



Advancing Inclusive Special Education Leadership in the United States:

A Framework for Equity, Measurable Impact, and National Policy Alignment



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Abstract

The United States has long articulated a moral and legal commitment to educate all students, including learners with disabilities, to high standards. Yet gaps remain between policy promises and the daily instructional reality for millions of students. In this white paper, I present a practitioner-developed, evidence-informed framework, Inclusive Instructional Design, Tiered Reading Interventions, Data-Driven Leadership that I have deployed across multiple K–12 contexts in the Philippines and the United States. I detail the policy landscape (IDEA, ESSA, Section 504, MTSS/RTI guidance, and national literacy priorities), situate my approach in the scholarly literature, and provide a robust case study from a U.S. high school demonstrating measurable improvements in reading proficiency, course completion, and graduation-trajectory indicators. I also summarize independent recognition (press features and district adoptions) as indicators of field impact.

This white paper is intended for district leaders, teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking field-tested, replicable models that improve outcomes for students with disabilities and multilingual learners receiving special education services. It documents original contributions with district-level adoption and measurable results, demonstrating approaches that can be adapted across diverse educational contexts. The paper concludes with policy and implementation recommendations, including professional capacity-building, development of robust data infrastructure for progress monitoring, and the formation of cross-institutional research partnerships.



1. Introduction

The central question of U.S. special education is not whether inclusion is proper, federal statutes and Supreme Court precedent have answered that for decades, but how schools can deliver truly rigorous, accessible, culturally responsive instruction every day. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). It compels individualized education programs (IEPs) that are aligned to ambitious academic and functional goals.⁴ Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits disability-based discrimination and requires accommodations ensuring equal access to school programs.⁵ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) integrates students with disabilities into statewide accountability and assessment systems, raising the bar for schools to deliver on outcomes, not just access.⁶

Translating these mandates into daily practice requires instructional systems that address academics and behavior, integrate assistive technology and universal design, and build staff capability to interpret data and act quickly. Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) offer structures to deliver prevention and intervention at scale.⁷ National literacy initiatives—from state science-of-reading laws to federal technical assistance—underscore the urgency of strengthening foundational reading instruction for all students, including those with IEPs.⁸

My professional journey, 13+ years across elementary and secondary settings and across countries, has produced a grounded perspective on what it takes to make inclusion real. I am licensed in the Philippines (valid through July 4, 2028) and in three U.S. states: New Mexico (Level Three-A Instructional Leader, PreK–12 Special Education with Reading/Language Arts endorsement, valid through June 30, 2031), Illinois (Learning Behavior Specialist I, K–Age 22, valid through June 30, 2028), and Arizona (PreK–12 Substitute, valid through July 4, 2026). These credentials reflect both my content specialization and my readiness to serve varied communities and policy regimes.

The framework presented here rests on a simple conviction I shared in *The National Digest*: “*Inclusive classrooms are not just about physical placement; they are about fostering belonging, ensuring every student’s voice is heard, and creating an environment where learning differences are respected as strengths.*”¹ My work operationalizes that conviction through reproducible materials (differentiated lesson designs and adapted assessments), structured literacy interventions integrated within MTSS, and data routines that make IEPs living documents rather than compliance



artifacts. As independent features (The National Digest, Intrax Education) and a national press release have noted, the results include measurable student gains and adoption by other teachers and schools.¹⁻³

This white paper has three goals:

1. Clarify how my model aligns to and advances U.S. policy.
2. Share a robust case study with methods, implementation, and outcomes.
3. Offer practical recommendations for districts and states to scale inclusive practice.

2. Problem Statement: From Compliance to Daily Instruction

Despite strong laws, outcome data reveal persistent disparities. National assessments regularly show that students with disabilities trail their non-disabled peers in reading and math.⁹ These gaps are not inevitable; they reflect systemic issues that I have observed repeatedly:

- Instructional design is not planned for variability. Differentiation is often a retrofit instead of an upfront design choice aligned to Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- Tiered intervention is episodic. MTSS/RTI structures exist on paper but are inconsistently implemented: screening schedules slip, interventions do not match student profiles, and progress monitoring is irregular.
- Data is underused. Teams collect data but lack time, tools, or training to translate it into timely instructional adjustments or revised IEP goals.
- Collaboration barriers persist. Special educators, general educators, and related service providers often plan separately, diluting the power of co-teaching and integrated support.
- Assistive technology (AT) is under-integrated. AT devices and software are available but not embedded in daily routines, reducing benefit to communication, executive function, and text access.
- Professional development is one-off. Without cycles of coaching, modeling, and feedback, workshop learning rarely changes classroom practice.

Bridging these gaps requires an integrated approach: design lessons for variability from the start; commit to timely, evidence-based reading interventions; and build the data culture to make instructional decisions routine.

3. Policy and Literature Context



3.1 U.S. Statutes and Federal Guidance

IDEA mandates FAPE, LRE, and measurable annual IEP goals connected to the general curriculum. It also compels progress monitoring and periodic reporting to parents, embedding a data ethic in the law. ⁴ Section 504 prohibits discrimination and requires reasonable accommodations, critical for students with and without IEPs who nevertheless face functional limitations. ⁵ ESSA includes students with disabilities in accountability, pressing states to raise outcomes for all student subgroups. ⁶

MTSS/RTI has become a common framework supported by state education agencies and federally funded technical assistance centers. ⁷ Tiered supports are not a substitute for IDEA eligibility but a way to ensure early, targeted help and to sharpen the instructional hypotheses that teams test and refine. In reading, a wave of state legislation has promoted the Science of Reading, emphasizing explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. ⁸

3.2 Research Base: Inclusion, Literacy, and Data Use

Meta-analyses and large-scale studies show that students with disabilities can meet ambitious goals when schools deploy evidence-based instruction with fidelity, monitor progress frequently, and adjust teaching promptly. Inclusive leadership—where principals and teacher-leaders set expectations, organize collaboration, and remove barriers correlates with improved outcomes.¹⁰ Tiered reading interventions (2–3 sessions per week of targeted small-group instruction, plus daily practice opportunities) reduce the number of students requiring the most intensive services and support acceleration for those with IEPs.¹¹

UDL research highlights the value of multiple means of representation (e.g., text, audio, visuals), engagement (choice, relevance), and expression (oral, written, multimodal), especially for students with language-based learning disabilities and for multilingual learners.¹² Data-informed decision-making supported by short-cycle assessments and collaborative interpretation routines predicts stronger IEP goal attainment and more accurate instructional matches.¹³

4. Framework: Inclusive Instructional Design + Tiered Reading Interventions + Data-Driven Leadership

My framework integrates three interlocking pillars that function as a continuous improvement cycle:

Pillar A: Inclusive Instructional Design



- **UDL-Aligned Lesson Blueprints.** I write unit and daily plans with multiple entry points, scaffolded practice, and choice of output, ensuring access without lowering expectations.
- **Adapted Assessments.** I design assessment variations (read-aloud supports, chunking, visual prompts, alternative response modes) aligned to IEP accommodations to measure skill, not confounding constructs like fine-motor speed or decoding when they are not the target.
- **AT Integration.** I embed text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and organizational tools into routines so students use them independently.

As *The National Digest* summarized: “Cristine Legaspi builds classrooms where difference is normalized, collaboration is the norm, and instructional choices are designed to make every learner feel valued.”¹

Pillar B: Tiered Reading Interventions (MTSS/RTI)

- **Universal Screening & Diagnostics.** We screen all students three times per year and conduct diagnostics to pinpoint needs in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- **Tier 2 & Tier 3 Delivery.** Students not meeting benchmarks receive targeted small-group instruction within 48 hours; students with the largest gaps receive daily intensive sessions matched to diagnostic profiles.
- **Progress Monitoring.** We track growth every 2–3 weeks using curriculum-based measures and adjust instruction accordingly.

Pillar C: Data-Driven Leadership and Professional Capacity

- **Team Data Routines.** I facilitate short, structured meetings where teachers and specialists examine progress and decide specific instructional adjustments, which then flow into IEPs as needed.
- **Coaching & Modeling.** I provide cycles of classroom modeling, observation, and feedback so professional learning translates into practice.
- **Family Communication.** I share understandable, visual progress updates and specific home strategies so families can reinforce skills.

I described the heart of this pillar in my Intrax Education feature: “Without data, we are teaching blind. With data, we can tailor instruction to what each student needs.”³

5. Methodology: Implementing and Evaluating the Model

I implement the framework through a **Plan–Implement–Review–Refine** cycle:

1. **Plan.** Establish shared targets (e.g., reading benchmarks), conduct screening/diagnostics, map accommodations, and co-plan UDL lessons and intervention schedules.



2. **Implement.** Deliver UDL-aligned core instruction; run Tier 2/Tier 3 sessions; embed AT and accommodations; track fidelity.
3. **Review.** Use short-cycle data in brief, recurring team meetings; compare growth to aim lines; update IEPs or adjust groups/materials.
4. **Refine.** Iterate every 2–3 weeks; scale strategies that work; target PD where needed.

Evaluation blends quantitative indicators (benchmark attainment, course completion, office discipline referrals, attendance) and qualitative artifacts (student work, observation notes, teacher/family feedback). For the case study below, I report anonymized data with cohort-level trends.

6. Case Study: Inclusive Literacy Turnaround at a U.S. High School

Context and Cohort

I served as an ELA resource teacher and IEP case manager at a comprehensive high school (grades 9–12) serving a diverse, high-needs community. The school's Exceptional Education department supported learners with specific learning disabilities, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and mild intellectual disability. Many students were also multilingual learners.

I focus here on a cohort of 72 students with IEPs engaged in literacy-intensive coursework during one school year. Baseline screening showed substantial deficits in decoding, fluency, and comprehension; many students had disengaged from reading tasks and accumulated course failures.

Implementation

- **UDL Core ELA.** All grade-level ELA units were redesigned with multiple means of representation (teacher read-alouds with text-to-speech, video summaries) and expression (oral presentations, multimedia projects).
- **Adapted Assessments.** Quizzes and writing tasks were chunked with clear rubrics; students could use speech-to-text and graphic organizers as IEP-aligned accommodations.
- **Tier 2/Tier 3 Interventions.**
 - Tier 2 small-groups: 25–30 minutes, 3x/week, targeted decoding/fluency or vocabulary/comprehension.
 - Tier 3 one-to-one: 20 minutes daily for students >2 grade levels behind.
 - Materials: decodable texts, repeated reading protocols, morphology instruction, and explicit comprehension strategy lessons.
- **Progress Monitoring.** Every 2–3 weeks using curriculum-based measures; groups and strategies were adjusted in real time.



- **Team Routines & Coaching.** I facilitated 20-minute data huddles every other week and modeled intervention lessons for colleagues; observation feedback cycles ran monthly.
- **Family Communication.** I sent brief progress updates with concrete at-home reading practice steps and tech tips (e.g., how to use device-based read-aloud).

Outcomes (Cohort of 72, Year-End)

- **Reading Growth.**
 - 74% met or exceeded individual growth targets on curriculum-based measures by spring (from a 19% baseline meeting fall aim lines).
 - Students assigned to Tier 3 daily one-to-one support (n=18) averaged **1.3 years** of reading growth in one school year.
- **Course Completion.**
 - ELA course pass rates for the cohort rose from **62%** (prior year) to **81%** in the intervention year.
- **Graduation Trajectory.**
 - Among juniors in the cohort, those on track for graduation increased from **57%** in the prior year to **76%** by June.
- **Engagement/Behavior.**
 - ELA-period office discipline referrals for the cohort declined by **31%**.
- **Replication.**
 - Three additional teachers adopted the lesson blueprints, adapted assessments, and Tier 2 routines the following semester, expanding reach to general education classes with push-in support.

These results reflect the synergy of design, intervention, and data routines. They also demonstrate that field-tested materials and structures can transfer—the clearest sign that the work is bigger than one classroom.

A school leader summarized the change in a letter: “Her lesson designs became a reference point for teachers beyond her own school. They were not just good practice—they became our standard practice.” (Administrative testimonial on file.)

7. Recognition and Field Impact

My work has been recognized across supervisory, peer, and independent platforms—essential for understanding field significance.

- **Independent Features.** *The National Digest* profiled my model as “a replicable approach for building inclusive classroom communities,” highlighting its transferability beyond my direct students.¹ Intrax Education featured my mentorship of colleagues and the integration of data routines into daily practice.³ A national 24-7 Press Release recognized “progress in education” tied to measurable outcomes and district adoption.²



- **District Adoption.** Adapted assessments and UDL-aligned lesson plans I authored were shared across departments, and my Tier 2 routines were incorporated into campus MTSS handbooks.
- **Professional Standing.** I hold advanced licensure (New Mexico Level Three-A Instructional Leader with Reading/Language Arts endorsement) and multiple state certifications. I have trained educators in IEP compliance, data interpretation, behavior support, and assistive technology integration.

These contributions are significant because they: (a) originated from my own instructional and programmatic designs; (b) were adopted by other educators and integrated into school-wide routines; and (c) produced documented, measurable gains at a scale extending beyond my own classroom. They address the critical need for equitable literacy and inclusion, demonstrating both replicability and sustained positive outcomes across multiple educational settings.

8. Discussion: Why This Works and How to Scale

8.1 Why the Model Works

1. **Design for Variability.** When lessons start with UDL principles, fewer students require reactive accommodation, and more time is available for intentional intervention.
2. **Timely, Targeted Reading Support.** Diagnostics prevent generic interventions; daily Tier 3 time accelerates growth for students with the largest gaps.
3. **Relentless Data Use.** Short-cycle progress monitoring and structured team analysis maintain momentum. Instruction changes when data do.
4. **Professional Learning that Sticks.** Coaching cycles and modeling move PD from theory to practice; teachers build confidence and skill.
5. **Family Partnership.** Clear, simple progress visuals and at-home strategies build continuity for practice and motivation.

8.2 Scalability and Challenges

- **Fidelity vs. Flexibility.** Core structures (screening cadence, huddle agenda, intervention time) should be non-negotiable, while materials can be localized to community culture and curriculum.
- **Staffing Constraints.** Tier 3 minutes require creative scheduling and, in some cases, paraprofessional training for supervised delivery of practice protocols.
- **Data Systems.** Schools benefit from lightweight digital tools that store progress data, graph trends, and flag students needing adjustment.
- **Sustained Coaching.** Capacity grows when districts institutionalize coaching roles and protect time for feedback cycles.

8.3 Connections to Policy Priorities



The framework aligns with **IDEA's** emphasis on measurable goals and progress reporting, **Section 504's** access requirements, and **ESSA's** shared accountability.⁴⁻⁶ It operationalizes **MTSS/RTI** expectations and responds to state **science-of-reading** legislation by ensuring systematic, explicit reading instruction and intervention.⁷⁻

9. Recommendations

For State Education Agencies

1. **Embed Inclusive Leadership Competencies** in preparation and licensure (UDL, MTSS/RTI, AT integration, data literacy).
2. **Invest in Statewide Coaching Networks** with common observation tools and feedback cycles.
3. **Provide Lightweight Data Platforms** that integrate screening, progress monitoring, IEP goals, and parent-friendly reporting.

For Districts and Schools

1. **Adopt a Simple MTSS Playbook** with fixed screening windows, intervention menus, and a 20-minute data huddle routine.
2. **Schedule Daily Tier 3 Minutes** for students with the largest gaps and train paraprofessionals to run practice protocols under teacher direction.
3. **Institutionalize UDL Lesson Design** templates and adapted assessment banks.
4. **Build AT into Routines** (text-to-speech/speech-to-text, graphic organizers, timers), not as add-ons.
5. **Run Coaching Cycles** (model → observe → feedback → re-model), with fidelity checks that are supportive rather than punitive.

For Teacher Preparation Programs

1. **Co-Teach Methods + Special Education** so generalists graduate ready to serve diverse learners.
2. **Require Data-Use Practica** using real school progress-monitoring sets and IEP goal-writing.
3. **Design Authentic AT Modules** (hands-on labs with standard tools and classroom scenarios).

For Researchers

1. **Study Fidelity and Outcomes** across sites implementing the tri-pillar model.
2. **Explore AT + UDL Synergies** on reading growth, writing fluency, and executive function.
3. **Examine Coaching Models** that best translate PD into durable instructional change.



10. Conclusion

Inclusive education is a daily practice, not a policy slogan. When schools **design for variability, provide timely reading interventions, and use data relentlessly**, students with disabilities meet ambitious goals and teachers rediscover confidence in their craft. The case study presented here, together with documented district adoption and independent recognition, shows that the model is both effective and transferable.

The record demonstrates original contributions that have produced major significance in K-12 education, including reproducible designs, measurable outcomes, and adoption across diverse settings. For policymakers and district leaders, the model offers a practical pathway to meet the obligations of IDEA, Section 504, and ESSA while advancing state literacy agendas. The moral case for inclusion has always been clear; the practical path becomes clearer when design, intervention, and data are integrated with purpose.

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