

SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL  
NEEDS: AN INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT GUIDE FOR  
RURAL K-12 EDUCATORS

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A Project  
Presented  
to the Faculty of  
California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Education

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by  
Jennifer Kimball  
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## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my loving parents Mark and Janelle, my two wonderful boys Avery and Garrison, my devoted friends Collette and Jim and that special man in my life, Chris. Their kind words, support, and unconditional love pushed me and encouraged me at exactly the times that I needed it the most. In my journey to help students with exceptional needs succeed in life, these exceptional people were helping me to succeed in my life ..... LOVE~

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## ABSTRACT

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL NEEDS: AN INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT GUIDE FOR RURAL K-12 EDUCATORS

by

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Master of Arts in Education

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Plumas Unified School District's mission statement of together is better signifies the commitment necessary by all educators to emphasize the cultural change that is required to promote and maintain equity for students with exceptional needs. Students with exceptional needs have equal educational rights to learn and work towards the same goals and standards as their peers. Research has shown that educators have concerns about their own abilities to differentiate appropriate pedagogy for the new Common Core State Standards. An instructional guide that supports K-12 educators working with students with exceptional needs will positively influence student performance in the general education setting.

This project was aimed to design an instructional support guide for K-12 educators based on the needs and limited resources of a rural Northern California school district. The instructional support guide contains sections that are relevant to the support

of instructional strategies and student success in the general education setting. The instructional guide focuses on the common needs of daily instruction in the general education setting and facilitates compliance and accountability for students with exceptional needs within Plumas Unified School District for all students.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Rural communities often face many educational challenges, and their schools are feeling the pressure of constant change produced by factors which include, but are not limited to: standard based reforms, upholding high expectations for all students, cultural diversity, student diversity, and swift technological changes. However, one very large concern effecting rural educators is the lack of funds for resources to be used for professional development training in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and differentiation of instruction (Gregory & Chapman, 2002). Historically, educator beliefs have been that students with exceptional needs are best taught in more restrictive environments. Today, many rural educators continue to have little training in the pedagogy of CCSS, and are struggling to differentiate common core curriculum appropriately in the general education setting.

Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone (2001) state that in past years, the requirements for special education students were separate from general education students. Special education's adapted instruction focused only on students' individual needs. It was understood that special education services were more important than student success in the general education classroom. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), (1997a) stated specifically for the first time, that all students, as appropriate, must have the same access to general curriculum; all students will work towards the same goals and

standards across all academic settings. Educators are continuing to search for varied and adapted approaches that will assist them in addressing CCSS and allow students with exceptional needs to demonstrate mastery of standards in the classroom and in their Individual Education Program (IEP) goals (Lohmeier, 2009).

With the new CCSS, both general and special educators are feeling the pressures of more rigorous instructional routines while having to incorporate accommodations and supports that enable students with exceptional needs to meet these new academic standards (IDEA 34 CFR 300.346, 2004a). According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2009), significant concerns are being raised in regards to both general and special educator readiness to work with students with exceptional needs. Findings from Shields et al. (2001) state that U.S. school districts have experienced an inconsistent amount of educators who are being hired with inadequate skills, and are inexperienced in the quality pedagogies required to teach standards. They shared that lower achieving schools are five times more likely to have an under prepared teacher teaching students who are already academically below their peers. Standards-based reforms have created an expected set of high standards for students with exceptional needs. CCSS have shifted the quality of special education and individual education program (IEP) development for special educators and other related service providers. Students with exceptional needs are now expected to work towards the same rigor of standards as their peers, and at the same time, educators are being held to rigid federal and national standards that have not been addressed in previous education preparedness programs. Educators are facing challenges within their own scope of schooling, are expected to be highly qualified, as well as being resourceful in their pedagogies of research based practices for all students according to Konrad et al. (2014).

It has become exceptionally important to the researcher to become the voice for these rural students with exceptional needs and advocate for them, their right to participate and learn equal to that of their peers across all educational settings. The researcher also hopes to help encourage, change perceptions regarding the concept of welcoming all students in an inclusive setting, and help bridge the gap of equal expectations. Past studies have shown that general and special educators' perceptions and attitudes regarding inclusive practices within the general education setting have been viewed as poor. Teacher programs must include suggestions and practices on how to better manage and work with students with exceptional needs for better success in the classroom (Dingle, Falvey, Givner, & Haager, 2004).

The situation of rural Plumas Unified School District, in Northern California, is a prime example of poor perceptions regarding inclusive practices. The cultural approach in Plumas Unified has been to emphasize that the most appropriate learning environment for special education students is in the special education setting. There is a need for general education teachers to become more informed and confident in working with students with exceptional needs in the general education setting.

Most general educators are unaware of the federal laws that govern and regulate the universal procedures for the education of students with exceptional needs. These laws provide a child with a disability, the right to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive educational setting (LRE). As stated before, educators are expected to have the same expectations for students with exceptional needs to master the CCSS. According to Haagar & Vaughn (2013) these required expectations create a great challenge for special needs students who have skill deficits. These deficits generally place them well below grade level achievement standards when compared to their peers. Without appropriate teaching

practices, support to access foundational skills, strategies specific to accommodations or modifications, and differentiation of instruction to accommodate the CCSS, these students will continue to struggle. It is imperative that educators improve their knowledge of academic content that is aligned with the CCSS by providing explicit and evidence based practices to help supplement the needs these deficits create for students with disabilities. According to Saunders, Bethune, Spooner, & Browder (2013), students with disabilities who demonstrate skill deficits, are capable of making progress towards CCSS with evidence-based instructional supports which promote problem solving.

#### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project is to create an instructional support guide for K-12 general and special educators. It also targets to reduce the lack of information and resources available to rural educators who are seeking to increase student success in the classroom. The instructional support guide will contain 11 sections that address key themes to support instruction and student performance. Each section will contain relevant instructional support strategies, background information, and procedural steps educators can consider when working with students with exceptional needs in the general education classroom. The information it contains is relevant to the basic understanding and implementation of academic supports for students with learning disabilities. It will reinforce basic teaching pedagogy for educators with the objective of improved student success and will offer suggestions for student monitoring tools that could be used to help assess student growth so that teachers may see if students are retaining information and if learning is taking place at an appropriate pace to allow for student success. Possible tools may include, but are not limited

to: curriculum based measures, the student information sheet, graphing, and other teacher created assessment and testing templates. The 11 sections will include:

- designated categories of disabilities;
- possible characteristics of learning disabilities;
- Student Study Team (SST) guidelines;
- eligibility steps before special education;
- basic Individual Education Program (IEP) content;
- deconstruction of standards;
- accommodations for enhancing instruction;
- modifications for enhancing instruction;
- classroom friendly supports;
- focus support suggestions for student success; and
- Plumas County connections to useful resources for teachers

The instructional support guide is designed as a reference support for educators. It will encourage awareness for general and special educators while promoting considerations of teacher accountability within Plumas Unified School District. Many of the small rural school sites within Plumas County have only one education specialist on site. These education specialists have large caseloads and teach classes with mild and severe students together. Often times, this makes it very difficult to assist and support the general education teachers when immediate help is needed. An instructional support guide focusing on common needs in the general education setting would be very beneficial. The district wide implementation of the instructional support guide will: help assist, support, build on teacher

efficacy, prompt previously learned teacher preparation skills, and suggest strategies and best practices for special education students in the general education setting. Students with exceptional needs have abilities, and require additional support in the general education setting. Educators sometimes need guidance and support to help with the improvement of student outcomes in the general education classroom. The intention is to assist educators in Plumas Unified School District with a useful, supplemental curriculum support tool that aids in differentiating daily instructional routines that will support students who have exceptional needs in the general education setting.

#### Scope of the Project

The intended audience is K-12 general and special educators, other educational staff members such as paraprofessionals, and Plumas Unified Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA). PUSD SELPA may use the instructional guide for purposes of guidance, support, and supplemental information for other educational entities such as the Special Day Preschool or any other education agency looking to support and increase academic achievements for all students. The instructional content will be systematically addressed and will help support K-12 students. Educational settings for implementing instructional strategies and supports will include primary grades, upper elementary, junior high and senior high.

The dissemination of this instructional support guide will promote and suggest ways to support adjustments in: difficulties pertaining to differentiation of curriculum through accommodations and modifications, making environmental adjustments in the

classroom, inform the user about the guiding components of a standards-based IEP, as well as providing a reference tool for teachers to use to establish better student outcomes.

### Significance of the Project

Plumas Unified School District's consultant was asked to conclude if the district was significantly over identifying students with disabilities as compared to the state average. The consultant found that the current rate for K-12 is currently at 14 percent in the identification of students receiving special education services (Gillaspie, 2015). It was determined that the district's over identification was due, to a lack of teacher training in general education interventions and inefficient SST processes (Gillaspie, 2015). These district wide inefficiencies have been serving solely as a means to enter special education programs. Gillaspie (2015) reports that appropriate differentiated instruction and intervention programs have not been implemented consistently to support at-risk students and their success in the general education classroom. He states that:

There is no one monitoring the referral process, therefore referrals are made and the assessment plan timelines are started. The director of the SELPA is not involved in reviewing referrals prior to finalization. Presently, the referral process is the gate way into special education, without prior interventions conducted for the student. (Section IV, p. 17)

Presently, there is a necessity for change within Plumas Unified School District. Common Core State Standards, and continued mandated compliance regulations, have created new specific and rigorous academic outcomes for all students. The significance of this project is threefold. First the instructional support guide is intended to be informational, instructional and assistive for K-12 general educators while also aiming to improve compliance, adjust general educator perceptions of the roles of special educators, and

redefine the definition of student equity in the general education setting. The instructional support guide will help ensure that there is instructional accountability to meet the diverse needs of all students, identify best practices, and isolate appropriate and diverse instructional strategies for students with disabilities. Lastly, this instructional support guide will contribute to the instructional needs of a very rural Northern California school district that is financially struggling with limited funds for additional teaching resources and instructional trainings. On a larger scale, other rural school districts in and beyond California may find sections, or all of the project, useful for integrating best practices for both general and special educators.

#### Limitations of the Project

This project is designed to assist and support general and special educators in finding different ways to differentiate curriculum for students with exceptional needs through: curriculum accommodations and modifications, evidence based practices, classroom environments, and to help facilitate a better understanding of standard-based IEPs. Given that students with exceptional needs have specific needs, and numerous struggling general education students have not had a specific deficit identified, it is instructionally clear that what educationally promotes one student may not work for another. Another challenge is, not all general educators are accepting of students with exceptional needs and are resistant to changes in the delivery of their daily instruction. Many general educators feel overly pressured with the rigor of new common core curriculum and believe strongly that differentiation of instruction for students with exceptional needs belongs to the special educator. These teachers often believe strongly that instruction for these students should be delivered in the special education setting. Therefore, without the directive from

administration, information and suggestions discussed in the research presented may not assist general educators, special educators and students in the way that it was intended to be used for. The instructional support guide is a living document and will change as instructional considerations, district requests for additional instructional coaching, new curriculum adoptions and specific needs for teacher training on special education practices increase.

### Definition of Terms

#### CCSS

“... is a historic effort designed to advance nationwide education reform... The ultimate goal is for all American children to graduate from high school ready for college, career pathways, and success in a global economy.” Common Core State Standards are learning objectives which show what students are to learn in grades K-12. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p.1)

#### EBP

Evidence-Based interventions are practices or programs that have evidence showing through research they are effective in producing results and improved outcomes. There are four tiers of evidence. (California Department of Education, Evidence-Based Interventions Under the ESSA, 2017)

#### EHA

Education for the Handicapped Act of 1970, (P.L 91-230), was the first federal law that required special educators to develop Individual Education Programs (IEP). In 1975,

EHA became EAHCA (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, (P.L. 94-142), entitled “students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education.” IEP documentation originally focused on compliance with new laws of pre-service and in-service training of educators on how to write an IEP (Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2007, pp. 23-35).

### FAPE

Free and Appropriate Public Education at no cost to parents when in conformity of an IEP. FAPE safeguards the education of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that get federal monetary assistance, including federal funds. Section 504 says:

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States . . . shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504, 34 C.F.R. Part 104)

### IDEA

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1990 began the process of equity and assurance that all children with disabilities would have access to general education curriculum standards in the least restrictive environment (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (1997b), Pub. L. No. 105-17).

### IDEIA

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 is the revision of IDEA 1990. It made changes regarding the requirements of: highly qualified special education teachers, reductions in specific paperwork, disabled student participations in state and district assessments, compliance towards student performances, appropriate education for homeless students, new requirements for procedural safeguards, modifications for parents in regards to private school placement, implementations of early intervention services for

non-disabled children, and additional services for children past 2 years of age (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (2004b), Pub. L. No.108-446, Part b).

### IEP

Individualized Education Program is a federally and state regulated document. An IEP is a collaborative document from parents, school staff members, and specialized service providers. Team members establish from comprehensive data collection and test results, individually based goals and objectives that are to be provided to a student who is determined eligible for special education services or other related services. An IEP addresses a student's unique and individual learning needs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (1997a), Part b, 300.341-300.350).

### LRE

Least Restrictive Environment refers to a service that is provided in the least restrictive or unjust way so as not to deny opportunities and equality of students with disabilities. Districts are required to educate students with disabilities in the general education setting along with their non-disabled peers with the appropriate aids and supports. The LRE is always the first placement option (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (2004a), 34 C.F.R. 300.346(a) (3)).

### NCLB

No Child Left Behind 2003 was deemed one of the biggest changes in public education. It stated that all children had the right to equal, high quality educational opportunities at both state and local levels (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, PL 107-110).

### PUSD

Plumas Unified School District, located in Northern California in Plumas County.

SAI

Specialized Academic Instruction is the specific instruction from special educators to ensure that students with disabilities are accessing the general education curriculum. SAI is the supports, modifications, and adaptations of curriculum needed by the student to make academic progress. SAI may be provided in the special education setting or in the general education setting.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Individualizing new Common Core State Standards, best practices and supports for students with exceptional needs while also balancing the needs of other students, is part of every teacher's scope and sequence of daily routines. For both general and special educators this requires a skill set of additional knowledge and tools that go way beyond the basics of their foundational learning of years past. Reauthorization of IDEA and new Common Core State Standards have added to the increasing rigors of schools, and the assurance that they are equitable in meeting the needs of all students

The content of these literature reviews target a few of the important factors that increase the success of students with exceptional needs in the general education setting. The reviews encourage the awareness and understanding of having successful, competent students with exceptional needs in the general education setting. The review will include: an overview of learning disabilities and the specific qualifying categories used for students to become eligible for special education services, characteristics that may be considered as a learning disability, the special education process for eligibility, documentation for establishing standards-based individual education programs, and considerations on the Common Core State Standards and teacher preparation programs.

## Learning Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that a specific learning disability is an impairment of multiple basic psychological processes. These impairments include using or understanding language that is spoken or written. These impairments can create mild to moderate problems in spelling, listening, speaking, thinking, writing, math calculations, or reading. The term specific learning disability encompasses perceptual disabilities, dyslexia and traumatic brain injury, but does not take into account learning problems that have resulted primarily from visual, hearing or developmental, emotional, motor disabilities, environmental, economic or cultural disabilities (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2001). Horowitz, Rawe, & Whittaker (2017) report that one in five students have a learning or an attention concern, and that one out of every 16 students will have an individualized education program.

A learning disability does not necessarily mean a deficit in intelligence, however it can severely, moderately, or even mildly weaken the ability of the brain to process, receive, analyze or store various input and output forms of information (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2001). Children with learning disabilities have challenges that are not due to differences or preferences, but are due to actual brain based disorders that adversely affect the brain function and structure (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). It is inaccurate to assume that a child will grow out of their disability, work harder, or become more flexible in their learning. Learning disabilities do not go away, they are always present (Kane, 2012).

Many students are identified with more than one learning disability. Students can have disabilities that impede their ability to focus or concentrate, while other disabilities cause deficits in reading, writing, spelling and math (Project IDEAL, 2013). There is no one

cause for learning disabilities, but research shows that there are factors such as genetic influences, brain development, and environmental impacts. Learning disabilities are being researched continually by scientists' to understand the connections between genetics and learning disabilities and related disorders that occur frequently within family members (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). This type of research will offer hope and direction for families and educators worldwide.

Learning disabilities are typically characterized by a significant difference between academic achievement and overall IQ. Some children exhibit a wide range of deficits in reading comprehension, writing, spoken language, or the ability to reason. Perceptual deficiencies, inattention and hyperactivity can also be related to learning disabilities. In addition, poor test performances, motor skill weakness, challenging impulsive behaviors, difficulty with daily tasks, and low tolerance can also be characteristics. It is not uncommon for children to display one or more of the warning signs, but when there are several characteristics over extended periods of time, a learning disability can be expected especially when it corresponds with no apparent progress in academic achievement or other areas of learning or behavior. When a child has not responded appropriately to high-quality instruction and low academic performances have ruled out environmental, psychiatric or medical concerns then, it is important to consider a probable learning disability (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

According to Samuels (2016), the US Department of Education's 2014 student with disabilities count ages 6 through 21, revealed there are 5.83 million students with exceptional needs. Nationally, forty two percent of students with disabilities are getting special education support services for learning disabilities. Child count is a required annual

report that every state must file. The data obtained from states, are policy sensitive and encourage or discourage the identification of students with disabilities. The most recent study done in 2016 indicated that federal funding continues to be poor and that of the 40% promised to special education, only about 16% of the funds are actually being used (Horowitz et al., 2017).

For most students, education is implemented by a highly qualified general educator. This teacher teaches skills and knowledge sets that are necessary for adulthood. Individual needs are generally met without any other interventions in the general education setting. However, when a child has an atypical need that is considered outside of the expertise of a general education teacher, then it becomes necessary for a special educator to assist in the learning of that student.

Pierangelo & Giuliani (2001) describe that in 1975, special education services were put forth under legislation, Public Law 94-142 and labeled the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA). This legislation was the first “federal procedural safeguards for children with disabilities and their parents” (p.4). EHA (1975) defined the foundation for what is now, the current special education guideline of practices, amendments, and reauthorizations that have changed who is eligible and, the ways that special educators provide services (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2001). In 1997 and 2004 other reauthorization and amendments to PL 94-142 were established that changed the existing name to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, IDEIA (2004a) created a specific list of qualifying conditions to define more specifically, who is eligible for a free and appropriate education (FAPE) and the qualifying criteria for eligibility for special education services.

The California Education Code has a list of eligibility categories and term guidelines that give states a list of qualifying definitions describing who is eligible for services under special education law. These regulated terms provide definitions that specify qualifying criteria for eligibility. These categories include:

- autism;
- orthopedic impairment;
- other health impairment;
- specific learning disability;
- speech or language impairment;
- traumatic brain injury;
- visual impairment, including blindness;
- deaf-blindness;
- deafness;
- emotional disturbance;
- hearing impairment;
- intellectually disabled; and
- multiple disabilities. (Title V, Section 3030 (b))

One crucial influence on the educational success of students with learning disabilities is the early detection of their disability. When identified early and remediated with supports and interventions, there is a greater chance a student will not develop a secondary impairment. Secondary impairments may include: loss of self-confidence, avoidance, distractibility or emotional pressures which can sometimes make the identity of

the disability unclear. Early identification can help a student develop the needed skills and strategies to live a successful life and academic achievement. The US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health (2017) states that even though a learning disability will last a life time, it can be greatly lessened when a student is given the appropriate educational supports and high quality instruction. When this high quality instruction builds on student strengths and establishes coping strategies for specific weaknesses, then there is an increased likelihood of better school success

According to Pierangelo & Giuliani (2001), the following delayed characteristics in these specific areas may be considered, but are not limited to a potential learning disability:

- written language: writing, spelling, reading, learning letters, letter reversals, transposition, substitutions, or letter inversions, slow in learning root words, prefix and suffixes, doesn't like to read aloud, evades written assignments;
- mathematics: mathematic functions, or comprehension of basic concepts/facts, confusion of number sequences, or mathematical signs, has trouble with word problems;
- spoken language: inconsistencies in listening and speaking, delays, or known disorders, pronunciation problems, rhyming, slow vocabulary progress, or confuses simple words;
- memory: slow or poor ability to remember facts or new skills, weak memory skills, poor word or letter memorization, poor comprehension;

- attention: lack of or short span, restless, easily distracted, pays great attention to detail,
- reasoning: difficulty with sequencing and adding thoughts together, summarizing things, open-ended questions;
- performance: fluctuating, inconsistent performance achievements, works slowly,
- temporal: difficulties in telling time;
- discrimination: failure to recognize the difference between letters and their sounds;
- motor difficulties: slow gross or fine motor skills, poor coordination, inclined to accidents, fist or tight pencil grip, poor handwriting;
- spatial relationships: poor visualization of how certain objects orient in space;
- social skills: difficulties interacting with peers, trouble making friends, trouble interpreting other people's body language or facial expressions;
- left or right hand dominance inconsistencies; and
- behavior: inappropriate, poor, difficulties with transitions or change, impulsiveness, planning difficulties (p.14).

The ultimate goal for all general and special educators is to assist children with learning disabilities and to help them become skillful at circumventing learning challenges and the daily impacts of their disabilities. These strategies enable them to demonstrate strengths, and assist in leveling the playing field so, the disability does not define who they are, but allows them to accomplish everyday tasks and goals. As Cortiella & Horowitz (2014) stated, "learning disabilities are not a prescription for failure. With the right kinds of

instruction, guidance and support, there are no limits to what individuals with learning disabilities can achieve” (p. 3).

### Special Education Process for Eligibility

The Code of Federal Regulation, Title 34: Education’s definition of special education is stated as:

Special education means *specially designed instruction*, at no cost to the parents, to meet the *unique needs of a child* with a disability... Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the *content, methodology, or delivery of instruction*. (IDEA, 2004c)

Federal law governs and regulates the education of students with disabilities.

There is a progression of universal procedures used when providing a child with a disability the right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE). Project IDEAL (2013) a group of people dedicated to the process of informing and educating others, describes what the seven different procedural phases look like and what is required when managing the steps before special education services and eligibility are deemed appropriate (FAPE):

- A typical need: An atypical and consistent need is exhibited by the child, the recognition of a large discrepancy in academics, or other aspects of the child’s education indicating that there is a need for additional academic support. During this phase parents and teachers gather together to discuss the specific problem and evaluate whether or not the problem could simply be managed with a cooperative plan between parent and teacher. Here the teacher collects data and student work samples for a specified amount of time while instructional strategies are being implemented in the classroom.

- **Pre-referral:** This is more formal, and is used to provide more than just simple accommodations for the student in the classroom. This phase is led by a Student Study Team (SST) that helps to identify and develop alternative instructional strategies for the student in the classroom. These strategies focus on using high-quality instruction in the core curriculum and is taught to all students by the general education teacher. The intent of the student study team is to implement interventions in the general education classroom that will promote academic success without special education. If these interventions are not successful, then the team will refer the student for formal assessments.
- **Referral for special education evaluation:** If the student is still experiencing difficulties despite classroom interventions, then personnel may ask for a special education referral. This is the launch of the regulated process to determine eligibility for special education services. It is mandatory to obtain parent signatures for consent before formal testing begins.
- **Evaluation process:** In this phase, formal educational assessments are given by various professionals who will bring different perspectives of the child's needs. Assessments given to the child can be from a variety of service providers; education specialist, low incidence specialist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, behavior specialist, or a school psychologist. Informal observations and medical records can also be used for additional information. IDEA states that any child referred for special education evaluations is to receive a comprehensive, nondiscriminatory, and multi-factored evaluation in which the

school district is given 60 days to complete. Assessment administrators must not be biased towards race, language, disability, or culture and must give the assessments in the child's home language to provide the most accurate representation of the student's present level of performances.

- **Eligibility (FAPE):** Special education eligibility means that a child with a disability will have the right to FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education). Special education is one type of service that meets this requirement from IDEA. The team has 30 days after all evaluations are complete to determine eligibility. A child is eligible if there is evidence of a disability defined by IDEA, which is negatively impacting academic performance, or when special education services are needed to assist access to core curriculum. If eligibility is deemed necessary, then the child will need special education, and a formal Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be developed to provide specialized academic instruction.
- **Individual Education Program (IEP) and Implementation:** The IEP is a legal document prepared by team members for the parents, and it specifies special education services that are to be provided for the student and the supports to be used to accommodate the identified disability. An IEP team consists of: parents and legal guardians, one or more general education teacher, a special educator, other special service providers, an acting administration who is capable of authorizing resources, a school psychologist, the child when appropriate, and other individuals the parent may ask to attend the meeting. All team members are knowledgeable and can advocate for the child. The IEP defines what services will be provided by the local district agency and includes:

- a. A summary that describes the child's present performance strengths and weaknesses in the classroom, on formal assessments, and the qualifying criteria that states why the child will now be receiving special education services.
- b. Eligibility and duration dates define the start dates of the goals in the IEP and when the goals end. This is generally put in place during one academic school year and are monitored and updated as the year progresses. Included in this if needed, are any instructional assistance that would assist the child in making progress on goals such as, assistive technology, braille, or items for the hearing impaired.
- c. Necessary special education transportation.
- d. Extended school year services.
- e. Opportunities to participate along with nondisabled peers in nonacademic activities.
- f. Frequency and procedures used to report on and maintain IEP goals include; measurable annual goals, evaluations, procedures to meet annual goals, and benchmark objectives that focus on the specific goals. Documentation of mastery for the benchmark and annual goals is required as it provides the proof and helps drive needed services. Next, is the frequency and amount time in specialized academic instruction (SAI), other related services, location and responsible providers needed to achieve these specific goals and short term objectives.

- g. If behavior is a concern, a functional behavioral assessment is collected and a behavior intervention plan (BIP) is created and implemented.
  - h. A statement of the least restrictive environment (LRE) and educational setting that states the percentages of time in and out of general education.
  - i. Signature page signed by all participating and present team members which will provide parental consent for the implementation of the IEP.
- **Reevaluation:** It is a requirement that the IEP team meet annually to assess the goals set the prior year, evaluate the existing document, and work on the development of a new annual IEP. Both positive and negative aspects of the student's present levels are discussed regarding current special education services and other educational setting for the new IEP. Formal evaluations are given every three years, however the team can decide to conduct assessments sooner if it is believed to be necessary. The IEP is a living document that can be amended to meet any challenges or changes that may arise at any time during the academic school year (Project IDEAL, 2013).

#### Documentation Considerations of Standards-Based IEPs

In 1975 federal law required special educators to develop individual education programs (IEP). An IEP is an important component that will ensure the best educational outcomes for a student with exceptional needs by promoting the most effective teaching practices, learning outcomes, and all around student success. IEP documentation originally focused on compliance with new laws of pre-service and in-service training for educators on

how to write an IEP (Mandlawitz, 2006). According to Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, (2001) in the past, student IEP goals were generally not directly related to academic instruction or the support that was occurring in the general education setting. Instead special education goals were general, inconsistent, and unrelated (for instance, “Sarah will develop better self-help skills”). During that time, very few educators believed that students with disabilities would benefit from general education curriculum and instruction. Students were thought to best meet their individual needs when working on their own goals and objectives using personalized curriculum that was not part of the general curriculum according to Thompson, Thurlow, & Whetstone (2001). These past beliefs resulted in separate, useless IEPs, and non-existent curriculum for students with disabilities.

Today, special educators have a wider range of documentation responsibilities that extend further than just the appropriate language of IEP goals and objectives. IEPs include educational needs, supports, and services that are the core of IDEA. IEPs are the educational framework for a free and appropriate education, and need to reflect CCSS (FAPE) (Anderson et al. 2002). IEP teams include parents, students, administration, special education, general education teachers and other service providers who are required to document special education services and supports for students with disabilities. New standard-based IEPs have shifted the considerations and decision making of IEP documentation from thinking about a student’s deficits, to focusing on ways to assist these students and their special needs. This support structure helps students work towards achieving the same high educational standards as their peers and allows them access to demonstrate mastery of a standard (Thompson, Thurlow, Quenemoen, Esler, & Whetstone, 2001). All team members are responsible for advocating and raising the bar for students with

special needs and as Thompson et al., (2001) suggests, thorough IEP decision making, addressing standards and assessments, will safeguard that students with disabilities participate and demonstrate mastery of standards. The guiding purpose of this discussion is to bring about a clearer understanding of standards-based IEPs and how it will support students' with disabilities in achieving the same high standards as general education students in place of the parallel programs of the past. IEPs are not to merely define the instructional curriculum of a student, but prioritize what students need to master and how they will access broader academic content (Courtade & Browder, 2011).

A well aligned IEP to state standards will: promote academic instruction and access to grade-level content, refer to standards that determine a student's grade level expectations, guide team members in understanding what the student is expected to learn, and lastly, will be a means of connecting and building gaps between general education curriculum and student deficits. Special educators are expected to develop and support standards-based IEPs. They must look in-depth at each grade level standard, understand what it contains, and how to align goals to specific standards. The close consideration of CCSS and IEP goals identifies; the appropriate learning strategies, implements clear consistent learning goals, and helps support the shift from answer getting to problem solving. The alignment of goals to state standards creates an opportunity to look closely at the curriculum being taught, and at the specific educational needs that arise daily from a student's disability. It constructs a balanced curriculum, bridges specific learning concepts to be used, and allows for meaningful and applicable IEP goals (Lohmeier, 2009).

Standard-based IEPs are framed by state standards and ensure that there is instructional accountability for students with special needs. It helps to ensure that progress,

improvement and exposure of goals are progressing towards achieving grade level state standards. These standard-based goals are designed to establish strategies and focus on those priorities that students will need to access the general education curriculum (Courtade & Browder, 2011). It is important to remember that alignment of IEPs to state standards does not necessarily mean only using the standard by itself to determine a targeted goal, nor should educators assume that students with disabilities will only work on grade level curriculum. The integration of IEP goals and state standards will require administrators, districts, and special educators to; become more responsible, accountable for appropriate instruction, and engage in high quality teaching pedagogies that are compliant with state and federal laws (Lohmeier, 2009).

A standards-based IEP document contains in the goals, grade level content standards that are used for the critical focus of IEP development. As mentioned before, in the past, critical focus was centered on basic “academic access and functional skills” which often had little to do with grade level content standards (Thompson et al., 2001, p. 5). Team members must take into consideration that a standards-based goal does not necessarily mean a student is working at grade level in the specified content area. The standards-based goal is created to help support and demonstrate evidence by the student and that they are working towards grade level expectations and also that, grade level instruction is being provided. According to Marla Holbrook (2007), there are seven essential steps that educators should consider, and are necessary to set the stage for high quality standards-based IEPs:

1. Selection and consideration of the specific grade level content standard. What is most essential to the acceleration of the student’s progress in general education?

2. The examination of past and present levels of student data to help determine where the student's current functional levels are, and to locate gaps in skill sets and knowledge. Were previous lessons taught aligned with grade level standards? Were appropriate instructional accommodations given, and where they evidence based?
3. What is already known about the student's strengths and weaknesses? What were the student's responses to academic instruction? What types of interventions have been put in place? How well is the student participating in the general education setting and what was used to develop the academic present levels and independent performance? Considerations and data are taken from previous IEPs, how did this effect learning, and was the student able to demonstrate mastery of CCSS within the year?
4. Develop and break down grade level standards-based goals to enable the student to be successful within the school year. Consistent monitoring and assessments throughout the school year showing what the student has learned. What type of timeline is needed for the goal to be successful and are short-term objectives appropriate? How will the outcome of the goal be measured?
5. Assess student progress throughout the school year. How can the student demonstrate mastery for state, district and classroom assessments? Are various modalities used to assess? What methods are used to inform parents of progress?
6. What Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) will be needed, including modifications and accommodations in the general education classroom? Where other accommodations more effective, and have content and materials been modified for ease of complexity?

7. What are the most appropriate state testing options for the student? Clarify testing accommodations and modifications. Has the student received evidence-based instruction, and been exposed to grade-level standards? What are student's present levels? Is the student receiving the same instructional level as peers, and is progress toward grade-level standards being made in appropriate time? Will assessment options allow for student to demonstrate mastery (Holbrook, 2007)?

Standard-based goals must be individualized and SMART: Specific, Measurable and Meaningful, Actionable, Realistic and Relevant, Time Limited (Holbrook, 2007). An example of goal alignment is; the class is asked to read a novel and then write a report summary to demonstrate comprehension. The special education goal is not specific to writing, but to show the ability to demonstrate in different ways, his/her knowledge regarding the novel. This different modality to demonstrate mastery could be in the form of: oral reporting, video, art, drama, or the standard book report format. This type of demonstration enables a student with a disability to have an equal chance to show their knowledge of the various components of the novel such as, plot, character recognition, and setting. Any of these opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the novel being used would be an effective way of achieving that particular learning goal and would allow the teacher to maintain high expectations for what is being learned (Rose, Myer, & Gordon, 2014). IEP members are accountable for the final decision as to how a student with special needs will access the general education curriculum standards. The decision process and the core curriculum standards are the driving force for equity of all special needs students to participate in general education as required by IDEA (1997). Progressive development and teacher preparation will emphasize the importance of accountability towards grade level content in special education.

It will expose all students with special needs to: a variety of texts and content, connect standards, goals that are grade level, help to establish classroom environments, encourage a community of learners regardless of any and all disabilities, and help to establish opportunity equity in the classroom. Accountability of standards-based IEPs will establish a meaningful, professional responsibility from all educators to teach high quality and evidence based instruction to all special needs students and their peers.

### Considerations of Common Core State Standards and Teacher Preparation

The Improving Schools Act 1994, Goals 2000: Educate America Act, No Child Left Behind 2001, and the School to Work Opportunities Act 1994 (Quenemoen, 2001), were the stepping stones of school accountability for students with disabilities and their involvement in the general education setting. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (IDEA) began the process of guaranteeing that all children would have access to general education curriculum standards. The number of students with disabilities and their participation in the general education setting has continued to increase every year since the beginning of The Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (PL 94-142) (Miller, Wienke, & Friedland, 1999).

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2009) significant concerns are being raised in regards to both general and special educator readiness to work with students with disabilities. Findings from Shields et al. (2009) state that U.S. school districts have experienced an inconsistent amount of educators who are being hired under certificated, and inexperienced in quality pedagogy required to teach the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely (2015) share that special education

programs have produced a general broad certification and licensing that are possibly hindering quality teaching of CCSS. Because of this, teacher preparation programs are less likely to provide beginning special educators with training based opportunities such as: developing depth of knowledge, skill fluency, subject competency, and collaboration practices that are essential to effectively teach CCSS. Proper teacher preparedness, understanding, and the teaching of deconstruction of CCSS in teaching programs will help mitigate these concerns and result in an increase in better prepared special educators, student success, and better IEP alignment of CCSS.

Standards-based reforms have created an expected set of high standards for students with disabilities. CCSS have shifted the quality of special education and individual education program (IEP) development for special educators and other related service providers. Students with disabilities are now expected to work towards the same rigor of standards as their peers, and at the same time, educators are being held to rigid federal and national standards that have not been addressed in previous education preparedness programs. Educators are facing challenges within their own scope of schooling, and are expected to be highly qualified and resourceful in their pedagogies of research based practices for all students according to Konrad et al. (2014).

In this review, the writer takes a look at some of the literature on the insufficiency and concern towards special educators' preparedness of CCSS, and the importance of implementing standards-based individual education programs (IEP). These considerations will bring about: a better understanding regarding the outcomes for students with disabilities, the significance of CCSS teacher preparation, and a stronger understanding of what standard-based IEPs contain. The more knowledgeable and competent teachers are, the better

collaborators they will become, and the more effective they will be to build student skills, provide necessary services, and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

In 2010, the District of Columbia and 47 states replaced their current state content standards with Common Core State Standards (CCSS):

The Common Core State Standards provide clear and consistent learning goals to help prepare students for college, career, and life. The standards clearly demonstrate what students are expected to learn at each grade level, so that every parent and teacher can understand and support their learning. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

Through the implementation of specific CCSS and assessments, schools check annually to review which students are meeting grade-level expectations. Standards are intended to hold schools accountable, and students with disabilities are expected to achieve the same rigor of standards as their non-disabled peers (Courtade & Browder, 2011). The central idea of the CCSS is to increase academic and instructional rigor to promote the reduction in discrepancies between early and higher education programs for all students. Thompson et al. (2001) states that in past years, the requirements for special education students were separate from general education students. Special education's adapted instruction focused only on students' individual needs. It was understood that special education services were more important than student success in the general education classroom. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997b) stated specifically for the first time, that all students, as appropriate, must have the same access to general curriculum. All students will be working towards the same goals and standards across all academic settings.

As stated before, educators are expected to have the same expectations for students with disabilities to master the CCSS. According to Haagar & Vaughn (2013) these

required expectations create a great challenge for special needs students who have skill deficits. These deficits generally place them well below grade level achievement standards when compared to their peers. Without appropriate teaching practices, and differentiation of instruction to accommodate the CCSS, these students will continue to struggle. It is imperative that educators improve their knowledge of academic content that is aligned with the CCSS by providing explicit and evidence based practices to help supplement the needs these deficits create for students with disabilities. According to Saunders et al. (2013) on average, research results are showing that students with disabilities, who have skill deficits in reading as well as other core content areas, are capable of having CCSS success within grade level standards. Unfortunately, the CCSS do not specify for educators the teaching pedagogies or best practices needed to be implemented in the classroom for optimal student success. In a study conducted by Murphy & Marshall (2015) results indicated that the majority of special educators interviewed received little or no training in teacher preparation programs on how to address CCSS. Educators felt they lacked the expertise necessary and were hesitant to adequately deconstruct the CCSS. In an online survey given by Education Week for educators who were registered through their website, (Murphy & Marshall, 2015), only one out of ten teachers felt very prepared to teach CCSS to students with disabilities. Many educators have relied on self-teaching and other resources outside of trainings to understand the application of the CCSS for students with disabilities.

Once more, CCSS reflect for states, targeted standards in K-12 curriculum however, they lacks the how in regards to the implementation of instruction. Special educators are now even more challenged with how to assist general education teachers in rethinking how they differentiate CCSS instruction, find supports, and strategies that will

offer students with disabilities different ways to access the general curriculum. Teachers have to find improved ways for assessment practices and form clear learning objectives through the deconstructing of new state standards. By finding these improved ways of instructional implementation, teachers will be able to collect better evidence of learning, give effective feedback, and encourage all students to take ownership in their education (Konrad et al., 2014). Unfortunately, as stated by Walker-Thompson (2014) there has been a significant lack of special educator professional development and training programs in the preparation of implementing the CCSS. Most CCSS emphasis has been for general education teachers with little thought to special educators and their professional development.

Murphy and Marshall (2015) suggest from their findings that specific outcomes for special educators be addressed before exiting teacher programs. They recommend familiarization of the CCSS, development of instruction that is specific to standards, and the significance of learning how to collaborate with general education educators. Altered or new program curriculum in preparation programs must occur for there to be teacher efficacy of CCSS. Science and Mathematics Teacher Imperative (SMTI) & The Leadership Collaborative (TLC) (2011), believe that higher education will need to be more accountable in the preparation of educators to implement CCSS, and recommend the following revisions in general and special education teaching programs: (a) Revising curriculum in disciplinary departments, (b) altering the content of disciplinary courses and professional preparation coursework, (c) working in partnership with professional development programs, and (d) identify, nurturing, and sustaining high-quality field experiences that include opportunities to witness high-quality instruction that is aligned with the CCSS (pp. 3-4).

Haagar & Vaughn (2013) make the following recommendations specifically for special educators: (a) become familiar with CCSS, (b) develop instruction focusing on steps leading to specific standards, (c) work with general education teachers to develop and present strategies that can be incorporated and reinforced across educational environments, (d) identify a variety of ways students can demonstrate skill or knowledge acquisition, (e) identify the most important components of content and practice the most critical elements of the standards, (f) collaborate with colleagues about appropriate instruction, (g) establish foundational skills by using guided small groups, and (h) allow for practice opportunities (p. 10).

These specific recommendations assist educators in how to teach standards and produce improved teacher efficiency of content areas. King, (2011) also suggests: additional research on how to implement CCSS in the field, collaboration with outside agencies such as state departments to support educators at all levels, greater content knowledge of higher educators to improve teacher preparation programs, and collaboration of interventions between K-12 and higher education educators, to help struggling high school students be college ready. An example of this familiarization by a teacher in the Konrad et al. (2014) study described, the necessity of understanding the numbers and letters called standard identifiers. She learned how to deconstruct the main idea to drive her planning and incorporate specific skills into daily instruction. She describes the importance that standard topics do not need to be taught in order, just understood so that they can be taught together to support generalization of concepts. She asks questions such as: how long will it take to master a skill, are there any prerequisite skills that are needed before learning a new standard, what and how will evidence of student mastery assist teachers in their instruction, and is the

data measurable? The deconstruction, understanding, implementation of standards, and establishing clear learning goals for students with special needs is a valuable tool for teacher learning. To be a more effective educator, it is necessary to understand the multiple interpretations of the content within the standards. This understanding will enable educators to articulate targeted expectations, and implement CCSS to all students (King, 2011). When improved practices are implemented, educators become effectively clear and proficient in creating measurable goals through the deconstruction of CCSS. Improved assessment administration will also result in better measurements of student data, so all students can be exposed to high quality instruction that is personalized and aligned with the CCSS (Konrad et al., 2014).

Courtade & Browder (2011) advocate that incorporating reform initiatives have only added to the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. The success of these students depends on higher critical thinking, teacher efficacy, and well planned instructional supports through modifications, accommodations, and other services. As mentioned before, the adoption of CCSS has put a new emphasis on teacher preparation. Special educators are expected to address the new standards with little or no guidance from either districts or universities. Teacher preparation programs must determine whether or not the adoption of CCSS negates the need for new alternative aspects of teacher training programs. Although states are still determining the success of student outcomes with CCSS, multiple articles support that teacher efficacy of the CCSS relies on teacher preparation and delivery of academic instruction (Murphy & Marshall, 2015). Teachers must be engaged in both the evidence based teaching practices as well as, delivering core content aligned with IEP goals and objectives. Special educators must invest in teaching, set specific goals, and be

persistent in the learning of their students. Ideally, teachers must maintain good relationships with students, collaborate, and be resilient and reflective when their teaching is not successful. Special educators must be able to continuously adjust academic instruction while ensuring that students with special needs have full access and equal opportunities for learning along with their non-disabled peers (Walker-Thompson, 2014).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The intention of this project was to develop an instructional support guide for K-12 general and special educators when working with students who have exceptional needs. It is to be utilized in the general education setting to support students with exceptional needs. The instructional support guide will help to encourage effective teaching strategies that will positively benefit student outcomes. It will support educators with instructional suggestions to, build on teacher efficacy, support daily routine instructional strategies, and help assist educators in the implementation of adaptations for special education and at-risk students. The content used to create this instructional support guide was obtained from reviews of literature that addressed: learning disabilities and their characteristics, special education's process for eligibility, standards-based IEPs, common core state standards and teacher preparation programs, special educator class room experiences, and years of informal focus questions from PUSD general educators on how to best support special education and at-risk students in the general education setting. This instructional awareness aided in the making of this instructional support guide.

As a result of the above methods used to gather information, these subjects were considered most beneficial to the creation of this instructional support guide:

- categories of disabilities;
- possible characteristics of learning disabilities;

- student study team (SST) guidelines;
- eligibility steps before for special education;
- basic IEP content;
- deconstruction of standards goal example;
- definitions of accommodation and modification;
- instructional support suggestions for accommodations;
- instructional supports suggestions for modifications;
- classroom friendly supports;
- focus support suggestions for student success; and
- Plumas County connections to useful resources for teachers.

To begin this project, the researcher contacted her SELPA director to discuss the benefits of more support for general and special educators in the general class setting in regards to adapting curriculum for special needs students. PUSD historically has provided instructional support strictly for general instruction and very little for special education staff. PUSD's rural proximity and multiple small school settings has limited the amount of education specialists at each school site causing caseload management, remedial teaching, and large caseloads to hinder closer working relationships as well as, in class support from the education specialist. It was becoming increasingly important to the researcher to provide district wide support to establish better connections with both general and special educators, and to help them find ways to improve teacher efficacy concerning students with exceptional needs within the general education setting.

Then, the SELPA director allowed the researcher to volunteer time during the school day to travel to various sites to observe and help support general and special educators in the classroom. The focus was how to help support and guide instruction so students with exceptional needs could better access the common core curriculum. Suggestions were given on diverse ways to differentiate the curriculum by implementing accommodations and modification supports. Next, the researcher asked at staff meetings, informal questions about how teachers felt in regards to: did they feel adequately prepared in their teacher preparation classes to work with and differentiate curriculum for students with exceptional needs, what would make them feel more supported in the class setting when dealing with their special education students, would they like more training on differentiating curriculum for this population, and lastly, are the supports they are receiving from special education staff having a positive impact on them and their students?

Due to the large distances in which PUSD school sites are spread throughout the county, the researcher began to think of other options to help support staff district wide. The researcher approached the SELPA director with the idea of creating an instructional support guide in which the main goal would be to support the implementation of instructional strategies for educators in the classroom when, one to one teacher instructional help was unavailable.

For the master's program, the researcher decided that the instructional support guide would benefit all educators, and also provide positive student outcomes for those students with exceptional needs in the general education setting. The researcher focused on common questions asked by educators and insufficient knowledge of special education information such as: not knowing what disabilities qualified a student for special education

services, what were the steps taken for the special education process, what were the differences between accommodations and modifications, and what some of the characteristics of a learning disability were. The goal was to help facilitate better student outcomes by supporting instruction in the general education setting. The information and material presented in this project were designed to help answer questions about adaptations, accommodations, and support in the classroom for students with exceptional needs. While staff was always welcoming, the researcher discovered that teachers were often reluctant to implement the daily supports needed for success in the general education setting. Their preference was for the supports to be in the more restricted environment of the special education room. Teachers felt that they had not the expertise or training to work with students with exceptional needs. The goal became knowingly clearer, what was needed to help teachers. The focus needed to be on supporting instruction, and building on teacher resources such as, the use of high quality instruction and being effective teachers.

During the current 2017-2018 academic year, the researcher was asked to join the instructional coaching staff as a representative for special education. The job was to help develop support programs in instruction, inclusion, autism, and behavior for general educators and site administrators. The researcher had also been disseminating information to the community to bring about awareness of disabilities. Within the various communities, the researcher spoke at community cafés, the county picnic, community children events, and collaborated with the local Sheriff Dispatch office to gather personal information that would inform first responders of potential problems they might encounter when an emergency call went out. The information obtained was to be used so first responders may appropriately and safely respond to an emergency call with a person with a disability.

In regards to the literature review, the researcher looked closely at various peer reviewed articles, websites, books, talked with educators at staff meeting, and read journals to enrich and support the project. The information read was high quality and focused on, but was not limited to: explaining what a learning disability is, the importance of high quality teacher preparation programs, the effective use of evidence based practices and supports, IDEA, eligibility for special education and its basic process, the importance of standards-based IEP development, and the difficulties special needs students are facing with the new common core state standards.

All of these experiences contributed to the intended strength and usability of the project presented. Through this research and project, the researcher hoped to encourage: cultural change throughout Plumas Unified School District, increase accountability, maintain compliance within the general education setting, provide student access to the least restrictive environment, and build on collaborative skills between general and special educators to benefit and create increased academic outcomes for students with exceptional needs.

## CHAPTER IV

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

Federal law has governed and regulated the education of students with disabilities since 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA). In 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations and amendments were made to PL 94-142 changing the name to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA, 1997b) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act in 2004 (IDEA, 2004a). These laws have defined the foundation for what is now, the current special education guideline of practices, have changed who is eligible, and the procedures that special educators are to use when providing services to students with exceptional needs. These laws also guided the creation of this instructional support guide. All of the content contained within represents documentation information and instructional support strategies that enhance and support the guideline regulations for students with exceptional needs and their right to have a free and appropriate education in the least restricted environment.

The ultimate goal for all general and special educators is to assist children with learning disabilities and to help them become skillful at circumventing learning challenges and the daily impacts of their disabilities. These strategies enable students to demonstrate strengths, and assist in leveling the playing field so their disability does not define who they

are, but allows them to accomplish everyday tasks and goals. The instructional support guide offers suggestions and implementation strategies that hopefully will promote best practices and equity for all students.

### Conclusions

The review of the literature revealed a common thread that repeated itself during this research. Overall, there are significant concerns about the readiness of educators to work with students with exceptional needs. The literature concludes the importance of teacher readiness and the necessity to develop a deeper depth of knowledge and practical experience essential to teach CCSS while at the same time, maintaining the same high expectations for all students.

Over time, the experiences of the researcher included: conversations, instructional coaching, community awareness, questions and collaborations with education specialists and general educators. All have assisted in the development and methodology of this instructional support guide. The information obtained from reviewing relevant literature also contributed to the basic understanding, methodology, and implementation of academic supports within this project.

The instructional support guide will assist rural educators with relevant instructional strategies, and information they can consider when working with students with exceptional needs in the general education setting. The creation of this guide reinforces basic teaching pedagogy, increases accountability, and offers instructional suggestions to promote student success and growth in the least restricted environment. Through appropriate supports, differentiation of daily instruction, and a change in school culture, it is more likely that

students with exceptional needs will be equally successful as their peers when given equal opportunity to access curriculum.

### Recommendations

During this research project, the researcher saw with more understanding and clarity, how overwhelmed general educators must feel with the rigors of new state standards and having to find new ways to differentiate instruction for students with exceptional needs. While it is important to always implement instructional best practices in any educational environment for all students, the researcher recognized more clearly the importance of the following recommendations in the field of education:

1. Continue monitoring progress of teacher preparation programs. Evaluate whether or not the curriculum and related instruction is sufficient enough to prepare new teachers on how to differentiate CCSS instructional pedagogies for students with exceptional needs.
2. Focus on field experiences in teacher preparation programs with this student population so that educators may gain more confidence and feel more successful with implementing instructional practices and interventions with diverse learners with a wide range of practices.
3. Encourage better hiring practices within teacher preparation programs for faculty who have more skill sets and practical experience in working with students with exceptional needs.
4. Offer more in depth special education preparation classes on writing standards-based IEPs and the deconstruction of standards for students with exceptional needs.

5. Take advantage of allocated funding from school districts for continuing education opportunities that are aligned with supporting teacher trainings for IEP goal writing, assessment of skills for mastery of CCSS, evidence based practices, and differentiation of instruction to promote the continued success of all students.
6. Develop a similar instructional support guide for non-certificated personnel to be implemented in other programs for students such as; after school programs, tutoring facilities, or parent facilitated programs.
7. Continue further research and collection of evidence based practices for self-regulation in the classroom and its effects on student outcomes.

Every student has different and individual needs and finding exactly the right academic support is important for student success. Different approaches help both the learner and the educator acquire skills and knowledge that encourage effective classroom practices and promotes the success of the diverse and individualized learning of all students. The researcher hopes that this project will provide direction for those that work in the field of education, or other such programs that facilitate the learning of all students.

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## APPENDIX

**Supporting Students and Students with  
 Exceptional Needs:  
 An Instructional Support Guide  
 For Rural K-12 Educators**  
 By Jennifer Kimball

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# INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) specified for the first time, that all students, as appropriate, must have the same access to general curriculum, and be working towards the same goals and standards across all academic settings. Different approaches of instruction are best for diverse students, and different methods of presentation of instruction actively build on and engage the strengths and weaknesses of each student.

The intention of this instructional support guide is to assist educators in Plumas Unified School District with a useful, supplemental curriculum support tool that aids in differentiating daily instructional routines to support K-12 students and students with exceptional needs in the general education setting. Contained within are instructional support strategies, background information, and procedural steps educators can consider when working with K-12 students and students with exceptional needs. The instructional support guide focuses on common needs in the general education setting that may be considered beneficial to the improvement of student success. It suggests strategies, and best practices for all students in the general education setting, along with accommodations and modifications that may enable K-12 students and students with exceptional needs to better meet new academic standards.

## HOW TO USE THE GUIDE

This instructional support guide is intended to be a quick reference for educators. It is designed to assist and support general and special educators in finding various ways to support and differentiate curriculum for K-12 students and students with exceptional needs through: curriculum accommodations and modifications, classroom environment changes, and help facilitate a better understanding of standard-based IEPs. The support cards are represented in page form, but the actual support guide will consist of 24, 5 x 8 card stock which will be attached on a ring to allow for quick and simple access of use. Simply locate the card title that may be of assistance to you to support a student, then flip it up to locate supports or suggestions to increase student success in the general education setting. In addition, on some of the cards, you may find the references helpful for further resources and recommendations to increase teacher success!

## CATEGORIES OF DISABILITIES

### 1

#### **California Code of Regulations**

- (a) “A child shall qualify as an individual with exceptional needs, pursuant to Education Code section 56026, if the results of the assessment as required by Education Code sections 56320 demonstrate that the degree of the child’s impairment as described in subdivisions (b) (1) through (b) (13) requires special education in one or more of the program options authorized by Education Code section 56361. The decision as to whether or not the assessment results demonstrate that the degree of the child’s impairment requires special education shall be made by the IEP team, including personnel in accordance with Education Code section 56341(b). The IEP team shall take into account all the relevant material which is available on the child. No single score or product of scores shall be used as the sole criterion for the decision of the IEP team as to the child’s eligibility for special education.”

- Autism
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other Health Impairment (OHI)
- Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment, including blindness
- Deaf-blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional Disturbance (ED)
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectually Disabled (ID)
- Multiple Disabilities

(5 CCR § 3030. Eligibility Criteria)

**2**

## DELAY CHARACTERISTICS OF DISABILITIES

3

### “(10) **Specific learning disability--**

(i) **General.** Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(ii) **Disorders not included.** Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.”

(34 CFR § 300.8. Child with a Disability)

3

### Characteristics of Delays to Consider

- **Written Language:** Writing, spelling, reading, learning letters, letter reversals, transposition, substitutions, or letter inversions, slow in learning root words, prefix and suffixes, doesn't like to read aloud, evades written assignments;
- **Mathematics:** Mathematic functions, or comprehension of basic concepts/facts, confusion of number sequences, or mathematical signs, has trouble with word problems;
- **Spoken Language:** Inconsistencies in listening and speaking, delays, or known disorders, pronunciation problems, rhyming, slow vocabulary progress, or confuses simple words;
- **Memory:** Slow/poor ability to remember facts, or new skills, weak memory skills, poor word or letter memorization, comprehension;

4

- **Attention:** Lack of or short span, restless, easily distracted, pays great attention to detail;
- **Reasoning:** Difficulty with sequencing and adding thoughts together, summarizing things, doesn't understand open-ended questions;
- **Performance:** Fluctuating, inconsistent performance achievements, works slowly;
- **Temporal:** Difficulties telling time;
- **Discrimination:** Failure to recognize the difference between letters and their individual sounds;
- **Motor Difficulties:** Slow gross or fine motor skills, poor coordination, inclined to accidents, fist or tight pencil grip, poor handwriting;

4

- **Spatial Relationships:** Inability to visualize how objects are positioned in space;
- **Social Skills:** Difficulties interacting with peers, trouble making friends, trouble interpreting other people's body language or facial expressions;
- **Left or Right Hand Dominance Inconsistencies;** and
- **Behavior:** Inappropriate, or difficulties with transitions or change, impulsiveness, planning difficulties.

List adapted from (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2001, pp.14-15)

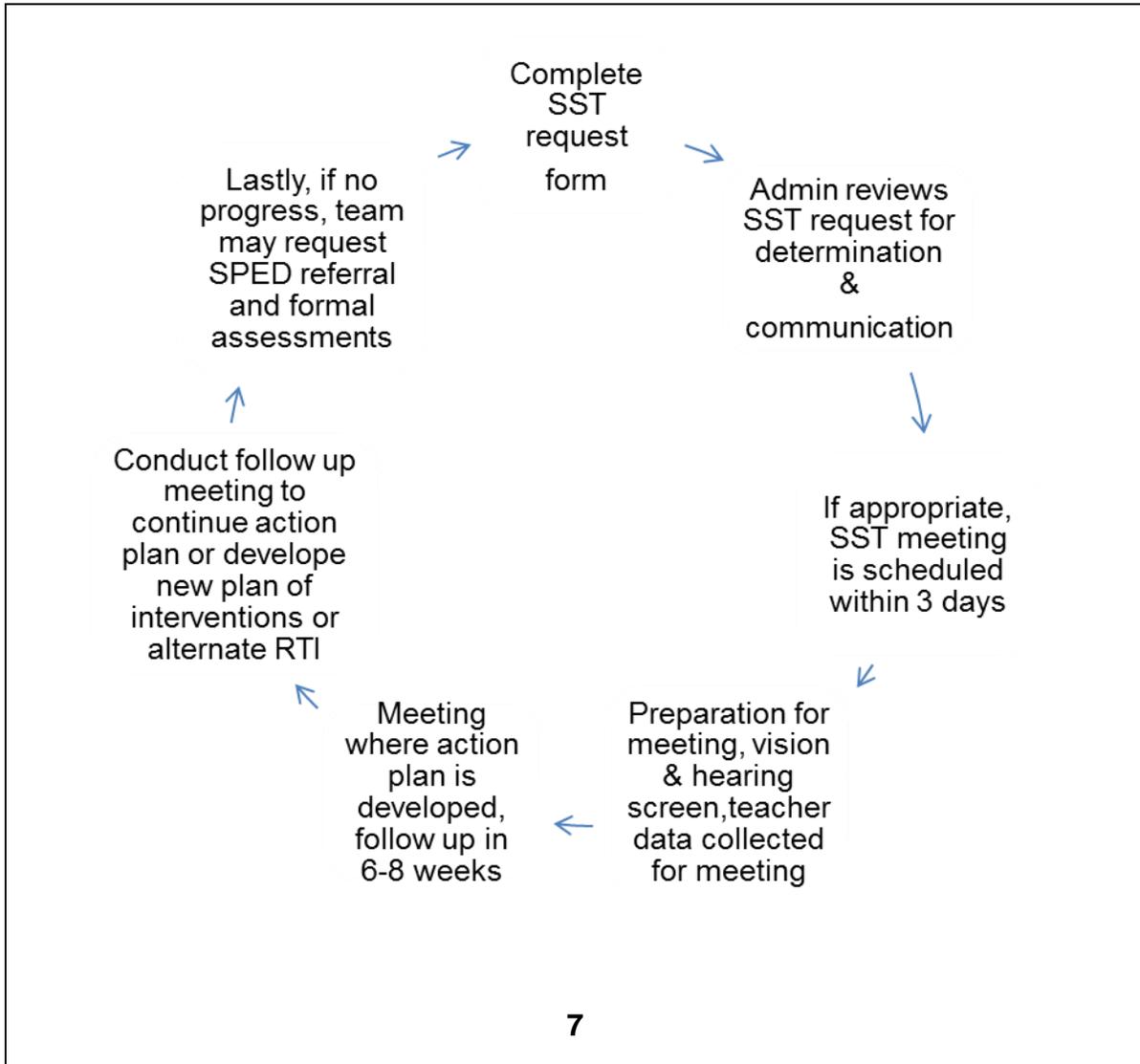
## STUDENT STUDY TEAM (SST) GUIDELINES

6

### **Purpose of a Student Study Team (SST)**

A **Student Study Team** is a group of team members who have identified a student with an atypical need in the general education setting. The team's purpose is to use a team approach when utilizing early interventions and curriculum support within the general education setting. An SST meeting provides the team with an opportunity to share concerns and develop an efficient and effective educational plan that will assist in bringing together all the resources and supports needed to enhance student success.

Adapted from (Plumas County SELPA, 2017) **6**



## ELIGIBILITY STEPS BEFORE SPECIAL EDUCATION

**Tier 1~** High quality whole group instruction that is provided in the general education setting, by the general education teacher to **ALL** students.

**Tier 2~** Students identified as at-risk who will receive more intensive, small group instruction and or whole group instruction, usually in the general education setting, but may also be pulled out.

**Tier 3~** Students who have failed to make gains despite interventions. Students will be referred and evaluated for special education services by highly qualified team members.

The Code of Federal Regulation, Title 34: Education's definition of special education is stated as:

Special education means *specially designed instruction*, at no cost to the parents, to meet the *unique needs of a child* with a disability... Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the *content, methodology, or delivery of instruction*. (34 CFR.300.39)

Federal law governs and regulates the education of students with disabilities. There is a progression of universal procedures for providing a child with a disability the right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE), and what is required to manage the special education process before special education services and eligibility are deemed appropriate (FAPE):

1. **Atypical need:** Large discrepancy in accessing academics. Parent conference to discuss concerns.
2. **Pre-referral (Tier 2):** Student Study Team formed to identify and develop alternative instructional strategies and supports in the general education setting. Data is collected for 6-8 weeks.
3. **Referral for special education evaluation (Tier 3):** Classroom interventions proven ineffective. Must have parent consent to give formal assessments. Assessment plan submitted by SST, and given to special education department.
4. **Evaluation process (Tier 3):** Formal assessments administered by qualified persons such as: low incidence specialist, OT, speech and language therapist, physical therapist, education specialist, school psychologist or behavior specialist.

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5. **Eligibility (FAPE):** Team has 30 days after formal assessments are complete to determine eligibility. A child is eligible for special education if there is evidence of a disability defined by IDEA, which is negatively impacting academic performances or special education is needed to access the general core curriculum.
6. **Individual Education Program (IEP) and Implementation (Tier 3):** An IEP is a legal document which specifies the special education services to be provided by the local district agency, in regards to the identified disability of the student. It may not be altered in any way without the signed consent of parents or legal guardians.
7. **Reevaluation:** Is done annually to assess goals, evaluate services, present levels of performance, and educational settings. Formal evaluations are done tri-annually to reconsider if eligibility is still appropriate.

Adapted from (Project IDEAL, 2013)

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## **BASIC IEP CONTENT**

**10**

### **Definition of an IEP**

When a student qualifies for special education, they must have an **I**ndividualized **E**ducation **P**rogram (IEP). An IEP outlines individualized annual goals that are specific to the student's learning disability. The IEP includes: instructional strategies, accommodations, modifications, % of time in special education, and other supports needed to help a student with exceptional needs reach his/her annual goals. Below is a list of the basic content in an IEP. IEP's also include other documents however, these are the documents within an IEP that are most relevant to general educators.

**10**

**Meeting Notice:** A meeting notice is necessary for every IEP meeting, including amendments, and includes all team members. Parent signature is required.

**Information and Eligibility Page:** Includes; IEP date (must not be overdue), next annual IEP date (1 year minus 1 day), next evaluation (every 3 years), consideration of redesignation, interpreter needed, primary and secondary disability statement and how it affects involvement/progress in the general education setting, and current demographic information.

**Transition Plans (secondary only):** Assessment of interest inventory and career questions and goals.

**Present levels of performances:** Includes; strengths, preferences, interests, parental concerns, state testing/alternate state testing results, physical education testing results, other current relevant assessments, hearing and vision results, academic performance levels, communication, gross/fine motor, vocational, daily living skills, health development, and a statement addressing the goals that will be addressed in the IEP.

**Special Factors:** Considerations if the student requires assistive technology, is blind or visually impaired, needs low incidence services, is deaf or hard of hearing, English learner support, and considerations/interventions if behavior impedes the learning of self or others.

**Statewide assessments:** Indicates student participation in state testing or alternate testing, including the appropriate accommodations and modifications.

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**Goals:** Goals support student deficits and enable them to be involved and access the general education curriculum. Must include a baseline which connects to present levels and short term objectives that reflect trimester/quarter dates. Progress on goals are sent home at every reporting period.

**Extended School Year Worksheet:** Considerations of summer school criteria. ESY provides services that assist the student in progressing toward goals that are being worked on during the school year. ESY is only available when the student shows a significant lapse in skills during long breaks or the summer.

**Services Offer of FAPE:** Service options and time considerations such as SAI, OT, SLP, considerations of placement in least restrictive environment (LRE), list of supplementary aids, supports, and services for student and other personnel frequency and duration of specialized academic instruction and other related services, and considerations of ESY and special education transportation.

**Offer of FAPE, Educational Setting:** Percentages of time in/out of general education for special education services, and why the student will not participate in the regular class setting. Lists other agencies involved in student's education, activities that support transitions, and a graduation plan (secondary).

11

**Signature Page:** Parental consent on IEP begins the implementation process of the IEP. Signatures are required from: parent, administrator, general educator, special educator, and any specialist providing services. If a team member is not present, then an excusal must be signed by parent preferably sent home with the meeting notice prior to the meeting. Parent signs for Medi-Cal authorization.

**Notes Page:** This is where any information not previously contained within the IEP needs to be documented such as, but not limited to: discussions and decisions made by the team or parent, any type of follow up information, and any parent requests, including the team's responses to the requests.

## TIPS FOR THE DECONSTRUCTION OF STANDARDS

13

### Deconstruction of Standards

It is important to remember that when deconstructing statements and skills, we are focused on understanding and identifying the sections which are appropriate for meeting the unique needs of **ALL** students even special education students. We are searching for the appropriate skill/level that will meet these needs within a standard's expectation. Keep in mind that, a student may not be functioning at grade level so, deconstructing standards will support appropriate needs. We are providing access and exposure towards grade level expectations and are enabling students to access content which is addressing specific academic needs in all educational settings. Student goals must not restate a standard, but be constructed on individual needs and present levels which correlate to general education expectations. Students with exceptional needs and those students at-risk, are still required to comprehend, synthesize, report, evaluate and gather information and ideas pertaining to grade level standards.

13

### Tips for the Deconstruction of Standards

- Think through the words that are most suitably connected to the student's goal, and is based on the most current present levels of academics.
- Locate the verbs (skills) that will identify the **action** needed to be done by the student.
- Locate nouns (concepts) that will identify the **content** the student needs to know.
- Pinpoint the **skills/element** necessary which will provide the student an access point based on their present levels of performance and functional performance.

14

- Ask yourself, what does the student need in order to **demonstrate** their **knowledge**, what concepts and/or facts are we wanting them to know?
- Consider how you can enhance the student's ability to **reason**. How or what is needed for the student to gain knowledge with understanding (mastery), and then be able to apply that knowledge to figure things out.
- Decide what **skills** are needing to be developed and are necessary for proficiency.
- Finally, what will your evidence be that shows the student is learning? This is where all the steps above have a combined outcome! Your student will be able to apply **knowledge** with **understanding**, and utilize **skills** that can produce an **end product** by being able to **demonstrate** what they have learned.

Adapted from (Johnson, 2015)

14

## **ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ENHANCING INSTRUCTION**

**15**

### **Definition of ACCOMMODATIONS**

**(To be used for Tier 1 and Tier 2)**

Accommodations must be administered as stated in a student's IEP or 504 plan. An accommodation is a slight adjustment in **HOW** a student may receive and respond to information such as: curriculum, testing preparation, teaching strategies, content standards, learning location, timing, class room expectations, and any environmental changes which may help a student access the curriculum with success. Accommodations **DO NOT** revise or lower the content standard or expectation of a learning goal, but allow a student to finish a task in a different manner while maintaining the same learning objectives. **Any** student can use an accommodation. That is called BEST PRACTICE!

**15**

<b>Instructional</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>
Work with a peer helper	Highlight key content
Visual work schedule/checklists	Provide chapter summary
Preferential seating close to teacher	Provide a set of books for home
Highlight key content	Frontload reading questions
1-2 step directions at a time	Use alternate book format
Check for understanding	Consider assistive technology
Chunk/sequence task phases	Provide a word bank
Allow use of teacher notes/study guides	Consider substituting assignments
Model the task and end product	Use oral presentations
Use visual aids	Alternative to read aloud
Hands on activities	Allow extended time
Work in small groups	Increase wait time for response
Xerox assignments for student	Provide assignment list one at a time
<b>16</b>	

<b>Testing</b>	<b>Grading</b>
Test over multiple days	Grade daily work more frequently
Alternate location to take test	Grade daily work higher than tests
Take test orally	Mark correct answers instead of wrong
Read the test to student	<b>Do Not</b> alter standard
Alternative test option/response mode	Assign grades based on same criteria
Use a scribe	<b>Do Not</b> penalize for accommodation
Chunk test into multiple parts	Base grade on content of response
Use a graphic organizer	Grades reflect learning/achievements
Use a noise buffer	
Use assistive technology	
Administer test 1:1	
Multiple choice vs. fill in answers	
List adapted from (PACER Center, 2015, 2013, 2001) <b>16</b>	

## MODIFICATIONS FOR ENHANCING INSTRUCTION

17

### Definition of MODIFICATIONS (To be used for Tier 3, special education)

Modifications **DO** revise or lower the content standard or learning goal. Modifications must be administered as stated in the IEP or 504 plan. They change the learning goal in regards to **WHAT** it is the student is being expected to learn by altering: the instructional level being taught, content, assignment configuration, and performance of mastery. Modifications are used so a student can manage and access the curriculum at their present level of performance. A modification makes instruction realistically achievable at a student's particular learning ability, so that mastery can happen without having to comprehend unnecessary information that is beyond their understanding.

17

<b>Instructional</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>
Instruction level changed	Lower level books with same concepts
Content level adjusted	Provide page for content location
Performance criteria changed	Shorten assignments for mastery
1:1 instruction/aide	Learn separate material
Alter standard	Alternate projects/assignments
Late work accept	Alter standard
	Excusal of assignments
	Modified length of written work
	<b>18</b>

<b>Testing</b>	<b>Grading</b>
Alternate assessment/benchmark	Pass/fail grades
Use recognition tests	E grades (working below grade)
Take home tests	Progress report instead of grade
Open book tests	Modified grading scale
More achievable test material	
1:1 testing	
Provide lists with definitions	
Provided word bank for fill in tests	
Provide sample/practice test	
List adapted from (PACER Center, 2015, 2013, 2001)	
	<b>18</b>

## **CLASSROOM FRIENDLY SUPPORTS**

19

### **What are classroom supports?**

Classroom supports are changes that teachers can do to the classroom environment that will assist in supporting and enhancing student success and participation in the classroom setting. Classroom supports can be used in Tier 1, 2, and 3 in any educational setting.

19

**Classroom Support Suggestions  
(To be used in Tiers 1, 2, and 3)**

- Dim the lights
- Seat student away from high traffic areas like, doors, windows or drinking fountains
- Preferential seating near the teacher
- Seat next to peer helper
- Sit on a yoga ball
- Use a seat cushion
- Reduce classroom noise levels
- Use a wobble chair
- Use a swivel desk chair
- Use technology such as computers or tablets
- Use hand or foot fidgets
- Attach a fitness band on legs of desk or table
- Allow student to sit on the floor, stand at desk or kneel
- Reduce visual clutter around the room
- Play soft music
- Use a visual schedule
- Small group setting for learning
- Rearrange classroom layout

## **FOCUS SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

**21**

### **Focus and Self-Regulation**

Focus and Self-regulation are independent processes by learners that enables them to consciously think, plan, organize, maintain progress, and assess their intellectual abilities in regards to their own learning. They help students to learn, think and problem solve, recall, have sound reasoning, create perceptions and make decisions in their everyday life.

**21**

### Focus Support Suggestions

- **Fit to Desk/Chair Size:** Student's feet need to be flat on the floor, and their elbows should be comfortably resting on top of the desk. Hips, knees, and ankles should be bent.
- **Desk Location:** Locate desk in a LOW TRAFFIC area, away from the door, sink, and pencil sharpener, drinking fountain, or windows.
- **Change Position:** Allow and encourage student to work in positions other than sitting at the desk. Use a large yoga ball, chair pad, bean bag chair, wiggle stool, use a chair with tennis balls on catty-corner legs to allow for rocking, sit in a quiet area, kneel or stand at desk, or lie on floor using a clipboard.
- **Reduce Visual Distractions:** Hang art work behind student, erase unnecessary writing from white board, and keep walls clear of clutter.
- **Movement:** Run laps at recess or quick lap during class, chair push-ups, jumping jacks, yoga stretches, create errands to the office or to another willing teacher where, the student carries a box of books to and from. Tie a bike inner tube, exercise band, or bungee cord to the front legs of the desk or chair.
- **Oral Stimulation:** Chew a couple of pieces of gum, chew on a straw, offer sports water bottle to be kept at student's desk.
- **Fidgets:** Squishy balls, crazy key chains, fuzzy balls, or MAKE THEM UP!

22

- **Music:** Play soft background music for class or allow student to wear headphones.
- **Resistance:** Wrist weights, weighted pencils, weighted back pack, weighted vest.
- **Have student repeat directions back to you.**
- **Individual Visual Schedule:** Place on student's desk.
- **Work Station:** Place finished work on the left side of the desk, and unfinished work on the right side of the desk. When student is finished with task, it is placed in the "Finished" side. Continue to repeat until all tasks are complete.
- **Visual Timer:** This will help student understand there is an end to the time period offered to complete the task. The time offered to work before getting a break, can be steadily increased.
- **Promote** goal setting, planning, self-motivation, attention control, flexibility, self-monitoring, help seeking and self-evaluations.

(Suggestions from PUSD SELPA)

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## PLUMAS COUNTY CONNECTIONS

- **Student Services Coordinator:** located at each school site
- **Plumas County Behavioral Health:** 530-283-6307
- **Plumas Rural Services (CHAT/Counseling):** 530-283-2735
- **Plumas County Social Services (CPS):** 530-283-6350
  - **Online report form:** [http://ag.ca.gov/childabuse/pdf/ss\\_8572.pdf](http://ag.ca.gov/childabuse/pdf/ss_8572.pdf)
- **Plumas County Sheriff Department:** 530-283-6300
- **Plumas Unified Special Education Office:** 530-283-6557
- **Plumas Unified District Office:** 530-283-6500
- **Family Empowerment Center:** 530-283-2735
- **Far Northern Regional Center:** 530-895-8633

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