Elevating Special Populations Leadership in Districtwide Instructional Systems

Vision Statement

Districts should ensure leaders of special education, emergent bilingual (EB), and other special populations are integral members of the instructional leadership team. This team will champion access and excellence for every student. By leveraging each leader's expertise into core instructional systems, districts ensure that students served by special programs have meaningful access to high-quality instruction, aligned systems, and inclusive learning environments.

Core Components for Special Populations Leaders
Planning Master Scheduling District Professional Learning Strategic Resource Allocation
Instructional Framework Tier 1 Curriculum Implementation with UDL Schoolwide Routines
Aligned Expectations for Campuses Observation & Feedback Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Core Components for Special Populations Leaders

While this is not an exhaustive list, the following core components outline areas where special populations leaders bring specific expertise as fellow members of the district instructional leadership team.

Planning

Master Scheduling

Begin master scheduling with a focus on ensuring all students, especially students with disabilities, have meaningful access to grade-level content.

- Co-develop intentional schedules that embed co-teaching, intervention blocks, and language development opportunities to support diverse needs.
- Campus-level staff knowledgeable in EB and special education are identified to support campus master schedule development.

District Professional Learning (PL)

Co-design and advocate for PL that reflects inclusive practices for students with disabilities, UDL principles, and language-rich instruction, ensuring relevance for all educators.

- Special populations leaders are encouraged to participate in district-wide leadership, curriculum, and instructional professional learning, including unit and lesson internalization, to deepen their understanding and effectively support integration into core instructional systems.
- Curriculum and instructional professional learning are prioritized for special education and bilingual teachers, with intentional planning to ensure they can attend both job-specific training and curriculum training.
- Curriculum & Instruction (C&I) team and special populations leaders model strong partnership practices for LEAs to reinforce alignment and collaboration across instructional systems.

Strategic Resource Allocation

Provide staffing, materials, and time aligned to supporting meaningful access and language development across all campuses.

- Ensure all special populations have access to Tier 1 curriculum and the resources needed for effective implementation.
- Ensure special populations teachers have access to instructional coaching and leadership feedback.

Instructional Framework

Tier 1 Curriculum Implementation with Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Ensure instructional coherence and equity for all students.

- Support special education teachers in adapting the adopted curriculum to meet the needs of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
- Assist with the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) that meets the needs of all classrooms and students.
- Support the understanding of UDL principles and how these practices should be considered during the unit and lesson internalization.
- Ensure leaders for all special populations are actively involved in curriculum decision-making processes to guarantee representation and access for all students.
- Ensure all special populations teachers and students have equitable access to Tier 1 curriculum and campus/district-wide implementation supports, such as coaching and observation feedback systems.

Schoolwide Routines

Ensure instructional time is maximized at the school and classroom levels. Schoolwide routines include, but are not limited to, arrival, dismissal, meals, hallway transitions, and the first few and last few minutes of class. Special populations leaders bring essential expertise to the development of inclusive schoolwide routines, ensuring that every student, regardless of ability, feels a sense of belonging and support.

- Special population leaders help identify barriers and solutions to ensure all students can meaningfully participate in schoolwide routines.

- Special populations leaders help ensure schoolwide routines are culturally appropriate and consider disability-related needs.

Aligned Expectations for Campuses

Observation and Feedback

Engage in coaching cycles and instructional walkthroughs to elevate meaningful access and provide targeted feedback.

- Ensure leaders for all special populations are actively involved in observation and feedback implementation and continuous improvement to guarantee representation and support the growth of all teachers.
- Ensure all special populations teachers have equitable access to routine observation, feedback, and coaching systems from campus and district leaders.
- Use inclusive practices data to inform instruction, monitor progress, and advocate for positive outcomes across student groups, leveraging the expertise of special populations leaders in data analysis.
- Promote flexible grouping strategies that reflect students' strengths, needs, and language development goals—fostering collaboration and peer learning.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Establish PLC structures to strengthen meaningful access to grade-level content through collaborative planning, data analysis, and aligned instructional supports.

- Prioritize early involvement in planning and ensure special populations teams are integrated into PLCs to co-plan instruction, analyze data, and align supports with grade-level standards.
- Use PLCs as a venue for reviewing student progress, identifying barriers to meaningful access, and planning scaffolds and supports aligned to Tier 1 curriculum.
- Opportunities are provided for general education teachers and leaders to strengthen their ability to support special populations and integrate inclusive practices into Tier 1 instruction, including participation in PLCs.

Call to Action

Let's build a district culture where every instructional decision reflects the needs and strengths of every learner. When leaders of special education, emergent bilingual programs, and other special populations are integral members of the instructional leadership team, we move closer to positive outcomes for every student.

If we expect shared responsibility for meeting the needs of every learner and collective ownership of all student outcomes in our classrooms and at the school leadership level, we must first model these behaviors at the district level. Districts are encouraged to use this document to cascade the district-level core components to develop aligned campus- and classroom-level roles and responsibilities to ensure coherence between general education and special education teams.