

Establishing Procedures, Protocols, and Structures to Support FAPE and LRE



Overview

This resource provides school leaders with actionable strategies to guide the effective implementation of free appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE) in their buildings. It explores leadership actions that foster supportive environments for students, families, and staff, and includes strategies for strengthening educator collaboration and engaging families in decision-making, meeting both the letter and spirit of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Summary

The principal's role is to establish systems - procedures, protocols, and structures – that ensure every student receives FAPE that is provided in the least restrictive environment. By aligning school practices with these foundational principles, administrators can foster supportive educational environments where all students are supported and thrive. But what does this look like in practice? The following content gives practical strategies that bring FAPE and LRE to life. Principals will gain actionable next steps to build sustainable systems that support students with disabilities and empower both families and educators.

Example Leadership Actions: Practical Strategies

Create Collaborative Structures

The principal's role is to prioritize collaboration among general and special educators.

- **Establish norms:** Establish schoolwide norms that foster trust, safety, and shared accountability, ensuring all educators feel respected, supported, and empowered to contribute.
- **Cultivate a positive school climate:** Build strong relationships by learning about staffs' strengths, needs, and working styles to cultivate a positive and collaborative climate.
- **Prioritize time:** Prioritize and protect dedicated time for general and special educators to collaborate in the master schedule.
- **Maximize planning opportunities:** Leverage early release days, professional development days, or before/after school time to support data review and co-planning.
- **Direct resources strategically:** Allocate funding for substitute coverage to provide additional flexibility for collaborative planning and instructional alignment.
- **Define roles:** Clearly define and communicate the roles and responsibilities of special and general education staff.
- **Provide collaborative review time:** Ensure collaboration time is purposeful, including regular review of student data and alignment of instruction with IEP goals and services.

Foster Individualized, Team-Based IEP Decisions

The principal is responsible for ensuring decisions about a child's educational placement are made collaboratively by the IEP Team, in accordance with IDEA requirements.

- **Uplift parents:** Reinforce that families are equal and valued members of the IEP team.

- **Share information:** Share the meeting agenda and relevant documents in advance to support informed participation.
- **Ensure full team input:** Avoid making assumptions or pre-determining services before the full team has had an opportunity to discuss the student's needs.
- **Communicate clearly:** Minimize jargon and clarify terminology.
- **Support discussion:** Ensure the conversation includes a balanced discussion of the student's strengths, areas of concern, assessment data, and identified needs.
- **Promote team engagement:** Create space for all team members – including families – to contribute meaningfully to the discussion.
- **Document appropriately:** Accurately document any changes to services, supports, and goals.
- **Define processes:** Clearly outline next steps, timelines, and responsibilities to ensure shared understanding and follow-through.

Foster Two-Way Communication Between Home and School

The principal is responsible for establishing clear procedures and protocols to facilitate two-way communication between families and school staff. Additionally, they must coordinate scheduling to ensure the IEP team has sufficient time and opportunity to make informed decisions about services based on the individual needs of the student.

- **Initiate contact:** Initiate contact with families as soon as they join the school community to begin building strong, positive relationships.
- **Develop trust:** Develop trust through consistent, proactive communication that invites collaboration, connection, and partnership.
- **Define expectations:** Define schoolwide expectations for communication with families of students with disabilities or during the pre-referral process, including frequency, methods (e.g., phone, email, in-person) and intended purposes.
- **Provide clear timelines:** Provide clear timelines and reminders for IEP meetings, evaluations, and other key events to ensure families are informed and prepared.
- **Provide adequate language access:** Ensure the availability of an interpreter and translation services, as well as translated materials, to support meaningful participation for all families.
- **Perform outreach:** Host workshops or information sessions on special education rights and processes, as a school or in partnership with community organizations.
- **Designate staff:** Designate parent liaison roles among staff to strengthen home-school connections, and create meaningful opportunities for families to participate in their child's education.
- **Keep families informed:** Establish protocols for providing families regular updates on their child's progress toward IEP goals in between annual meetings.

Additional Resources

- [Lead IDEA Principal Navigator: Special Educator Retention](#)
- [Lead IDEA Center Article: Leading the Charge for Students with Disabilities](#)
- IRIS Center: [Family Engagement: Collaborating with Families of Students with Disabilities](#)
- PROGRESS Center: [The IEP Team: Who's Who and Other Considerations](#)
- PROGRESS Center: [Path to PROGRESS: Developing and Implementing High-Quality Educational Programs](#)

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