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Educator Evaluation 3.0: Leveraging Educator Evaluation Systems to Improve Outcomes for Students With Disabilities

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**Educator Evaluation 3.0:
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Approaches to educator evaluation have undergone numerous and substantial shifts in recent years. Traditionally, educator evaluation involved one annual observation per teacher in which the observation protocol may or may not have been grounded in practices that improve student academic and social achievement. There was little expectation of feedback and sustained support to advance professional growth, and minimal use of evaluation data to make informed human capital decisions. The introduction of *Race to the Top* in 2009, however, ushered in the era of “educator evaluation 2.0” by incentivizing states to develop educator evaluation systems that featured multiple measures of educator effectiveness, including accountability for student growth, and the use of evaluation data to inform high-stakes personnel decisions. Subsequently, a subtle but equally significant trend has emerged toward the adoption of educator evaluation systems that emphasize formative feedback and opportunities for professional learning. Reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in the form of the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* in December 2015 solidified this trend by placing state and local education agencies in the driver’s seat for designing and implementing educator evaluation systems, relaxing requirements for the use of student growth, and reinforcing the use of evaluation data to guide professional learning with a specific focus on high-quality instruction. With the passage of ESSA, the field has officially entered the era of “educator evaluation 3.0” in which states and districts are provided an opportunity to leverage educator evaluation to advance professional learning supports for educators.

ESSA’s shift to educator evaluation 3.0 offers a number of opportunities for states and districts to reinforce high-quality instruction to meet the needs of all students and professional learning supports to meet the needs of all educators. For example, ESSA emphasizes the need to improve equitable access to “effective” teachers, which may have implications for the role of educator evaluation systems in defining an effective teacher. Additionally, ESSA cites a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), or a “comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision making” as a critical model to prevent and address learning and behavior problems (*Every student succeeds act*, 2016, Title IX, Sec. 8002(33)). ESSA’s specific references to equitable access to effective teachers and MTSS have the potential to transform the teaching profession by ensuring that the highest quality of instruction and support is occurring in every classroom for every student, including students with disabilities (SWDs). This editorial advocates that the convergence of educator evaluation, equitable access, and MTSS initiatives within ESSA creates a timely and powerful opportunity to address critical issues that have plagued the field of special education for decades.

Critical Issues in the Field of Special Education: Poor Student Outcomes and Personnel Shortages

Despite the policy reforms of recent decades, the academic performance of SWDs continues to lag considerably behind the performance of students without disabilities. According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 40% of fourth-grade students and 38% of eighth-grade students without disabilities performed at or above the level of proficient in reading, whereas only 12% of fourth-grade students and 8% of eighth-grade students with disabilities did so (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Although some gains in academic achievement for SWDs have been noted, progress remains slow, intermittent, and inconsistent across states, districts, and schools.

It is not difficult to make a connection between poor academic outcomes for SWDs and a shortage of qualified special education personnel. A critical review of the literature on special education teacher attrition and retention since 2004 confirms the unsurprising fact that there continues to be a severe shortage of special education teachers and that there are too few special education teachers every year to fill the vacancies in the field (Vittek, 2015). Our nationwide shortage of special education teachers, moreover, is exacerbated by dismal rates of retention. Newly hired special education teachers are 2.5 times more likely to leave teaching than other beginning teachers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Special education teacher shortages, as well as the gap between the academic performance of SWDs and their nondisabled peers, are linked to an even larger systemic problem that has gained national attention in recent years—educational equity. Research findings indicate that our nation’s most disadvantaged students, including low-income and minority students, have less access to effective teaching (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2014). ESSA retains the imperative to ensure that low-income and minority students—many of whom are disproportionately identified for special education services—have access to effective educators.

Making the Connection:

The Role of Educator Evaluation in Promoting Access to Effective Educators for SWDs

To raise student achievement and ensure equitable access to effective educators for SWDs, there must be a concerted effort to retain qualified special education teachers. Special education teachers who leave the profession frequently cite reasons such as lack of shared ownership for SWDs, role ambiguity, and lack of leadership support (Holdheide & Demonte, 2016). Equally important is that special educators no longer bear sole responsibility for the education of SWDs; on average, more than 60% of students served under Part B of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* spend at least 80% or more of their school day in the general education setting (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Collaboration between special educators and general educators is critical for the academic success of SWDs, especially those receiving the majority of their instruction in inclusive settings.

Aligning MTSS and educator evaluation initiatives creates an opportunity to address challenges that contribute to the attrition of special education teachers, while building the capacity of all educators to effectively serve SWDs. An MTSS infrastructure can address some of the most frequently cited reasons why special education teachers leave the profession. Additionally, when closely aligned with educator evaluation systems that define expectations for

effective instructional practice, MTSS can increase the likelihood that SWDs and other disadvantaged populations have access to teachers—both general and special education—with the knowledge and skills to serve their needs.

MTSS are prevention-oriented frameworks that unite general educators, special educators, and specialized instructional support personnel in a shared goal to proactively address the needs and monitor the progress of all students, including those at risk for poor learning outcomes. Although the specifics of implementation vary greatly across schools and districts, MTSS creates school-level infrastructure (e.g., school leadership teams that regularly examine data to inform instructional decisions) that promotes shared accountability for the outcomes of all students while clearly defining educator roles and responsibilities within a tiered system of support.

When teachers' roles and responsibilities are clearly defined within an MTSS framework, it creates opportunities to focus on the instructional practices—and educator knowledge and skills—within and across tiers that have been proven to improve academic outcomes for SWDs. For example, general educators delivering tier 1 core instruction should be able to differentiate instruction and apply principles of universal design to the general education curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. Special education teachers supporting students at tier 1 should be equipped with a toolbox of evidence-based practices to adapt the general education curriculum, so that all students can access grade-level content regardless of their skill level. Interventionists delivering secondary (e.g., tier 2) and intensive (e.g., tier 3) intervention need a specialized set of skills in order to collect progress monitoring data, analyze students' responsiveness to intervention, and make individualized instructional adaptations.

Educator evaluation systems can be a powerful lever to reinforce effective instruction within tiered systems of support. The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) brief, *A Framework for Coherence: College and Career Readiness Standards, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and Educator Effectiveness*, puts forward a model outlining the interconnectivity of MTSS and educator evaluation systems (Hayes & Lillenstein, 2015). In the context of this framework, college and career readiness standards, the high and consistent expectations for what students need to know and be able to do, represent the “what” of student learning and growth. MTSS represent the “how” of student learning and growth. Educator effectiveness systems reinforce continuous improvement of delivery of the “what” and the “how” by providing educators with feedback through the evaluation process that drives professional learning and improves quality of instruction. Well-aligned MTSS and educator evaluation systems result in targeted and actionable feedback directly aligned with tiered instructional practices. High-quality feedback from educator evaluation systems, paired with sustained opportunities for professional learning and growth, create ideal conditions for educator evaluation 3.0. However, a lack of alignment between roles in a framework for MTSS and the expectations defined in educator evaluation systems may unintentionally send mixed messages, inhibit student success, and increase teacher frustration—all of which compound the critical issues of poor student outcomes and personnel shortages.

Classroom Application: A Practical Example

Consider this scenario: A special education teacher is responsible for delivering tier 3 intensive intervention to middle school students in reading. Her role, as defined within an MTSS framework, is to implement evidence-based practices to intensify intervention for students who have not made adequate progress in tiers 1 and 2. The teacher carefully plans her lessons to include evidence-based practices for intensive intervention such as explicit instruction to model the steps of a process, systemic instruction to break down complex skills into smaller parts, multiple opportunities for response and practice, and immediate and corrective feedback (Vaughn, Wanzek, Murray, & Roberts, 2012).

During a recent classroom observation of a lesson on finding the main idea of an informational text, the teacher was given a rating of “needs improvement” under the evaluation rubric’s category for questioning techniques. Although little feedback was given to support this rating, the teacher later learned in a conversation with her principal that this rating was given because she was not observed asking “higher-order thinking” questions.

In this scenario, the teacher was successfully employing evidence-based instructional practices matched to the needs of her students. However, the expectations for instructional practice identified in the educator evaluation rubric (e.g., asking higher-order questions) did not align with the expectations of how to deliver instruction within a framework for MTSS (e.g., individualizing intervention through evidence-based practices that promote scaffolding of questioning techniques). As a result, the rating she received on the evaluation rubric did not accurately reflect her ability to provide appropriate and effective instruction to her students.

In an alternate version of this scenario, the teacher met with her principal before the observation in order to identify “look-fors” in the rubric category of questioning techniques. The teacher was able to demonstrate how her lesson supported the grade-level standard of identifying an informational text’s main idea while explaining how she intended to scaffold her instruction for students with cognitive processing difficulties through questioning techniques that reinforce explicit and systematic instruction. After observing the lesson, the teacher and the principal met for a post-observation conference, during which the principal noted that the teacher effectively used questioning techniques to meet the needs of her students. The principal added that in future lessons, the teacher should work to incorporate more immediate and corrective feedback for her students. Equipped with this specific and actionable feedback, the teacher and the principal made arrangements for the teacher to observe the classroom of a colleague who was skilled in the use of immediate and corrective feedback as a professional learning opportunity.

In the alternate scenario described, feedback from the educator evaluation process served the dual purpose of (1) reinforcing instructional practices matched to student need and (2) informing opportunities for professional learning. By intentionally connecting and aligning multi-tiered instructional practices and the educator effectiveness system, the evaluation process led to the teacher receiving helpful feedback for instruction, the principal increasing her knowledge of intensive intervention practices, and the students receiving the type of instruction that they need to be successful.

Action Steps to Promote Alignment

The 2013 GTL Center brief, *Inclusive Design: Building Evaluation Systems That Support Students with Disabilities*, outlines key considerations for designing educator evaluation systems that are inclusive of SWDs (Holdheide, 2013). Like the example in the previous section, featured considerations include leveraging pre-observation conferences as opportunities for teachers to provide evidence in support of specific instructional practices and integrating special education content into evaluator training. The brief also highlights the states that have chosen to strengthen existing rubrics by augmenting rubric content with explicit examples and look-fors of how the standards and indicators appear in different instructional contexts.

Resources such as the GTL Center's 2013 brief provide critical guidance to the field regarding the design of inclusive educator evaluation systems. Virtually none of this guidance, however, explores a systemic approach to aligning educator evaluation and MTSS initiatives as a strategy to address special education shortages and promote equitable access to effective educators for SWDs. When educator evaluation systems and MTSS are mutually supportive, the alignment creates opportunities to focus on the instructional practices that students need to be successful and the targeted feedback that teachers need to improve their practice. Teachers who are successful, supported, and recognized for their good work are more likely to stay in the profession, thereby addressing critical issues related to poor student outcomes, personnel shortages, and lack of equitable access to effective educators for SWDs.

This approach is not without challenges. The implementation of MTSS and educator evaluation initiatives varies greatly across schools, districts, and states. Full implementation of either initiative may take years to achieve, and administrative structures in state and local education agencies may create barriers and silos that impede successful implementation. Monitoring fidelity of implementation continues to be a challenge for MTSS, as does quality implementation of educator evaluation systems. However, systemic solutions that promote coherence and alignment across initiatives hold real promise for ensuring sustainability over time. A framework for coherence that aligns MTSS and educator evaluation in order to address issues of educational equity is a long-term solution, but it is one that ultimately will help to promote the kinds of school infrastructures and professional learning supports that lead to the retention of effective educators and ultimately student outcomes. Although a long-term investment, it is one worth exploring.

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