



Overview

Defining essential skills. Developing effective special education teachers. Improving outcomes for students with disabilities.



The above goals are at the center of High-Leverage Practices in Special Education, a joint initiative between the Council for Exceptional Children and the CEEDAR Center.

High-leverage practices are frequently occurring, essential educational practices that all K–12 special educators should know how to do. These practices are evidence based, meaning that they reflect effective methods that when successfully implemented can improve results for struggling learners. They also are broadly applicable across content areas.

The twenty-two high-leverage practices—which were identified through consensus among special educators—are designed to serve as a road map for guiding teacher preparation, professional development, and/or current self-assessment. To make the practices more understandable and easier to use for these purposes, high-leverage practices are organized around four intertwined areas of practice:

- **Collaboration.** Effective special education teachers collaborate and communicate with a wide range of professionals, families, and caregivers to ensure that educational programs and related services are effective and meeting the needs of each student with a disability.

- **Assessment.** Effective special education teachers understand the strengths and needs of their students, are knowledgeable about assessment, and are skilled in using and interpreting data.
- **Social/emotional/behavioral.** Effective special education teachers establish a consistent, organized learning environment to support student success and well-being.
- **Instruction.** Effective special education teachers are well versed in general education curricula and other contextually relevant curricula. They also use appropriate standards, learning progressions, and evidence-based practices in conjunction with specific individual education program (IEP) goals and benchmarks to prioritize long- and short-term learning goals and to plan and deliver instruction. [See the text box, “High-Leverage Practices in Special Education,” for the practices.]



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Effective teachers use strategies to promote active student engagement.

Special education teachers enact practices in these areas in integrated and reciprocal ways. For example, they use assessment to design instruction and then evaluate it. High-leverage practices in the instruction area can be used to teach both academic content and emotional, behavioral, and social skills. Teachers share their knowledge of high-leverage practices in these areas when collaborating with other professionals and parents.

The integrated and recursive use of high-leverage practices in these four areas can result in some overlap at times. For example, providing effective feedback appears in both the social/emotional/behavioral and instruction areas. To use the high-leverage practices in the collaboration area requires teachers to have a deep knowledge of practices in the other three areas.

[Note: A brief on each of these four areas is included in this professional development guide.]

How High-Leverage Practices in Special Education Were Identified

In 2014, the Council for Exceptional Children appointed a High-Leverage Practices Writing Team to develop a set of high-leverage practices in special education. The twelve team members, who were mostly experienced teacher educators, determined parameters (identified the four practice areas, limited the focus to K–12 special education teachers, etc.) and set criteria for identifying the high-leverage practices. Criteria were included to ensure that practices were practical and useful for teacher education and professional development. [See the text box, “Criteria for Identifying CEC’s High-Leverage Practices.”]

High-Leverage Practices in Special Education

Collaboration

1. Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.
2. Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.
3. Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.

Assessment

4. Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs.
5. Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.
6. Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.

Social/Emotional/Behavioral

7. Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment.
8. Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.
9. Teach social behaviors.
10. Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans.

Instruction

11. Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.
12. Systematically design instruction toward specific learning goals.
13. Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
14. Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.
15. Provide scaffolded supports.
16. Use explicit instruction.
17. Use flexible grouping.
18. Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
19. Use assistive and instructional technologies.
20. Provide intensive instruction.
21. Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.
22. Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.



Criteria for Identifying CEC's High-Leverage Practices

Applicable and Important to the Everyday Work of Teachers

- Focus directly on instructional practice.
- Occur with high frequency in teaching.
- Are based on research and known to foster important kinds of student engagement and learning.
- Broadly applicable and usable in any content area or approach to teaching.
- So important that skillfully executing them is fundamental to effective teaching.

Applicable and Important to Teacher Education

- Limited in number for a teacher education program (about 20).
- Can be articulated and taught.
- Can begin to be mastered by novices.
- Can be practiced across university and field-based settings.
- Grain size (i.e., how detailed should the practice be) is small enough to be clearly visible in practice but large enough to preserve the integrity and complexity of teaching.
- System (or group of high-leverage practices) considerations embody a broader theory regarding the relationship between teaching and learning than would individual practices, as well as support more comprehensive student learning goals (the whole is more than the sum of its parts).

Credit: McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy, M., Lewis, T., Maheady, L., Rodriguez, J., Scheeler, M. C., Winn, J., & Ziegler, D. (2017). *High-leverage practices in special education*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.

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In early 2015, team members began the consensus process. A draft set of high-leverage practices were reviewed by teacher educators, teachers, and administrators. Reviews led to revisions, followed by more reviews, and then a final draft was approved by the Council for Exceptional Children Board of Directors in July 2016.

In Summary

The establishment of high-leverage practices in the field of special education is leading to collective action among those who prepare and provide continuing professional development to teachers. High-leverage practices, when used to design a cohesive set of practice-based opportunities to support teacher candidates and practicing teachers, help ensure that students with disabilities learn to high standards and achieve their potential.



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