

Leadership for Effective Instruction for Students With Disabilities: Lessons Learned From Five State Education Agencies



In April 2024, the National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) at WestEd convened a Thought Leader Forum focused on ways State Education Agencies (SEAs) can provide leadership to support effective instruction. Participants

included representatives from five SEAs, school districts and schools, the U.S. Department of Education, higher education, state technical assistance partners, professional organizations, family centers, and federally funded technical assistance centers. State special education leaders and their partners from New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Washington each shared information about their change initiatives focused on promoting effective instruction for students with disabilities at the local level. The Forum raised this important question: How were these states leading change to promote effective

instruction for students with disabilities? This brief was produced by the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) at the University of Utah, in partnership with NCSI, to address this question.

The UEPC conducted interviews and focus groups with 24 individuals across the five states. Interviews and focus groups explored how SEAs identified the need for their work, their motivations for implementation efforts and challenges, key partnerships in establishing and implementing the work, perceived impacts of the work, reflections on lessons learned, missed opportunities, and planned next steps. In addition, the UEPC reviewed and analyzed SEA documents such as strategic plans, presentation materials, improvement plans, and theories of action. This brief summarizes the primary lessons learned from this selection of five states — all of which are intentionally engaged in providing leadership that is improving instruction for students with disabilities.

Levers for Change

The states that participated in this study vary in terms of the focus of the initiatives they are leading and the stage of their improvement efforts, as well as in size, location, and situational context. Although there were differences among the states, it quickly became apparent that each of these five states intentionally engaged in a systemic approach to leading transformative change.

Each SEA prioritized effective instruction based on research, focused on success for learners, and worked to improve opportunities for students with disabilities. In doing so, these SEAs moved beyond targeting isolated initiatives and outcomes to instead working on restructuring processes and creating conditions that could enable and sustain effective instruction that improves student outcomes. SEAs embraced the complexity and interdependence of their efforts and worked to align initiatives across various systems levels. Over time, they also adopted a deliberate and coordinated approach to their transformation efforts, integrating support for students with disabilities into broader educational initiatives to support a system that benefits all students. SEA efforts to achieve effective instruction for students with disabilities embraced

systems thinking and embedded processes that worked to solve problems and break down silos across state, district, and classroom levels.

The analysis of SEA efforts also revealed seven primary levers that were used — albeit to varying degrees — across the five states as a part of their systemic approaches to change. These seven primary levers are leveraging purposeful leadership, using data as a catalyst for action, engaging in continuous improvement, fostering strategic partnerships, increasing coherence and alignment, reimagining funding and resource allocation, and transcending a compliance-focused role. Figure 1, SEA Levers for Leading Effective Instruction for Students With Disabilities, presents these levers and the key strategic moves used by the SEAs in their systemic approaches to providing leadership for effective instruction for students with disabilities. It is important to note that success to date was not attributed to any one lever or strategic move in any state education agency's systemic approach. Instead, SEAs used each of these levers in ways that were interconnected and positively reinforcing. The following sections provide illustrative examples of SEAs using each key lever strategically.

State Education Agency Levers for Leading Effective Instruction for Students With Disabilities

Transcend a Compliance-Focused Role

Use Data as a Catalyst for Action

Leverage Purposeful Leadership

Engage in Continuous Improvement

Reimagine Funding and Resource Allocation

Increase Coherence and Alignment

Foster Strategic Partnerships

Leveraging Purposeful Leadership

Purposeful leadership is a cornerstone of the five SEAs' efforts to support effective instruction for students with disabilities. Purposeful leadership involves establishing a clear shared vision, defining measurable goals, and strategically sharing responsibility across stakeholders to maximize the impact of change efforts. By anchoring their work in purposeful leadership, SEAs exemplify how visionary leaders serve as a critical component to support a broader systemic change and enable collaborative, coordinated, and responsive reforms for identified needs. The following two state examples showcase this thinking.

With a clear vision for addressing Utah's special education teacher shortages, the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) special education leaders initiated a new alternative educator preparation program — the Alternate Pathway to Professional Educator License in Special Education (APPEL-SpEd). This program, developed in partnership with local education agencies and university preparation programs, reduces barriers to preparation and licensure, such as access, cost, and time available. The overwhelming interest and participation in APPEL-SpEd has created the potential to mitigate the state's special education teacher shortage in two years.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) also modeled this purposeful leadership by establishing a comprehensive and strategic vision for improving outcomes for students with disabilities. To accomplish their goal, TEA leadership invested in creating a new state-level office, the Office of Special Populations and Student Supports, which is dedicated to serving special student populations (e.g., multilingual learners, students with disabilities). The new TEA office is strategically aligned with broader agency aims and includes a new playbook to support sharing responsibility for meeting the needs of students with disabilities throughout levels of the system.

Using Data as a Catalyst for Action

All five SEAs used data as a catalyst for action in leading for effective instruction for students with disabilities. Specifically, leaders used data to identify critical gaps in services and outcomes, shared data strategically to create a sense of urgency for action, and used data to inform decision-making processes about necessary changes. Examples of the types of data used by states included statewide assessments, national reports, and teacher workforce data. SEAs demonstrated that strategic use of data can serve as a backbone of systemic change and, when appropriate, can serve as a key lever to provoke immediate action to address identified gaps, as shown in the two state examples below.

The Rhode Island Department of Education's (RIDE) special education team's analysis of statewide math assessment data revealed alarming achievement gaps. Sharing this finding with their broader SEA team generated an immediate sense of urgency for change. In response, RIDE prioritized mathematics achievement for students with disabilities and developed an accompanying comprehensive support system that included coaching for both general and special educators. RIDE continues to strategically leverage their data to build a deeper understanding of gaps and create momentum for expanding these improvement efforts.

Similarly, special education leaders in the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHED) leveraged their statewide data to determine that students needed better and different supports to achieve reading proficiency. Using data on reading proficiency in tandem with data analysis on the increase in district requests for additional separate special education classrooms, NHED leaders determined that school staff felt underprepared to assist students with disabilities in general education settings. In response to both the gap in achievement and the changes in demand for special education classrooms, the NHED identified additional needed support structures, including additional coaching and professional learning, for administrators and teachers to strengthen their instructional capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general education settings.

Engaging in Continuous Improvement

To lead for effective instruction for students with disabilities, the five SEAs also engaged in continuous improvement efforts to address evolving challenges and opportunities. Continuous improvement efforts included implementing planned learning cycles, establishing systematic data collection and feedback mechanisms, and building processes to apply lessons learned. As shown in the two SEA examples below, continuous improvement — which was notably central to systemic changes — enabled these SEAs to navigate emerging challenges, make iterative improvements, and build the capacity to provide leadership that supported local-level effective instructional practices.

In Washington, special education leaders in the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) demonstrated continuous improvement through systemic data collection and subsequent refinement of their Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN). Following previous inclusion-focused efforts, they initially observed dramatic increases in the state's inclusion rates. However, rather than simply celebrating their early successes in improving inclusion rates overall, they used this information to go deeper to ensure the system was effectively supporting all students. Their continuous improvement processes led them to refine their efforts further and identify where the IPTN could focus on improving inclusionary practices with full access in mind.

Another example of SEAs engaging in continuous improvement was how the USBE's special education team demonstrated the use of structured feedback loops and intentional refinement cycles for designing and implementing their APPEL-SpEd program. They established feedback loops that positioned them to be able to use input from program candidates and state higher education partners about the need to increase content and pedagogical skills (e.g., reading, mathematics, intervention, behavior

management) to better prepare APPEL-SpEd candidates in meeting the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Feedback on course timing and accessibility in the APPEL-SpEd program also prompted adjustments to ensure courses took place at times that accommodated candidates' existing teaching and work schedules.

Fostering Strategic Partnerships

To support effective instruction for students with disabilities, SEAs in the five states fostered strategic partnerships with entities such as districts and schools, higher education teacher preparation and research centers, technical assistance entities, student and family advocacy groups, and teachers' unions. By expanding partnership networks, increasing collaboration opportunities, and building collective capacity for action, the five SEAs built strategic partnerships that strengthened and broadened the range of expertise and resources available to carry out the change effort being led by the state education agencies. By leveraging strategic partnerships, state education agencies created networks to share expertise and resources. Doing so empowered stakeholders at every level to support meaningful and lasting improvements in instruction for students with disabilities and amplified their ability to address complex challenges and innovate. Two examples of such leadership in fostering strategic partnerships are shown here.

RIDE officials partnered with the West Bay Collaborative, a Rhode Island-based partner with expertise in MTSS and intensive interventions, to develop online learning modules supporting Rhode Island's Tiered Intervention in Math Education (RI TIME). This partnership led to the development of an online professional learning system that combined the RIDE team's math instruction expertise with their partner's MTSS expertise. The online platform supports extending RIDE's capacity to reach more teachers while optimizing the limited number of coaches in the RI TIME program.

Washington officials took a comprehensive approach to building strategic partnerships. OSPI special education officials strategically engaged an outside vendor (WestEd) to help coordinate and facilitate their work to support the coordination of the IPTN and ensure consistent alignment between partners' work and the OSPI's aims. Throughout this process, the WestEd team served as a valuable thought partner, sharing their insights and expertise in systems design and helping to align statewide instructional and inclusionary goals with local district implementation. At the same time, the OSPI developed a broader statewide network to participate in the IPTN, which included statewide technical assistance partners, family organizations, higher education institutions, and specialized service providers like the School for the Deaf and School for the Blind. This intentional approach transformed relationships from competitive to collaborative and built their system capacity to respond to district needs.

Increasing Coherence and Alignment

State education agencies in the five states have focused on increasing coherence and aligning their efforts to support a systemic approach to leading for effective instruction for students with disabilities. Their approaches to increasing coherence and alignment included connecting improvement efforts with other state initiatives; enhancing collaboration and coordination across state education agencies and other spokes of the education system (e.g., regional centers, districts, schools); and engaging a broad range of stakeholders, which included school districts, universities, families, and technical assistance providers, to create unified and comprehensive efforts across the education system. By prioritizing coherence and alignment, these state education agencies fostered a collective vision that promotes collaboration and advancement of their efforts, including bridging state and local initiatives. The following two state education agency examples exhibit this lever in action.

The NHED demonstrated an increase in coherence and alignment by identifying opportunities to reduce redundancies across departments at the SEA and refining the special education department's goals to align with the statewide science of reading initiative and their literacy goals for students with disabilities. To further support the alignment with the state literacy goals, the special education team helped to develop a pilot coaching program to support early-adopting schools in implementing literacy practices promoted by the new reading initiative.

In Texas, SEA leaders recognized the existence of overlapping efforts and redundancies across departments. To address this issue, TEA established cross-functional teams to break down silos and align efforts toward common goals. To strengthen coherence between schools, local education agencies, and Education Service Centers (ESCs), TEA introduced the Strategic Integration Liaison role to provide systems-level coaching for the ESCs. These new Liaison positions focused on building the leadership capacity of ESCs and tightening the coherence of efforts across Texas's vast number of schools and districts while ensuring close alignment with TEA's vision for improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Reimagining Funding and Resource Allocation

State education agencies in the five states reimagined their use of funding and resources to support their work of leading effective instruction for students with disabilities. Their efforts included leveraging existing resources in new ways, shifting resources to support capacity-building initiatives, and optimizing existing resources through strategic alignment with priorities. Although fiscal resources are an important aspect of their efforts, SEA resources also include time, talent, and infrastructure. Strong relationships among leaders and stakeholders within and across state agencies and governance structures facilitated the strategic reallocation of funds and resources.

In Utah, for example, the USBE invested funds and SEA personnel to support the ongoing growth of the APPEL-SpEd program. The USBE strategically partnered with universities to provide affordable, high-quality coursework options for APPEL-SpEd participants. Where gaps in coursework availability for APPEL-SpEd existed, the USBE utilized internal subject matter experts to develop courses to meet the required competencies. The USBE also optimized internal resources by integrating APPEL-SpEd coursework development with their broader educator training initiatives to avoid duplication of efforts. Moreover, the USBE funded significant scholarships to assist aspiring special educators enrolled in university programs.

Another example is New Hampshire, where the NHED identified the need to reallocate efforts and funds to sustain their literacy goals. Their reimagining of how to spend their resources included investment in a professional learning system that focuses on building the capacity of state-level coaches who can continue to deliver structured literacy training at the local levels. This investment in local capacity building reduces the need for ongoing funding for the SEA to supply school-level coaches and is aimed toward also reducing continued reliance on costly external literacy training programs. By reimagining how funds and other resources leverage partnerships with local stakeholders, the SEA minimized funding gaps and provided expanded access and support for students with disabilities.

By reimagining the allocation of resources and capacity-building investments, all five SEAs demonstrated how intentional stewardship of time, talent, and funding can address critical challenges as part of a systemic approach to leading for effective instruction for students with disabilities. By reimagining how resources are allocated, the SEAs supported the creation of a sustainable system that can also empower local stakeholders to grow and deepen the delivery of evidence-based practices for teaching and learning.

Transcending a Compliance-Focused Role

State education agencies in these five states are transcending traditional state roles that have focused predominantly on compliance. These SEAs engaged in reframing compliance as a baseline for improvement; developing strategic plans for goal attainment; and proactively providing leadership, support, and partnership for change. SEA leaders described how they view compliance as a minimum standard rather than an end goal and continue to develop new approaches to support and guide educational improvements.

In Texas, for example, TEA embraced compliance requirements not as an endpoint but as a foundation to drive broader systemic change. Recognizing the value of their stakeholders' input and perspective, TEA engaged with thousands of stakeholders around the state — including families, educators, legislators, school boards, locally elected officials, and advocacy groups — over a series of months to craft an ambitious strategic plan that exceeded compliance requirements to ensure that the holistic needs of students with disabilities are met. By prioritizing support over regulation and fostering inclusive partnerships, TEA is advancing broader access to educational opportunities and enhancing instructional practice for students with disabilities statewide.

Another example of applying this lever is Washington, where special education leaders at the OSPI supported systemic change by moving beyond compliance to actively help schools and districts build capacity to strengthen their inclusionary practices. Through strategic partnerships, the OSPI enhanced support for LEAs and schools by offering professional learning opportunities for educators and leaders (e.g., IEP goal writing, coteaching and collaboration, data-informed planning and instruction) to better meet the instructional and inclusionary needs of their students with disabilities.

By redefining compliance as a foundation for innovation rather than the end goal, the SEAs demonstrated how shifting from oversight to collaboration can drive meaningful improvements. This shift has positioned them as proactive partners in the field in fostering effective instruction for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

The analysis of these five SEAs reveals how states can lead change to advance effective instruction for students with disabilities through a systemic approach that strategically uses multiple, interconnected levers. These SEAs are not only addressing immediate pressing education needs but are also laying the groundwork for sustainable improvement. While states in this study varied in the extent to which they used each particular lever, all five SEAs did use each lever to some degree.

A key insight from this cross-case analysis is that successful leadership for effective instruction for students with disabilities requires integration, not isolation of efforts. The five SEAs featured here show that when support for students with disabilities is embedded within comprehensive, state-led and state-supported educational efforts, they are better positioned to achieve coherence in their improvement efforts. By further aligning policies, leveraging data, fostering strategic partnerships, and optimizing resource allocations, these SEAs have enhanced their capacity to drive meaningful and sustained change that serves students with disabilities. As these SEAs illustrate, applying these levers provides valuable insights for other states seeking to provide impactful leadership that promotes and supports effective instruction for students with disabilities.

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WestEd is the lead organization for NCSI. For more information about the work of WestEd, NCSI, and their partners, please visit www.ncsi.wested.org and www.wested.org.

