected during disciplinary removals?
- ✓ Are positive behavior supports implemented consistently and informed by data across the school?
- ✓ How do we ensure instruction continues and remains aligned with IEP goals when a student is removed from instruction?

Leadership Move: Build and sustain highly effective educators



The Big Picture

Educators working with SWDs must be qualified, well trained, and supported to deliver instruction and services aligned with IDEA. When staff lack sufficient understanding of IDEA requirements and student rights, they may unintentionally violate key aspects of FAPE. Leaders play a central role in building and sustaining educator capacity through intentional hiring, ongoing mentoring, and thoughtful workload management.

Why This Matters

SWDs often learn and behave in ways that require specialized knowledge and support. Leaders play a critical role in ensuring educators are well prepared, supported, and informed when serving students with disabilities. When staff receive strong, ongoing support, the quality of instruction improves, educator confidence increases, and schools are more likely to retain effective educators who experience greater job satisfaction.

IDEA Leadership Essential Aligned Moves



Hire qualified inclusive educators

Hire staff who are prepared to support students with disabilities and committed to teaching all learners.



Provide ongoing support to staff

Ensure staff know where to access support and guidance for challenges related to educating students with disabilities



Ensure effective service delivery

Provide staff with dedicated time, tools, and structures to collaborate, plan, and implement instruction and services effectively.

Leadership Check-In

- ✓ How do you ensure that staff are well prepared and supported to deliver high-quality instruction and services to SWDs?
- ✓ What clear support pathways (people, teams, or routines) help staff get guidance on implementing special education services?
- ✓ Do your schedules, teams, and resources enable effective service delivery—or create barriers that need to be addressed?

Research to Support These Moves

The resources provided offer research-informed, evidence-based guidance to strengthen implementation of practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

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Research to Support These Moves

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