

# Fewer, Clearer, Higher Common Core State Standards

## Implications for Students Receiving Special Education Services



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## Implications for Students Receiving Special Education Services

American students must be fully prepared to compete successfully in a global economy. The recently released *Rising Above the Gathering Storm, Revisited: Rapidly Approaching Category 5* continues to warn that the United States is quickly losing its competitive edge in the world.

The top recommendation of the original National Academies report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, was to “move the United States K-12 education system in science and mathematics to a leading position by global standards.” Five years later, the recommendation is still the same.

## Common Core State Standards

To meet this challenge, a state-led effort by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers (CCSSO) has created Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects K-12 and for mathematical content and practice, with science standards to follow. The purpose of these standards is to ensure a clear and consistent framework to prepare all students for college and the workforce.

“... a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite.”

- President Barack Obama

In June 2010, the final version of the Common Core State Standards was released. These standards address what students are expected to know and be able to do. They are designed to be robust and relevant and to reflect the knowledge and skills that all young people will need for success in college and careers.

To that end, the standards:

- are aligned with college and work expectations
- are clear, understandable and consistent
- include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills
- build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards
- are informed by other top performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society
- are evidence-based.

The manner of assessing these fewer, clearer, higher standards will be very different from current methods of assessing state standards. Students will be

required to use higher order thinking skills, apply what they have learned to unique situations, and bring together knowledge from a variety of content areas to solve problems. Students will be expected to engage in performance-based events, some of which will take place over long periods of time. In addition, these assessment challenges will use a range of technologies with which students must have become familiar during their class work.

Teachers will be expected to monitor progress using a wide range of formative assessments. Data from formative and end-of-course assessments will be collected, analyzed, and used to make instructional decisions to strengthen student performance.

## Common Core State Standards and Special Education

The goal of the Common Core State Standards is to focus on the knowledge and skills needed by all students so they can be successful in college and careers.

This goal applies for all students. Students who are receiving special education services are no exception. They too are expected to be challenged to excel within the general education curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards.

The table that follows represents the percentages for selected categories of disability within the total population of identified students. The largest category of students in special education is students with learning disabilities, which means they have average or above average intelligence according to the federal definition. This group accounts for 39% of classified students. The second largest group is students who are speech impaired. Also included are students who are hearing or visually impaired, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, emotionally disturbed or developmentally delayed. These categories encompass almost all students in special education. Most of these students by definition do not have a significant cognitive disability; many fit within the normal range on the intelligence scale.

“It’s not just that kids need to go to school, they need to learn in school.”

- Emiliana Vegas  
Senior Education Economist  
World Bank

### Percentage Distribution of 3- to 21-Year Olds Served Under IDEA by Primary Disability Type — 2007-08

Disability	Percent
Learning disability	39
Speech or language impairment	22

As districts and schools across the country prepare to transition from their existing state standards to the Common Core State Standards they must address the needs of students receiving special education services and other struggling students from the outset.

Disability	Percent
Other health impairments	10
Mental retardation	8
Emotional disturbance	7
Developmental delay	5
Autism	4
Multiple disabilities	2
Hearing impairments	1
Orthopedic impairments	1

“This [Senate] committee believes that the critical issue now is to place greater emphasis on improving student performance and ensuring that children with disabilities receive a quality public education”

- IDEA Reauthorization Committee

For these students, the Common Core State Standards provide an opportunity to have access to the knowledge and skills necessary for a successful future. As districts and schools across the country prepare to transition from their existing state standards to the Common Core State Standards they must address the needs of students receiving special education services and other struggling students from the outset.

Language in the Common Core State Standards outlines the areas that must be available to students receiving special education services in order for them to demonstrate their conceptual and procedural knowledge and skills in English language arts (including reading, writing, listening, and speaking) as well as in mathematics:

- supports and related services designed to meet the unique needs of these students and to enable their access to the general education curriculum (IDEA 34 CFR §300.34, 2004)
- an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which includes annual goals aligned with and chosen to facilitate their attainment of grade-level academic standards
- teachers and specialized instructional support personnel who are prepared and qualified to deliver high-quality, evidence-based, individualized instruction and support services.

To ensure meaningful and complete participation and success in the general education curriculum for students receiving special education services the developers of the Common Core State Standards suggest additional supports and services be provided, as needed. They include:

- instructional strategies based on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These strategies support student engagement by presenting information in multiple ways and allowing for students to access and express what they know in a variety of ways
- accommodations, including changes in materials and/or procedures. An important consideration is that these accommodations should not alter the standards nor lower the expectations for students to successfully accomplish the work.
- assistive technology devices and services to enable access to the standards.

Access to the general education curriculum also includes access to the general education assessments. Traditionally, students receiving special education services have been provided testing accommodations and, in some cases, modifications. In some instances, these accommodations/modifications have resulted in expectations being lowered and students being assessed on material that is below grade level and/or not related to the knowledge and skills necessary for mastery of the content.

When being assessed on the Common Core State Standards, all students will be required to demonstrate understanding of the content and skills outlined in the key ideas of the standards. They will demonstrate their understanding through reading, writing, listening, and speaking and through mathematical practices embedded in performance tasks during an end-of-course test and, also, through tasks occurring throughout the course.

Those students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities and who have traditionally taken alternate assessments will require substantial supports and accommodations. These additional supports will allow alternate assessment students to have meaningful access to certain standards and assessments that are appropriate to the students' communication and academic needs.

Curriculum developers should be mindful that higher order content and skills may not have been part of the assessment requirements for students receiving special education services and accessing the general education curriculum. As schools transition to the Common Core State Standards, the depth and breadth of traditional assessment items and techniques should be taken into consideration and support provided so all students are prepared to be tested on higher order thinking and performing.

“This review and authorization of the IDEA is needed to move to the next step of providing special education and related services to children with disabilities to improve and increase educational achievement”

- IDEA Reauthorization Committee



All students must be provided with opportunities to interact with the technologies available to foster the aptitudes and attitudes required for success in college and careers. Providing these opportunities is especially important for students receiving special education services.

Many, if not all, of these performance tasks will be assessed using various technologies. All students must be provided with opportunities to interact with the technologies available to foster the aptitudes and attitudes required for success in college and careers. Providing these opportunities is especially important for students receiving special education services. In many schools and classrooms, these students have not been provided the same level of access to or instruction in technology use as general education students. In order to be prepared for the new assessments and the new methods in which these assessments will be administered, it will be important to bring students receiving special education services up to the level of proficiency that general education students may already possess.

## Improving the Performance of Students Receiving Special Education Services

Not every student with disabilities will meet academic standards, but that is not a reason to stop providing support to help them achieve at high levels of learning. Many more students can reach standards than schools have imagined. One core issue that prevents high levels of learning is a culture of low expectations. Too many educators believe that students receiving special education services cannot perform at higher levels, and the programs offered reflect that attitude, from elementary school all the way through high school.

Focusing on the needs of students receiving special education services during the initial stages of this transition will benefit all students.

The examination and reflection on curriculum and instruction that transitioning to the Common Core State Standards requires will allow schools and districts to improve their programs for all students. Focusing on the needs of students receiving special education services during the initial stages of this transition will benefit all students. The International Center has identified Five Key Elements that schools must address to support the achievement of students receiving special education services:

1. **ownership** – understanding among staff that students receiving special education services are the responsibility of all
2. **high expectations** – understanding by administrators, faculty, and students that all students will be challenged and expected to perform to the best of their ability
3. **intervention systems** – policies, procedures, and protocols to ensure that struggling learners meet academic and/or behavioral expectations as measured by improved performance

4. **inclusion/collaborative teaching** – teaching methodologies in which students receiving special education services are included in the general education classrooms and have access to both content and special education expertise
5. **organization/professional development** – successful programs for all struggling learners depend on alignment of and access to standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment and data-driven professional development to support teachers in achieving goals

## Ownership

Schools that are successful in raising the achievement levels of their special education populations have established a culture in which the achievement of each and every student is considered a shared responsibility. These schools discourage a “yours and mine” attitude among administrators and faculty and find ways to integrate general and special education programs so that all students are supported by all adults to perform to their highest potential.

The International Center’s Special Education Institute has worked with many schools and districts to increase the level of ownership of special education students by all staff. One such district is Shenendehowa, outside of Albany, New York. A significant objective in the district’s strategic plan to improve the special education program is to “share responsibility for student achievement among general education staff, special education staff, and other staff of the district.”

The experience of the Special Education Institute has shown that building administrators must take the lead for setting a tone of collective ownership. They must serve as primary advocates for the students who need support beyond the standard curriculum and instruction, even if there is a dedicated special education administrator in the building or district.

## High Expectations for All

High expectations are linked closely to ownership. A strong sense of communal responsibility makes it possible to set lofty expectations for all students and establish a culture of support for each student to achieve. When these expectations are clearly stated and supported, students internalize them. They are more motivated to perform at higher levels. This is true of all students.

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Schools and districts with steadily improving performance levels for students receiving special education services are intentional about holding high expectations for achievement. For example, one goal of James Campbell High School in Honolulu, Hawaii states clearly, “The performance gap between general education students and students receiving special education services will be reduced to no more than 10% by 2014.” Wilson County Schools in North Carolina shares this goal.

Similarly, in Florida, an Orange County Public Schools goal states that “80% percent of students receiving special education services will graduate with a standard diploma.” Another example of a clearly stated high expectation is from Shenendehowa: “By year 2014, 85% of students receiving special education services will reach at least a level 3 [proficiency] on State assessments.”

These successful schools and districts recognize that “holding all students to the same standards” is not the same as setting high expectations for each student. Many schools talk about holding all students to high standards, but they do not articulate high expectations for achievement to their struggling students. Too often, there is an attitude among administrators and faculty that students with disabilities cannot achieve at higher levels. When this happens, standards are relaxed, the curriculum is watered down, students give up or develop “learned helplessness,” and scores lag. This creates a vicious cycle of poor results for students who, more often than not, are capable of achieving at higher levels, but who are not provided with the support to do so or the self-confidence that they can.

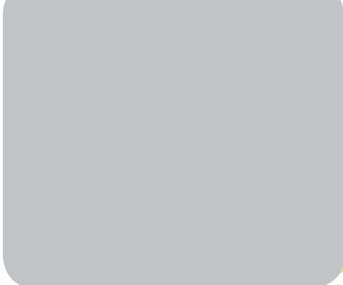
To be most effective, a culture of high expectations should exist throughout the district. Administrators must ensure that every school building is on board. A districtwide culture enables students to continue to achieve no matter which school they attend or what grade level they are in. In some districts without uniform high expectations, middle school teachers can tell which elementary school their students have come from by the students’ expectations of themselves.

## Intervention Systems

Schools with well organized intervention systems tend to achieve higher success for all students. Interventions are planned using student-specific strategies designed to change behaviors or improve skills. The purpose of an intervention system is not to place a student in a program, service, or setting, but to identify the student’s needs and implement a plan to meet them. In an effective intervention program, lower-than-expected performance is a signal to try different approaches to instruction, not to refer a student for special education services.

Intervention systems are most effective when they are deeply rooted in a school’s general education program rather than in the special education program.






Intervention systems are most effective when they are deeply rooted in a school's general education program rather than in the special education program. Teachers and administrators continually collect and analyze data for each student to provide individualized supports for every learner. In turn, an effective intervention system then works as a source of data to identify schoolwide instructional issues. Ongoing support is provided to teachers in implementing differentiated instruction and other strategies to help them meet the varying learning needs of their students. When interventions are implemented effectively, many students who might have been referred to special education are supported successfully in general education.

Most schools have intervention programs, but increasingly, they have strayed from their original purpose. Instead of helping students who are lagging behind achieve grade-level proficiency, these programs have turned into pre-referral systems for special education. The programs are often evaluated on the number of referrals to special education rather than on improvements in students' performance as a result of successful intervention. While some students do need to be referred for special education, the goal of intervention programs should be *not* to refer students unless absolutely necessary.

Schools like James Campbell High School, with whom the Special Education Institute has worked have put intervention systems into place that identify and monitor the needs of all struggling students. They use effective teaching methods to improve student performance. The intervention teams that are formed use a problem-solving approach to supporting students rather than viewing the team's work as that of a "pre-referral" committee.

Successful programs like these are data driven for both students and teachers. Intervention teams analyze data from many sources, including attendance rate and number of low or failing grades on a student's report card. Focused professional development is also data driven and is provided in areas identified by the teams themselves. Success is measured by improving student performance, not the number of referrals to special education as had been the measure in the past.

As with high expectations, continuity of intervention programs throughout a district is imperative. The students who struggle in school are also the ones who tend to be the most transient. When they move from one school to another in a district where there is no consistency between buildings, school becomes even more difficult for them. If students who are receiving interventions that are working transfer to another building where school staff are not familiar with the interventions, it is challenging for those students to adjust and succeed.



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## Inclusion/Collaborative Teaching

In most schools that show high performance for students with disabilities, special education serves more as a support system for general education than as a separate program. School climate means everything, particularly for students who are struggling academically, highly mobile, lacking self-confidence, or struggling to belong. These students must have access to the general education curriculum. Simply placing them in general education classrooms is not the answer, however. Schools must create systems to help students get the instructional support they need to succeed.

For years, schools all over the country have referred students to special education because they were not reading well. In doing so, they have placed students with a teacher who is often not trained to teach reading. In many schools, students with disabilities are in special classes where the special education teachers are teaching math, English language arts, social studies, and science even though they have not been trained in any of those subjects. It is not surprising that the performance of these students has been poor.

In many schools, students with disabilities are in special classes where the special education teachers are teaching math, English language arts, social studies, and science even though they have not been trained in any of those subjects. It is not surprising that the performance of these students has been poor.

Transitioning to a collaborative model is not easy, but it can and must be done. Many schools have not defined what their “inclusion” program is. As a result, they are unable to articulate what is expected of teachers or to develop and implement the systems to support teachers or students. When they launch a coordinated process to create a culture in which high expectations and inclusion are the norm and the appropriate support systems are put in place, they see increases in student performance.

One of the most effective strategies for inclusion is collaborative teaching, frequently designed as a co-teaching model. When correctly implemented and supported, the collaborative teaching model increases performance dramatically for students with disabilities over time. One of the most effective co-teaching arrangements pairs a special education teacher with a content area teacher in a general education classroom. In this model, the general and special educators share instructional responsibility, resources, and accountability for all the students in the classroom. Together the teachers plan, present, and evaluate instruction and student progress. They also share equally in classroom and behavior management. Almost always, the performance of both the general education and special education students improves.

Collaborative teaching is most successful when schools:

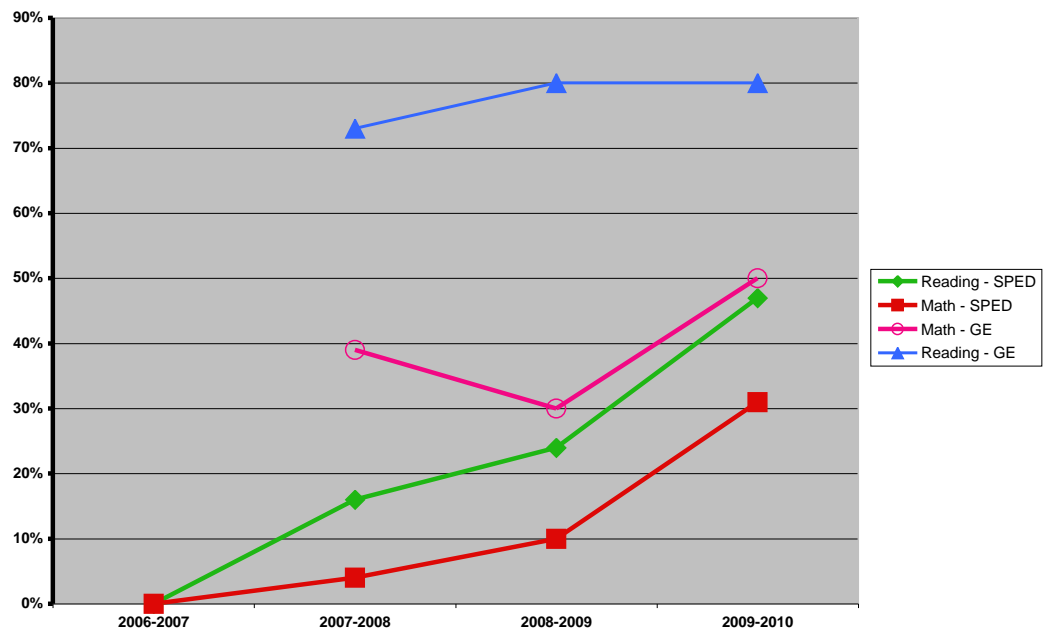
- define clearly which students can benefit from exposure to the general curriculum
- maintain a ratio of one-third or fewer special education students to general education students in the classroom

- implement ongoing, high-quality professional development around the co-teaching approach to keep it from evolving into a teach/assist model
- schedule regular common instructional planning time for teaching teams and protect that scheduled time
- build in time before the school year begins so co-teachers can discuss philosophies, logistics, classroom management, and other non-instructional issues

At James Campbell High School, the full-inclusion program has 16 co-teachers teaching special education students in general education classes for the entire school day. Zaricke Jackson, a special education teacher in a co-taught classroom sums up the successful collaboration, “We feed off each other’s strengths.”

Over the three years since James Campbell High School moved to inclusion and collaborative teaching, data show double digit gains in the percent of students receiving special education services testing at proficient levels in math and reading. Campbell High School also has data to support the phenomenon that many other inclusion programs experience: the performance of general education students in co-taught classrooms also improves.

### James Campbell High School



Another example of successful co-teaching is in Brockton (Mass.) High School. Co-teaching has been an important aspect of its special education program, and

performance in English Language Arts for both general and special education students continues to improve. Special education students' performance (the second dark line) has improved so much, they are now surpassing performance of general education students in other Massachusetts urban districts.

Proficiency Index - ELA - Mass. Urbans									
District	Grade Band	Sub Grp	ELA 2003	ELA 2004	ELA 2005	ELA 2006	ELA 2007	ELA 2008	Gain
<b>Brockton</b>	Grd 10	Agg	76.4	78.1	79.2	84.0	83.2	88	11.6
<b>Lynn</b>	Grd 10	Agg	70.5	70.7	73.0	77.2	78.1	82.7	12.2
<b>Worcester</b>	Grd 10	Agg	67.9	68.6	71.8	75.3	79.3	82.6	14.7
<b>Boston</b>	Grd 10	Agg	64.4	67.7	69.7	76.5	78.1	82.3	17.9
<b>Lowell</b>	Grd 10	Agg	69.8	74.2	73.6	76.4	78.9	81.4	11.6
<b>Fall River</b>	Grd 10	Agg	69.8	71.7	72.1	72.6	81.4	79.2	9.4
<b>New Bedford</b>	Grd 10	Agg	66.1	69.1	70.5	74.3	74.5	78.2	12.1
<b>Springfield</b>	Grd 10	Agg	62.1	65.6	66.7	67.3	69.7	76.7	14.6
<b>Brockton</b>	Grd 10	Agg	51.3	50.2	54.0	61.8	63.3	70.4	19.2
<b>Lawrence</b>	Grd 10	Agg	59.9	58.3	63.6	61.4	61.9	69.2	9.3

## Organization/Professional Development

Schools like Brockton, James Campbell, Wilson County, and Shenendehowa are examples of how important organizational support is to successful special education programs. Administration, faculty, and parents are integral to the successful and sustainable implementation of all of the key strategies to improve the performance of students receiving special education services. Strong organization, especially throughout a district, minimizes inconsistencies in attitudes that hinder student achievement and allows best practices to be implemented to the advantage of staff and students.

For example, districts can implement regular instructional monitoring using assessments and give teachers the capability to review data online. This enables teachers to adjust instruction as they go, so that they can have the greatest impact in the classroom for every student, from the highest performing to the ones who need intervention and support.

Strong organizational structures can also have a positive impact on student achievement across grade levels and schools. Individual schools may succeed in aligning their own curriculum, but curriculum alignment across schools lends itself to smoother transitions for struggling learners.

Successful schools focus first on learners who have special needs when setting schedules. This allows them to protect the integrity of the collaborative teaching model and ensure that ongoing professional development and other essential supports are not overlooked.

Another particularly effective practice observed by the International Center relates to scheduling. Successful schools focus first on learners who have special needs when setting schedules. This allows them to protect the integrity of the collaborative teaching model and ensure that ongoing professional development and other essential supports are not overlooked. Common planning time may be difficult to arrange, for example, but it is absolutely essential. Administrators report that it is far easier to address the scheduling needs of the general education program after they have attended to those of special needs learners.

Strong organization is also essential for professional development, which is a fundamental element in launching and sustaining any initiative to support learning for all students. Successful schools create professional learning communities in which teachers have opportunities to receive high-quality training and ongoing support that is aligned with strategic goals.

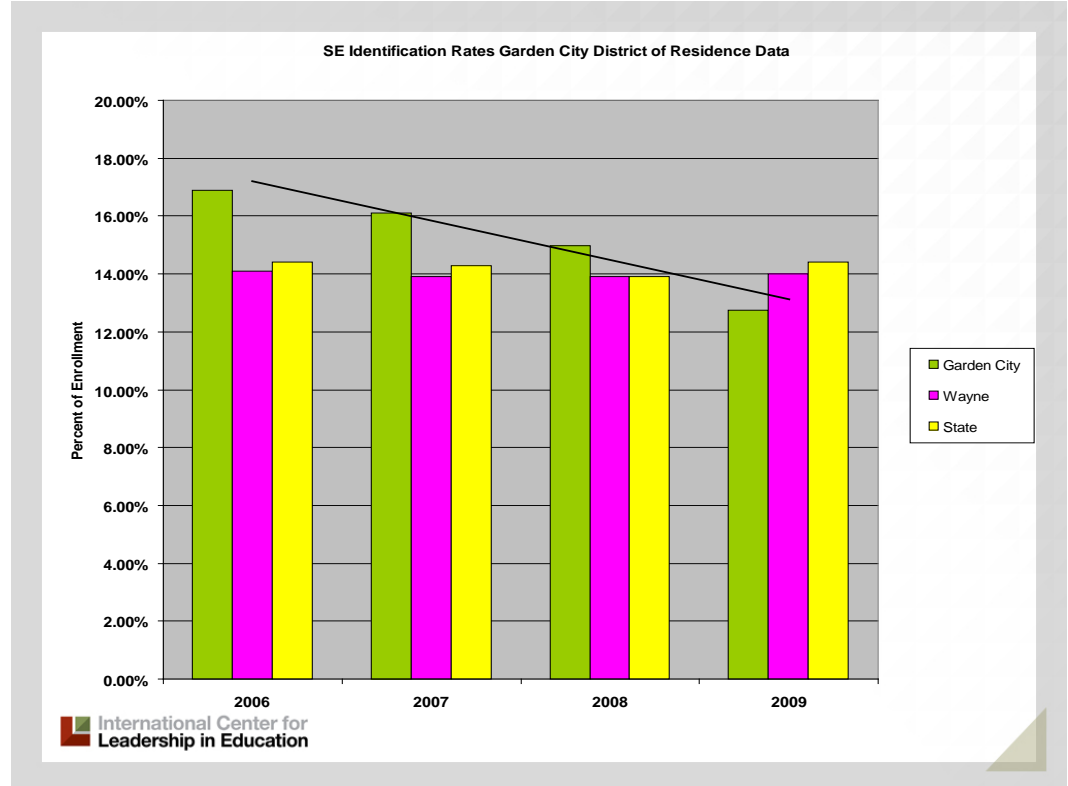
In effective schools, professional development focuses on what the data reveal is important, as well as on the needs of the students and faculty, and it stays persistent over time. Staff development is done not only in workshops, but also at the building level and with classroom follow-up. This support in the classroom, provided through a variety of strategies, helps teachers internalize their new learning.

In Garden City, Michigan, an overarching goal of the special education program is to reduce the classification rate of students. Administrators and teachers have been persistent in pursuing this goal. Professional development activities have focused on the Five Key Elements with the express goal of reducing classification rates. The success of choosing a goal and being relentless in its pursuit is shown in the graph that follows. Special education classification rates have decreased in Garden City for three straight years.

## Analyzing the Five Key Elements

Historically, what many educators have believed students with disabilities are capable of does not align with what these students show they can do if the right systems are put into place. When coordinated in a school and across a district, the Five Key Elements – a sense of ownership, a culture of high expectations, intervention systems, inclusion and collaboration, and professional development – converge to create an environment in which student learning is the priority. The result is that achievement improves for the entire student population.



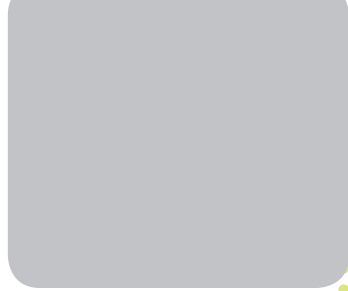


The Special Education Institute at the International Center for Leadership in Education has developed a “Special Education School Performance Guide” to aid schools and districts in assessing their status in these Five Key Elements. The rubric elaborates evidence across a continuum, allowing teachers, administrators, and school leadership teams to reflect on where their program is currently. Characteristics of four levels — Beginning, Developing, Solid, and Exemplary — provide direction for schools and districts as they strive to improve their general and special education offerings in a systemic way.

Once the assessment has been completed, action steps can be identified and those actions can be prioritized to address short-term solutions and longer-term systemic changes.

## Seizing the Opportunity

A prioritized “to-do” list for special education programs cannot stand in isolation from all other programs in a school or district. As administrators,



“America’s economy is in crisis. We can either drown under the weight of the problem, or we can surf the wave of opportunity that it brings – to put science, engineering and innovation back in their rightful place in our economy.”

- Sen. Edward Kaufman, Delaware

staff, and other stakeholders prepare to transition to the Common Core State Standards and the next generation assessments, the time is now for schools and districts to focus attention on several areas. They must revise curricula to reflect fewer, clearer, higher world-class standards, assess existing programs to make them rigorous and relevant for all students, and increase the effectiveness of instruction for all. Strategies that assist students receiving special education services and other struggling learners should be identified and seen as part of the solution right from the start.

Educators must be committed to taking responsibility for the achievement of every student in their school. They must support a culture of high expectations for all and work collaboratively with colleagues to strengthen their instructional practices. It is only with this commitment that all our students will be able to meet the challenges that face them, so that our country can compete successfully, prosper, and be secure in the global community of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

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Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

National Center on Universal Design for Learning  
[www.udlcenter.org](http://www.udlcenter.org)