

Conquering intractable challenges: Aligning systems to improve results for students with disabilities



Outcomes for students with disabilities are historically concerning. As states have leveraged the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) to refine accountability and support systems, schools across the country have been identified as needing *Targeted School Improvement* (TSI) or *Comprehensive School Improvement* (CSI). The performance of students with disabilities is a consistent factor in these school designations.

So, what can be done about special education student performance? Is it a hopeless, intractable challenge? The good news is no! Strategies do exist and have succeeded.

The National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) has been working with states to identify how to make impactful, lasting change. A few central themes have emerged that can support state and local leaders, educators, and stakeholders in figuring out how to improve.



1. Getting started. Alignment is the answer to turning around low performing systems. Successful states leverage federal requirements including ESSA and the *State Systemic Improvement Plan* (SSIP) as well as state policy born from Chiefs' agendas and legislative action to compel alignment in vision, goals, and strategies for changing student outcomes.



2. Getting real about instruction. Students with disabilities are primarily general education students. The majority of students with disabilities spend most of their school day receiving instruction in regular classrooms with grade-level peers, from general education teachers. Successful states focus on supporting the development and implementation of *Multi-Tier Systems of Support* (MTSS). They monitor progress of each individual student to understand who is succeeding and who is not; dig deeper to understand why; and then apply appropriate improvements in core instruction and/or support tier 2 or tier 3 interventions when needed.



3. Getting serious about inclusive leadership. States that are successfully working to align their systems have embraced equity as a central theme. State and local leaders in these states are actively partnering to talk about student performance data and the shift from a historical focus on special education compliance to a stronger emphasis on outcomes. Successful states are intentional about supporting building principals to make effective decisions about student placement and staffing patterns, and to develop cultures of collaborative inquiry and inclusive practices.



4. Getting clear that the work is both technical and adaptive. Ensuring effective instruction and leadership requires development of technical capacity — the ability to deploy evidence-based practices shown to work through research. It also requires attention to the adaptive side of the work...making sure that individuals are supported to evolve through the change process. Successful states are focused on students' learning needs while also paying attention to the social and emotional needs of the adults who are striving to improve the systems.