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Specialized Innovations for Students with Disabilities

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Action Principles for SEAs, LEAs, and Schools

State Education Agency (SEA)

- a. Develop a state website solely dedicated to innovations in special education. The first step might be for SEAs to develop a website on innovations in special education. This website should be separate from the state education website. Because state websites are so large, they are tedious to maneuver through and find the information that a person is seeking. A dedicated innovations website could contain examples of how innovations are used in schools throughout the state and the country. Examples might include video clips of teachers using technological or methodological innovations in the classroom with students. Teachers in the videos could point out the advantages of the innovation, identify potential problems in using it in the classroom, and offer tips for teachers about it. The website could also contain links to journal articles or websites on each innovation, as well as to upcoming training sessions on the innovations.
- b. Develop a state conference on innovations in special education. SEAs could sponsor a state conference on innovations in special education. These conferences could provide stipends to teachers to help defray the cost for their attendance. The conference should include a mix of informational sessions about different innovations and “hands on” workshops in which teachers can learn in depth about an innovation and create materials related to the session, materials which they could then use, in turnkey fashion, in their classrooms. The conference could feature national speakers who developed an innovation, as well as federal grant awardees who could discuss findings from projects that used, developed, and evaluated innovations. These awardees could discuss the findings from their research and offer suggestions for using their innovation in different environments (e.g., urban, rural, and suburban) and with different populations of students (i.e., How did general education students respond to the innovation? How did students with autism spectrum disorders respond to the innovation? Students with learning disabilities?).
- c. Reward schools for using innovations to teach students with disabilities. Each SEA should try to identify and recognize effective schools within its borders that use innovations. These schools could serve as models, and their personnel could serve as resources for teachers throughout the state. Too often, school personnel within a state, and in some cases within each of its districts, are unaware of colleagues using effective teaching innovations. Often teachers must go it alone to try to teach students with disabilities when, in fact, other teachers in the state have already developed successful innovations for their classrooms. Schools’ efforts should be recognized and highlighted on SEA websites for others to learn about and copy. Schools could also offer small monetary awards for teachers who use or develop innovations.
- d. Encourage state laboratory schools or university–school partnerships. SEAs could help bring together researchers from universities and school personnel

who are looking for innovations. Often, faculty are looking to assess and research a new innovation and, at the same time, schools are in need of an innovation. These schools could serve as laboratory/experimental schools and may well be sites that are using some of the latest innovations in special education. In 2012, the Institute of Education Sciences, an arm of the U.S. Department of Education, offered a grant competition titled Researcher–Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research. This competition solicited proposals from university researchers who would evaluate a school’s data and help identify potential problem areas that, in subsequent years, could be addressed through innovations or current best practices. The hope is that these 2-year funded partnerships will be the beginning of long-term collaborations. Initially, funds would be used to help schools identify weak areas and, in subsequent funding cycles, develop interventions and assess the effectiveness of those interventions on student learning and behavior. In many ways, SEAs could take this federal program and use it as a template. State competitions could offer funding that would encourage such partnerships, perhaps in the form of seed money or small grants.

- e. Develop materials that show how to integrate innovations into the curriculum. Provided the innovations have been shown to be effective for both students with and without disabilities, the latest innovations should be embedded in the curriculum for teachers to use in their classes. Once an innovation is embedded within the curriculum, the better the chance that teachers will use it on a consistent basis. Lenz and Deshler (2004) have observed from their many years of strategy research that elementary schools are able to seamlessly weave new strategies or innovations into their curriculum; in spite of their general applicability, however, these practices are not often adopted in secondary schools. Further, Lenz and Deshler show that, with proper supports, teachers can use these innovations to help all students learn content.

Local Education Agencies

- a. Allocate resources for technology and professional development. If school districts want teachers to learn new skills/innovations, they can either send teachers out for training or bring the training into schools. Schools should offer travel funds for teachers who will target a new innovation that they want to learn. Teachers can then attend the training or workshop to learn it and report back to the school district how the innovation is being used in their classroom. If schools have inclusive classes, co-teachers can attend workshops and then demonstrate to other teachers how the innovations are used in co-taught classes. Another option for school districts is to provide professional development in schools. In either case, the old model of one-shot professional development has been shown to be ineffective. More efficient training involves locating teachers who have a need to learn an innovation and a desire to use it in their classroom. Districts should target these teachers for professional development and then follow up using turnkey methods, such as having the expert model the innovation in the teacher’s class and then letting

the teacher use it, receiving feedback from the expert. Experts may have to return a few times to help the novice teacher refine how the innovation is used in that particular classroom.

- b. Provide a support network after training. For teachers trained to use innovations, districts should provide them a support network in order to share ideas and solicit advice when they encounter problems. An electronic discussion board or chat board can serve as a virtual meeting place for discussions about better ways to teach students with disabilities. The site might also contain other resources like video clips that demonstrate effective teaching using innovations or web articles about innovations.
- c. Develop district-wide innovation coaches. Mentors could teach part-time and mentor teachers part-time. They should also be tasked with staying abreast of and being trained in the latest educational innovations for teaching students with disabilities. With such duties, they could serve as professional developers in the district, introducing innovations to teachers. When serving as coaches, they could assess the fidelity of teachers' implementation of innovations and assist in assessing the effectiveness of innovations on student learning.
- d. Districts should assess their teachers' and students' attitudes about new innovations. If teachers don't enjoy using an innovation or don't see its value, they are unlikely to use it consistently in the classroom. Therefore, districts need to assess attitudes through customer surveys that ask teachers about an innovation's usefulness, what they like and dislike about it, and what changes could improve its use in the classroom. Students are also consumers of teachers' methods, strategies, and technologies, so they too should provide input about classroom innovations. Further, students should be asked about or interviewed on how they feel the innovation has changed the way they think about content or the learning process while using the innovation. Student input can help the district decide whether changes should be made in the way the innovation is taught to teachers or the way teachers implement the innovation.

Schools

- a. Make innovations work for students with disabilities. As noted earlier in this chapter, teachers need to use explicit instruction, especially when introducing a new instructional method or technology. In explicit instruction, a teacher first models or demonstrates an innovation, followed by guided practice with feedback, and ending with the student using the innovation independently. Teachers should strive to teach students innovations that allow them to become autonomous and independent learners. So instead of relying on a note-taker, a student with disabilities should learn the skills (e.g., strategic note-taking) necessary for recording his or her own notes. Teachers should express their high expectations of students; mediocrity never advanced civilization.
- b. Tie strategy instruction to the teaching of new technology. For technological innovations, it may be more effective to teach students a strategy that helps

them use the new technology in authentic classroom settings. For example, the InSPECT strategy (McNaughton, Hughes, & Ofiesh, 1997) was taught to students with learning disabilities to help them successfully use the spell checker in word processing programs. With new technology, such as smartpens and iPads, it may be necessary to teach students a strategy so that they can use the technology properly and effectively. Regardless of the technique or strategy, explicit instruction is still needed to insure that students learn to use technology effectively.

- c. Teachers need to insure that new innovations transfer to the classroom. Once students learn to use the innovations, teachers should make sure that students with disabilities can generalize the innovation to different contexts with different content. This stage of instruction teaches students how to use the innovation in a flexible manner—modifying steps of the strategy when necessary or modifying how technology is used in new situations. This adaptation of an innovation may also necessitate teaching students its use in those classes with more advanced content.
- d. Train with fidelity using all training steps. The idea of fidelity in interventions refers not only to teachers following the prescribed implementation procedures for an innovation, but also to how much time (e.g., days, sessions) teachers spend—sometimes referred to as intensity—on specific training steps when training students how to use student strategies (Swanson, Wanzek, Haring, Ciullo, & McCulley, 2012). Intervention fidelity is important because it determines whether an innovation fails or succeeds, especially in special education classrooms where students require explicit step-by-step instruction and scaffolding to master a skill or innovation. Therefore, the more complex an innovation, the more critical it becomes for teachers to follow the prescribed training procedures.
- e. Monitor the progress of learning by identifying specific skills to be assessed and use benchmark tests that parallel components of state tests. As with any innovation or intervention, it is important to assess student progress. Progress is typically assessed daily for a newly implemented innovation and then periodically once it is determined that the innovation is working as intended. When measuring an innovation's effectiveness, teachers should focus on its usability (i.e., Can students use it successfully?), students' fluency in using it (i.e., Can students use it quickly without making too many mistakes?), and its effectiveness as measured by outcomes (i.e., For a math innovation, have students increased the number of correct problems solved compared to previous measures?). Finally, since the goal of the kind of academic innovations discussed here should be to increase students' skills to a level comparable to that of nondisabled peers, teachers should consider using a districtwide benchmark measure (i.e., smaller tests whose questions are similar to state tests) to insure that students are on track to do well with district and state measures.