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Review

Leading with an Inclusion Mindset: Strategic Recommendations for School Leaders and Administrators

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Received: 7 March 2026; **Revised:** 12 May 2026; **Accepted:** 17 June 2026

Abstract: The successful inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings is heavily dependent on the strategic leadership and systemic support provided by school administrators. Administrators can support the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom by promoting differentiated professional development opportunities in an effort to advance in continuous improvement and raise student achievement in their classrooms. Instructional constructs such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs), and High Leverage Practices (HLPs) can be implemented to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. This literature review provides evidence-based recommendations for administrators, including the deliberate allocation of resources, protected collaborative planning time, and targeted professional development in UDL, EBPs, and HLPs to ignite school-wide change. By aligning district policy with equitable pedagogical practices and supporting teacher efficacy, administrators can move beyond philosophical endorsement to create sustainable, district-wide inclusion that recognizes and celebrates the unique profiles of all learners.

***Keywords*:** administrators, differentiation, evidence-based practice, High Leverage Practice (HLP), scaffolding, Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

1. Introduction

Inclusion is defined as the systematic support of students with disabilities through the implementation of individualized learning goals, accommodations, and modifications and allows for students with disabilities the opportunity to access the general education curriculum within the general education classroom while being held to the same rigorous expectations as their non-disabled peers (IRIS Center, 2021, p. 1). Research consistently demonstrates that when administrators prioritize inclusive values, they cultivate a school culture that shifts the perception of disability from a deficit-based model to one of neurodiversity and asset-based learning (McLeskey et al., 2012). This administrative commitment must transcend philosophical endorsement to include the deliberate allocation of resources, such as protected time for collaborative planning between general and special educators and the provision of targeted professional development in practices that promote inclusive educational practices (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). School administrators' leadership is critical to ensuring that schools continue to improve and create cultures where each student can thrive and meet their potential (DeMatthews et al., 2023).

The successful implementation of inclusive educational practices, however, is fundamentally contingent upon the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37256/ser.7220269863

strategic leadership and systemic support provided by school district administrators. While district-wide leadership provides the necessary infrastructure for inclusion, the practical implementation of policies to support inclusive practices begins with a precise understanding of which students qualify for specialized support. Moving from the big picture goals of school administrators to the individual level requires a clear grasp of the legal frameworks that define disability and determine service eligibility.

1.1 *Special education services eligibility*

One prevalent misconception in the field is that a clinical diagnosis of a disability automatically guarantees eligibility for special education services; however, under The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), eligibility is contingent upon a dual-criterion: the presence of a disability and a demonstrable adverse impact of that disability on the student's academic performance. Currently, approximately 7.5 million students representing 15% of the United States population aged 3 to 21 receive special education or related services. IDEA (2004) recognizes 13 disability categories (excluding developmental delay for specific age groups), which are traditionally classified into high-incidence and low-incidence classifications (Table 1).

Table 1. IDEA disability categories

Disability category	Prevalence
Specific learning disability	32%
Speech or language impairment	19%
Other health impairment	15%
Autism	13%
Developmental delay	7%
Intellectual disability	6%
Emotional disturbance	4%
Multiple disabilities	2%
Hearing impairment	1%
Deaf-blindness	< 0.5%
Deafness	< 0.5%
Orthopedic impairment	< 0.5%
Traumatic brain injury	< 0.5%
Visual impairment	< 0.5%

1.2 *Educational placement for students with disabilities*

The complexity of inclusive practice is compounded by the significant intra-categorical variability among students with disabilities based on their unique diagnostic traits and their academic, social, and emotional profiles. Consequently, effective inclusion necessitates a shift away from generalized instructional strategies toward a nuanced understanding of each student's specific abilities and challenges. Upon the formal identification of a student within one of the 13 disability categories specified by IDEA and the subsequent determination that the disability adversely affects academic

performance, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team (i.e., parent of the child, regular education teacher, special education teacher, a school district representative from the Local Education Agency (LEA), an evaluator to interpret data, and the child when appropriate), is tasked with determining the most appropriate educational placement (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These placement decisions are predicated on a continuum of services which are a range of delivery models ranging from full inclusion to residential facilities and must be uniquely tailored to the idiosyncratic needs of the learner. The specific levels of the continuum of services, setting type, and their functional descriptions are further delineated in Table 2.

Table 2. Continuum of services (IDEA, 2004)

Placement level	Setting type	Description of services
Level 1	General education class	Student receives majority of instruction in the regular classroom with supports, aids, and services.
Level 2	General education class with in-class co-teaching support	Student receives the majority of instruction in the regular classroom with in-class Special Educator support.
Level 3	General education class with resource room	Student is in the regular class but pulled out for specialized instruction for part of the day (less than 50%).
Level 4	Self-contained special class part-time	Student receives core instruction in a separate special education classroom for a significant portion of the day.
Level 5	Self-contained special class full-time	Student spends the entire day in a separate classroom within a regular school building.
Level 6	Special day school	Student attends a separate public or private school specifically designed for students with disabilities.
Level 7	Residential facility	Student receives 24-hour care and education in a specialized residential program.
Level 8	Homebound/hospital	Student receives instruction at home or in a medical facility due to health or behavioral needs.

Central to this deliberative process is the statutory requirement of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Under IDEA (2004), students with disabilities must be educated alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Removal from the general education setting and into specialized classes or separate schooling is legally permissible only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that satisfactory achievement in regular classes cannot be attained, even with the rigorous application of supplementary aids and services (IDEA, 2004). The decision-making process must be guided by the notion that the general education classroom is the primary and most appropriate starting point for all students. Consequently, placement must never be dictated by a student's diagnostic label. For example, a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) should not result in the automatic or reflexive placement of a student in a specialized "autism" classroom. Instead, the IEP team must ensure that the placement is a direct response to the individual's functional and academic requirements rather than a byproduct of categorical classification.

Data regarding disability-specific placement trends reveal significant variance in the utilization of the general education setting. The distribution of placement patterns across disability categories suggest that access to the general education environment is not solely a function of student need, but is also shaped by a systemic decision-making, resource allocation, and instructional capacity within schools. The comparatively high rates of inclusion for students with Speech or Language Impairments (88.3%), Specific Learning Disabilities (75.3%), and Other Health Impairments (70.2%) indicate that when supports are perceived as portable or less intensive, general education placement is more readily achieved. In contrast, markedly lower rates for students with Intellectual Disabilities, Multiple Disabilities, and Deaf-Blindness alongside their higher representation in settings where they spend less than 40% of the day in general education, point to potential structural and instructional barriers that constrain access. These disparities suggest that categorical assumptions about disability severity may function as a de facto gatekeeping mechanism, limiting

opportunities for inclusion independent of individualized student potential or the availability of evidence-based supports.

From a systems perspective, these patterns can be interpreted as indicators of exclusion risk points embedded within school processes. For school administrators, the transition thresholds reflected in Table 3 represent critical junctures where students may be systematically diverted away from inclusive settings. These inflection points may be driven by factors such as insufficient co-teaching capacity, limited access to specialized supports in general education classrooms, or scheduling structures that favor pull-out services.

Table 3. Disability categories and percentage spent in general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2023)

Disability	80% or more of the day	40%-70% of the day	Less than 40% of the day	Other environments
All disabilities	66.6	16.0	12.6	4.8
Autism	40.8	17.1	34.2	7.8
Deaf-blindness	30.1	11.0	32.2	26.7
Developmental delay	69.8	14.6	13.8	1.7
Emotional disturbance	54.7	17.0	14.6	13.7
Hearing impairment	64.5	13.3	10.2	12.0
Intellectual disability	18.7	27.7	47.2	6.4
Multiple disabilities	15.3	17.9	43.5	23.2
Orthopedic impairment	57.6	14.5	20.1	7.8
Other health impairment	70.2	18.1	7.7	4.0
Specific learning disability	75.3	19.1	3.8	1.9
Speech or language impairment	88.3	3.7	3.7	4.3
Traumatic brain injury	51.5	20.08	19.6	8.2
Visual impairment	69.7	11.3	8.7	10.2

Given the prevalence of students qualifying for special education services and the diversity of available placement options, it is imperative to examine the proportion of the instructional day that school-aged learners (ages 5-21) spend within the general education environment. In the context of a standard school day that typically ranges from 390 to 420 minutes. The 80% threshold for inclusive placement necessitates that a student spend a minimum of 336 minutes, or approximately five to seven hours, receiving instruction alongside non-disabled peers (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage breakdown by minutes and hours

Considering a full day is 390-420 minutes or 6-7 hours		
80%	40%-79%	Less than 40%
> 336 mins or 5-7 hours	168-335 mins or 2.8-5.5 hours	< 168 mins or 0-2.7 hours

For school administrators, mastering these legal and conceptual intricacies is vital for ensuring procedural compliance with federal mandates and mitigating the risk of costly due process litigation (Yell et al., 2021). Moreover, proactive administrative leadership is necessary to shift organizational culture, ensuring that special education is viewed as a mobile framework of services rather than a static physical location (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). It is critical to distinguish special education as a set of tailored services rather than a specific physical location. By disaggregating placement data at the school level and examining where students cluster along these thresholds, administrators can identify patterns that signal heightened exclusion risk for specific disability groups. Strategic responses should include strengthening inclusive service delivery models (e.g., co-teaching, embedded interventions), investing in professional learning that builds teacher efficacy for supporting diverse learners, and auditing master schedules to reduce structural barriers to sustained general education participation. In doing so, administrators move beyond compliance with LRE mandates toward actively disrupting the systemic conditions that produce inequitable access to inclusive educational experiences.

2. Theoretical framework

This literature review is grounded in the theoretical framework of rightful presence, which challenges traditional notions of inclusive education by shifting the focus from merely being included in the classroom to belonging (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2019). While inclusive education often emphasizes the physical placement of students with disabilities in general education settings, rightful presence suggests that inclusion is insufficient if it requires students to assimilate into existing systemic structures that were not built for them. Instead, this framework views the presence of students with disabilities as an inherent right that demands the transformation of the school environment itself (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2019). By utilizing rightful presence as a lens, this review evaluates how school administrators move beyond mere compliance with disability legislation to act as architects of environments where students are not only allowed to participate, but are seen, understood, and fundamentally wanted (Lepore-Stevens & Sosland, 2025). This lens allows for a critical examination of how leadership practices, such as the implementation of Universal Design for Learning, evidence-based practices, and High Leverage Practices as well as the removal of systemic barriers, facilitate a shift from guest-like status to a legitimate belonging for all learners (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018; Miyauchi et al., 2022).

3. Literature review

School administrators are viewed as pivotal agents whose leadership directly impacts the success of inclusive education through resource allocation, professional development, and the fostering of a school culture centered on social justice (Steed et al., 2024). This literature review explored school administrators and related research including inclusive practices and students with disabilities. The research question for this literature review asked How do school administrators in the United States conceptualize and implement leadership practices that move beyond physical inclusion toward the rightful presence and genuine belonging of students with disabilities?

Employing the use of EBSCOhost Web, the following search terms were used: administrator AND inclusion or inclusive education or mainstreaming AND special education or special needs or disabilities. The initial search returned N = 4,610 articles, reports, dissertations, magazines, electronic resources, books, conference materials, news, trade publications, reviews, eBooks, government documents, Continuing Education Units (CEUs), biographies, and videos. The search was then narrowed further by only including academic peer-reviewed journals and limiting the time frame to the last 10 years. The remaining full text articles written in English were n = 635. Because this research was intended to support school administrators, it was important that there was an understanding of school systems in the United States, as a result, all articles that described research that took place outside of the United States were excluded and that took the total number of articles down to n = 12. The articles were then read in their entirety to determine further inclusion in the literature review.

After reading the articles, an additional inclusion criteria was established: the articles must discuss inclusive practices in the school setting. Many of the articles identified discussed policy, inclusion at the university level, or

marginalized populations that did not include students with disabilities. As a result, the total number of articles for the review were $n = 3$.

Miyauchi et al. (2022) investigated how four specialized schools for the blind in the United States maintain their vitality and relevance in an era where the majority of students with visual impairments are educated in local public schools. The authors highlight a shift from isolated residential models to a symbiotic approach that combines on-campus expertise with statewide outreach. The participants in this study relate that the overall success and continuing vitality of the specialized schools can be attributed to several factors, including considering the overall mission of the school based on the current school-based and community needs as opposed to traditional programming. From the inclusion perspective, this could mean reconsidering school leadership using a universal approach and encouraging the use of evidence-based practices and High Leverage Practices to support learning. Additionally, Miyauchi et al. (2022) suggest that administrators should invest in diverse expertise when hiring teachers and seek out those with multi-faceted skills in order to bridge the gap between specialized instruction and the general education requirements. Ultimately, the study conducted by Miyauchi et al. (2022) highlights the belief that children should be able to learn among their peers in order to prepare for a life after graduation.

Lepore-Stevens and Sosland (2025) discuss the inclusion of students with albinism from the parent perspective. The exploratory study investigated the experiences of students with albinism through the eyes of their parents. Lepore-Stevens and Sosland (2025) found that while inclusion was considered as mere participation; however, the hope for their children was true belonging; they were defined by a student feeling wanted, seen, and understood. Parents indicated that belonging was a vital component of the school community and made pointed recommendations for bridging the gap between inclusion and belonging. In order to establish intensive inclusion, the parents suggested that implementing inclusive design, enhancing representation and awareness, understanding the adaptive needs of students, and strengthening the parent-teacher partnership. Specifically, parents requested that administrators support teachers to ensure that accessibility to the curriculum was the default expectation and that classrooms were flexible allowing students to move freely without encumbrances. Additionally, parents suggested that a universal design approach should be adopted in order to accommodate the specific needs of their children, such as applying sunscreen prior to going outdoors. The parent participants in the Lepore-Stevens and Sosland (2025) study highlighted the importance of small considerations directly related to established best practices for providing services to students with disabilities that should be noted and supported by school administrators in order to take a proactive approach to inclusive design.

Finally, Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) conducted a qualitative study that examined the first-year experience of 10 special education teachers who were trained in evidence-based, inclusive practices, but were then assigned to self-contained classrooms. To clarify, self-contained classrooms are characterized by including students with moderate/severe intellectual disability, autism, multiple disabilities, severe emotional disturbance, and deaf-blindness (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2010). Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) provide several implications and recommendations for administrators to better promote inclusion and support new special educators. The findings suggest that there is a lack of shared vision between teachers and administrators. As a result, administrators should consider establishing a school-wide culture that values the inclusion of students with disabilities and this should extend beyond those that are on grade level and be inclusive of those students that may have more significant disabilities. Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) report that administrators should ensure that new special educators, especially, receive induction support that is relevant to their specific roles and student populations. In order to successfully accomplish this task, administrators must be aware of the characteristics of the population of the students that the teachers will be working with as well as evidence-based, High Leverage, and Universal Design practices that are proven to be effective when working with students with disabilities. Additionally, the administrator's work extends beyond the special education teacher. In order to establish a shared vision and understanding of inclusion, administrators should encourage general education teachers to initiate inclusive opportunities for students, not just comply, but initiate. Finally, administrators should work diligently to remove any systemic barriers to inclusion, ensuring that all students have adequate opportunities to be included.

School administrators serve as the primary architects of an inclusive framework, wielding the authority to transform school culture from mere compliance to genuine belonging for students with disabilities (Steed et al., 2024). To bridge the gap between traditional isolated programming and modern inclusion, leadership must prioritize a Universal Design for Learning approach, ensuring that accessibility and flexible classroom environments are the default standard

rather than an afterthought (Lepore-Stevens & Sosland, 2025; Miyauchi et al., 2022). Furthermore, by integrating High Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Evidence-Based Practices into the school's pedagogical core, administrators can empower educators to meet the diverse adaptive and academic needs of all students, including those with significant intellectual or sensory disabilities (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). This systemic shift requires administrators to foster a shared vision that encourages general education teachers to proactively initiate inclusive opportunities and remove systemic barriers, thereby moving beyond a participation model toward a community where every student is seen, understood, and fundamentally wanted (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018; Lepore-Stevens & Sosland, 2025).

3.1 *Inclusive practices in action*

A fundamental principle of inclusive pedagogy and practices in action is that curriculum access is a prerequisite for academic achievement; without the former, the expectation of the latter is inherently compromised. To operationalize inclusive educational practices, school administrators must move beyond abstract commitments and establish a coherent, systems-based framework that translates IDEA requirements into daily practice. Grounded in the *Leadership Essentials* identified by the LEAD IDEA Center, administrators should begin by clearly articulating and consistently communicating a school-wide vision for inclusion that emphasizes both the legal mandates of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and the broader moral imperative of equitable access. This vision must be actively reinforced across all stakeholder groups (e.g., general and special educators, instructional support staff, etc.) through communication, shared language, and embedded expectations for inclusive practice (U.S. Department of Education, 2025, p. 28). Establishing a common understanding is critical to shifting inclusion from an isolated initiative to a collective responsibility, where all adults working with students recognize their role in supporting students with disabilities.

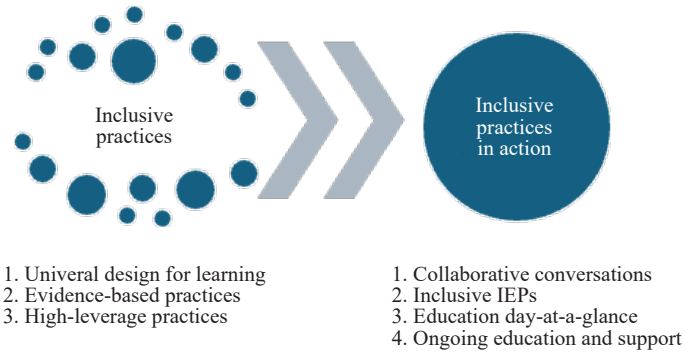


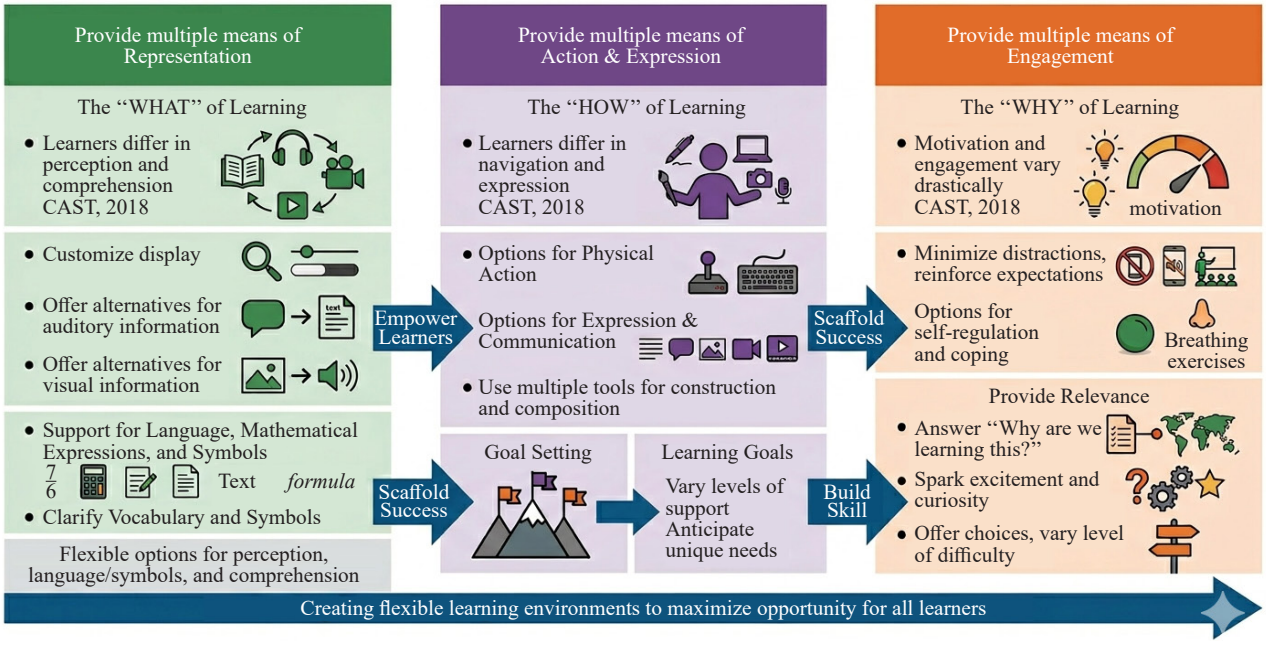
Figure 1. Inclusive practices and action items

Administrators are charged with bridging the gap between specialized instruction and the general education requirements while also ensuring that children are able to learn along with peers for a smoother transition into adulthood (Miyauchi et al., 2022). Further, inclusive classrooms require strategic educational practices that embed aspects of evidence-based practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs), and HLPs. In order to utilize such practices, actionable strategies need to be created and implemented by school administrators that staff can implement based on clear guidelines. The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), in collaboration with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)-funded The Inclusive Education Systems Technical Assistance Center (TIES Center), created the *Comprehensive Inclusive Education in Washington* guide, which highlights four steps for implementing inclusive educational practices. These include collaborative conversations, creating inclusive IEPs, providing education day-at-a-glance processes, and ongoing education and support (U.S. Department of Education, 2025, p. 6). Using this as an overarching framework can assist in the creation of guidelines to support school staff in implementing inclusive practices (See Figure 1). The role of the administrator as an instructional leader is to ensure that educators learn how to strategically approach instructional planning, while embedding aspects

of UDL, HLPs, and EBPs so that the diverse needs of all students are considered as a preemptive approach. In order to accomplish this task, administrators should first believe in the effectiveness of these practices and share the vision for the school.

3.2 *Universal design for learning*

Lepore-Stevens and Sosland (2025) discuss the need for small considerations that provide students with access to the curriculum and aim to lead to a feeling of belonging for students. To that end, Glass et al. (2013) suggests that UDL is not a list of strategies for educators, but rather a lens for looking at instructional design that considers from the onset that the needs of each individual in the classroom will be diverse. Administrators should spend time in the spaces in which UDL can occur (i.e., classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, gymnasiums, etc.) (Sider et al., 2017). UDL is a framework for instructional design that adheres to a set of guidelines that consider the need for 1) multiple means of representation, 2) multiple means for expression, and 3) multiple means of engagement for students when planning for instruction or assessment and can impact all students (CAST, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2014). The implementation of Universal Design for Learning necessitates a comprehensive evaluation of four foundational instructional pillars: learning goals, materials, methodologies, and assessments. When synthesized, these elements constitute a robust educational framework that guides the systematic design of inclusive pedagogical practices. Central to this approach is the premise that proactive instructional planning, rooted in UDL principles, not only facilitates equitable access to the core curriculum but also systematically dismantles barriers to learning for an increasingly diverse student population. Consequently, UDL should serve as the primary cornerstone of instructional design rather than an auxiliary modification (Grillo, 2022).



Attributed to: CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines

Figure 2. Universal design for learning guidelines and framework

When considering the application of UDL into instructional design, it is important for administrators to note that it should not replace individualized instruction required by Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of students receiving special education services, but rather offers a more equitable experience for those students (CAST, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2013). While UDL is not designed to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities it does

provide a higher level of equity in the classroom. Administrators should be aware and look for evidence that educators are incorporating UDL principles into instruction. In connection to the recommendations of Ericsson (2014) and Zeichner (2012), administrators should provide opportunities that not only allow educators to practice skills related to the implementation of UDL principles over a sustained period of time, but also utilize a methodology that supports "the transition from knowledge to instructional practice with high fidelity of implementation" (Morin et al., 2019, p. 4). To move from administrative vision to classroom reality, school leaders must understand the specific functional components of the UDL framework and how they appear within the instructional environment (See Figure 2).

Moving from the theoretical foundation of UDL to classroom application requires a shift from understanding student differences to actively designing flexible environments. As highlighted by CAST (2018), because learners vary significantly in how they perceive information, express knowledge, and sustain engagement, educators must move beyond a one-size-fits-all instructional model. Administrators should facilitate opportunities for teachers to intentionally plan for multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement. Additionally, encouraging educators to provide students with choices and vary the level of difficulty throughout instruction. By sparking excitement and curiosity for learning, students may be more apt to tackle learning challenges with focus and determination to self-regulate their motivation. Teachers can preemptively remove barriers to learning and foster a more inclusive, goal-oriented atmosphere. The following table outlines practical strategies for implementing these three UDL pillars to ensure every student has an equitable path to success (See Table 5).

Table 5. Recommendations for practitioners for implementation of UDL adopted from CAST (2018)

Principle	Representation	Action & expression	Engagement
Access	• Display of information • Auditory/visual alternatives	• Multimedia communication • Multiple modalities	• Provide choices • Explain relevance • Minimize distractions
Build	• Clarify vocabulary/symbols • Support decoding • Multilingual support • Use multimedia	• Graduated support levels • Goal setting • Planning & strategizing	• Emphasize goal importance • Vary difficulty levels • Facilitate collaboration
Internalize	• Background information • Highlight patterns/big ideas • Visualizations • Maximize transfer/generalization	• Manage information • Support progress monitoring	• Provide specific feedback • Reinforce expectations • Coping strategies • Self-assessment skills

When overseeing the integration of UDL into instructional frameworks, administrators must recognize that UDL is not intended to supersede the specialized, individualized instruction mandated by the IEPs of students with disabilities. Instead, UDL functions as a complementary framework that fosters a more equitable educational environment (CAST, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2014). While UDL provides broad-based equity rather than clinical individualization, it establishes the necessary conditions for diverse learners to thrive within the general education setting. As a result, school leaders must maintain a high level of instructional supervision, seeking evidence that educators are embedding UDL principles into their daily pedagogical practice. Consistent with the recommendations of Ericsson (2014) and Zeichner (2012), administrators are tasked with facilitating sustained professional learning opportunities that allow for the iterative practice of UDL strategies. Furthermore, leadership must employ methodologies that facilitate "the transition from knowledge to instructional practice with high fidelity of implementation" (Morin et al., 2019, p. 4), ensuring that theoretical professional development translates into tangible classroom outcomes.

Administrators must ensure that effective instructional delivery methods and accessibility for quality of instructional design and support are present for students with disabilities. Of those strategies, UDL was recommended because it can be applied both in online and face-to-face learning environments and can function to meet the diverse needs of students (Texas Education Agency, 2020). It is important to note that UDL principles do not replace specialized instruction for students with disabilities, but provide *increased access* to the curriculum for a wider range of students and

accounts for the diversity of the classroom (Hallahan et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2013). UDL is a framework that can be complemented by the infusion of High Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs). HLPs and EBPs provide opportunities for intensive instruction and intervention for students with disabilities and students who require additional support in the classroom. Benefits of using these strategies include a greater likelihood of increased student outcomes, accountability and being responsive to students' needs because they have been proven to be effective (IRIS Center, 2021; McCray et al., 2017). Teachers' understanding of effective practices is therefore essential for addressing the individualized needs of students and closing persistent achievement gaps. EBPs are instructional strategies backed by research and professional expertise to support the learning and behavior of students and are often content focused and appropriate for students at different developmental levels (Cook et al., 2008). Often, they are content focused and appropriate for students at different developmental levels (McCray et al., 2017). Moreover, there is empirical evidence that student outcomes are improved when teachers use EBPs (Maheady et al., 2013).

3.3 *Evidence-based practices*

Evidence-based practices are instructional techniques and interventions that have been rigorously evaluated through high-quality research to prove their effectiveness in improving student outcomes. According to Cook and Cook (2013), an EBP is not merely a popular trend but a practice supported by a substantial body of empirical evidence, often involving experimental or quasi-experimental designs. By implementing EBPs, educators can move beyond intuition-based teaching and instead rely on strategies that have a high probability of success for diverse learners, particularly those with disabilities or those who are at risk (Cook & Cook, 2013). EBPs represent the specific content or "what" of effective instruction, whereas High Leverage Practices provide the "how" by establishing a foundation of essential teaching behaviors that support EBP implementation across different subjects. McLeskey et al. (2017) describe HLPs as frequently used classroom actions, including providing explicit instruction or using flexible grouping, that all educators must master to effectively facilitate student learning. The connection between these two frameworks is critical because HLPs serve as the delivery system that allows EBPs to be performed with fidelity. This ensures that research-based interventions reach the student in a way that is both meaningful and impactful (McLeskey et al., 2017).

3.4 *High leverage practices*

High Leverage Practices represent a set of 22 essential strategies identified by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center as the foundation for effective special education (McLeskey et al., 2022). These practices are designed to be highly effective because they are used frequently by educators, are supported by a robust body of evidence, and significantly improve student outcomes across various content areas and grade levels. HLPs provide a comprehensive framework for supporting students with diverse learning needs and are organized into four pillars; collaboration, data-driven planning, instruction in behavior academics, and intensify and intervene as needed (Figure 3). While 22 strategies could be a daunting task to implement school-wide, as a result, an excellent starting point with HLP implementation is explicit instruction.

Within the instructional pillar of HLPs, explicit instruction HLP 16, stands out as an essential methodology. This approach is characterized by a series of small, manageable steps where the teacher provides clear explanations, models the task, guides student practice, and eventually transitions to the student independently applying the skill. Research consistently shows that explicit instruction is highly effective for students with disabilities, particularly within the content areas of reading and mathematics (e.g., Doabler et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017). Brownell et al. (2019) suggests that explicit instruction is an effective tool when a student is having difficulty learning.

Research has also demonstrated that High Leverage Practices positively impact student achievement when used across a variety of content areas and grade levels (McCray et al., 2017). HLPs represent a set of foundational instructional and collaborative practices that are essential for improving outcomes for students with disabilities and focus on frequent actions teachers take and that have the greatest impact on student learning, including explicit instruction, providing feedback, facilitating meaningful engagement, and collaborating with colleagues and families. "When HLPs are coupled with EBPs, they provide a continuum of support that results in a rapid response to academic and behavioral needs" (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.). In order to be increasingly effective, educators must

have knowledge of content across subject areas and grade levels, understand the individualized needs of their students, utilize strategic pedagogical practices, and know how to analyze data in order to respond to specific student needs (Brownell et al., 2010) and EBPs and HLPs allow educators to do so. EBPs and HLPs can also be easily interwoven into pre-existing multi-tiered systems of support (Figure 4).

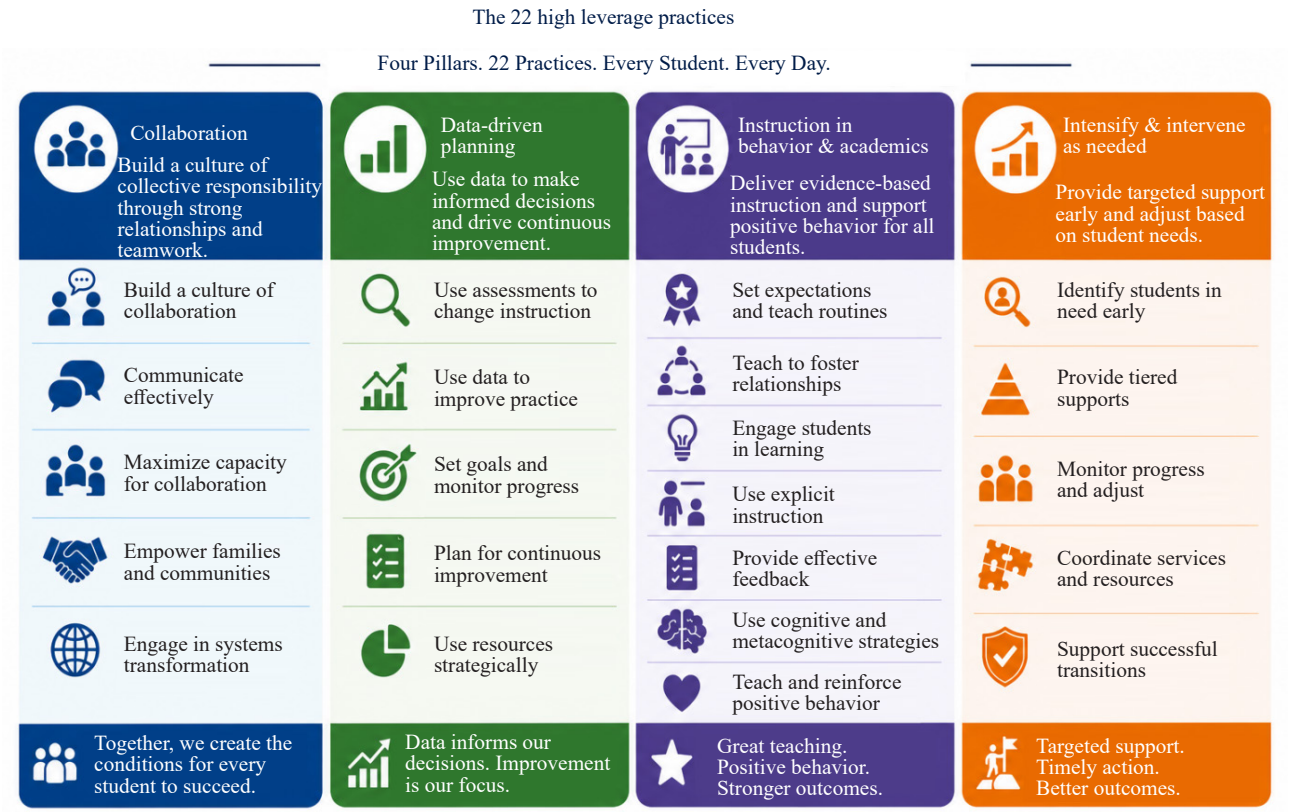


Figure 3. High leverage practices (Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) & CEEDAR Center, 2024)

The successful implementation of EBPs and HLPs though, does not occur solely at the individual teacher level. Developing teachers' knowledge and skill in HLPs is therefore a critical component of effective teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning. School leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring that teachers have the knowledge, support, and opportunities necessary to select, develop and refine these practices. Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) support the notion that administrators play a critical role in the professional development of educators to strengthen inclusive practices. Instructional leaders must help translate the EBPs and HLPs into actionable school-wide priorities by aligning professional development, coaching, and collaborative planning structures around them. Through intentional leadership, administrators can create systems that allow teachers to study, practice, and reflect on these practices within authentic classroom contexts. School leaders are instrumental in creating conditions that support sustained use of EBPs and HLPs and by fostering a culture of collaboration, promoting data-informed decision-making, and providing structured opportunities for professional learning communities, leaders help teachers move beyond surface-level awareness to deep implementation of these practices.

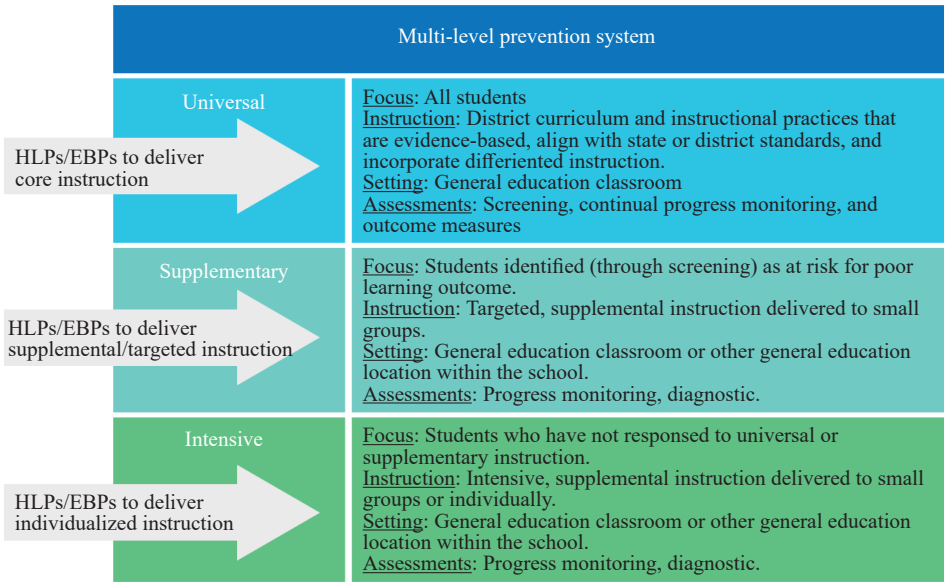


Figure 4. EBP and HLP alignment to a multi-tiered system of support
Note: This figure was reproduced with permission from McCray et al. (2017). High leverage practices and evidence-based practices: A promising pair

3.5 *Professional development and implementation of UDL, EBPs, and HLPs*

When the UDL framework is used in tandem with EBPs and HLPs, it allows educators to plan for and implement teaching strategies that best support students to acquire and master knowledge through an individualized manner. To justify a system-wide shift toward inclusive excellence, it is essential for school administrators to view UDL, EBPs, and HLPs not as isolated initiatives, but as a cohesive, school-wide instructional framework. Research indicates that when administrators champion the integration of these models, they move beyond mere compliance to foster a culture of proactive accessibility (McLeskey et al., 2022). UDL provides the overarching "blueprint" for curriculum design, ensuring that environments are flexible enough to meet diverse needs from the outset. By embedding EBP and HLPs into the general education setting, leaders provide teachers with a standardized toolkit for success. However, administrators should consider the approach for effective implementation of inclusive practices.

The successful implementation of these practices requires that administrators commit to professional development and resource allocation. Administrators must ensure that the transition from theory to classroom practice is supported through sustained coaching and collaborative planning time (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). When HLPs, such as the use of explicit instruction and cognitive scaffolding, are normalized across all grade levels, the 'siloed' nature of special education services can become diminished. This systemic approach is vital because it addresses the variability of all learners, reducing the need for intensive interventions by making the general education environment more robust and responsive (Benedict et al., 2016). Ultimately, the administrative mandate for a unified instructional framework is the primary driver for narrowing the achievement gap and fulfilling the ethical and legal promises of the LRE. To ensure the effective, school-wide implementation of inclusive frameworks like UDL and High Leverage Practices, administrators must move beyond "one-off" training sessions toward systemic, structural support. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for leadership-driven instructional change.

Building on this foundation, administrators should implement structures that ensure inclusion is systematically supported rather than individually negotiated. This includes investing in sustained, job-embedded professional development that strengthens educator capacity to implement inclusive instruction frameworks such as UDL, EBPs, and HLPs. Professional development should be coupled with intentional efforts to foster collaborative partnerships between general and special educators, including clearly defined shared accountability for student outcomes. Administrators should also leverage the master scheduling process as a strategic tool, ensuring that time is protected for co-planning, co-teaching, and the delivery of services within the general education setting whenever appropriate. In tandem, leaders should establish data-driven continuous improvement cycles that use disaggregated placement, achievement, and

engagement data to identify patterns of exclusion and monitor progress toward more inclusive outcomes. Administrators can support teachers with training and coaching to implement UDL, HLPs, and EBPs. Scaffolded professional development can support educator training for the implementation of targeted strategies specific to the individualized needs of their students.

3.5.1 *Scaffolded professional development*

Educators must have multiple and repeated opportunities through high-quality, scaffolded professional development to continue learning and practicing strategies related to academics and behavior. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identify critical practices for effective professional development which include: 1) Content focus, 2) Incorporation of active learning utilizing adult learning theory, 3) Support of collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts, 4) Use of models and modeling of effective practice, 5) Provision of coaching and expert support, 6) Opportunities for feedback and reflection, and 7) Sustained duration (p. 4). Scaffolding, in particular, serves as a critical bridge within this framework, allowing administrators to provide temporary supports that are systematically faded as educators gain mastery, thereby ensuring that high expectations are met without sacrificing instructional rigor (McCray et al., 2017). It is essential that professional development contains longitudinal learning opportunities that take complex topics and/or skills and break them into smaller components, so that educators have opportunities to learn and practice these specific strategies in their classrooms throughout the duration of the academic school year.

For school-wide change to take hold, administrators must apply the same principle of scaffolding to teacher learning as teachers do for students. Rather than a single workshop, administrators should design a multi-tiered professional development arc. When designing professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators should begin with modeling (demonstrating the practice), then move to guided practice (co-teaching or peer observations), and end with independent application (classroom implementation with feedback). By gradually fading administrative and coaching support as teacher efficacy grows, leaders ensure that high-fidelity implementation becomes a permanent part of the school culture (Knight, 2017).

3.5.2 *Establish professional learning communities and peer coaching*

Another option for administrators would be to restructure the school schedule to provide dedicated time for collaborative planning within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Within these groups, teachers can engage in opportunities to collaboratively design a UDL-aligned lesson and observe its implementation. Research suggests that peer coaching, where teachers provide non-evaluative, objective feedback to one another, is significantly more effective at changing instructional practices than traditional administrative evaluations (Benedict et al., 2016).

3.5.3 *Utilize data-driven instructional supervision*

Table 6. Universal design for learning observation tool

Element	Observable evidence	Observed?
Multiple means of representation	Information is provided in more than one format (e.g., text, video, audio, or tactile models).	
Multiple means of action & expression	Students are provided options to demonstrate knowledge (e.g., written, oral, digital, or artistic).	
Multiple means of engagement	Students have choices in tasks; the "Why" of the lesson is clearly stated and relevant to students.	

Effective implementation of UDL, EBPs, and HLPs requires administrators to serve as instructional leaders who are visible in the classroom. This involves using specific walk-through rubrics that look for evidence of UDL (e.g., multiple

means of representation) and HLPs (e.g., explicit instruction and scaffolding). By collecting and sharing school-wide data on these practices, administrators can identify areas where educators are able to excel and specific areas where teachers may need additional tiered support or resources (McLeskey et al., 2018). Tables 6 and 7 provide examples of simple observation rubrics that could be used to quickly identify elements of UDL or HLPs being implemented in the classroom by educators.

Table 7. High leverage practice observation tool

Element	Observable evidence	Observed?
Explicit instruction	The teacher uses "I Do, We Do, You Do" modeling to introduce new concepts.	
Instructional scaffolding	Temporary supports are visible (e.g., graphic organizers, sentence starters, or checklists).	
Immediate/specific feedback	Teacher provides corrective feedback that is specific to the learning goal and task-oriented.	
Flexible grouping	Students are working in varied groups based on need or interest, not just static "ability" levels.	

3.5.4 *Strategic resource allocation and time protection*

One of the most significant barriers to inclusive practice is the lack of time for general and special educators to co-plan. Administrators must prioritize the protection of collaboration time in the master schedule. Educators must be given the opportunity to work together across content areas and grade levels to implement UDL, EBPs, and HLPs for the purpose of fostering inclusive practices. School administrators have a unique opportunity to have an enormous impact on the learning process for their students. Through differentiated learning opportunities that incorporate UDL, HLPs, and EBPs students, all students, regardless of ability or disability have a greater opportunity to access curriculum and improve academic performance. Please see Table 8 for resources available to school administrators for the implementation of UDL, EBPs, and HLPs.

Table 8. Resources for the implementation of UDL, EBPs, and HLPs

Resource	Access to resource
Building and sustaining inclusive educational practices	https://www.ed.gov/media/document/inclusive-practices-guidance-109436.pdf
Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)	https://udlguidelines.cast.org/
Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR Center)	https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/hometest/
High leverage practice crosswalk	https://highleveragepractices.org/high-leverage-practices-crosswalk
High leverage practices leadership guide	https://highleveragepractices.org/hlp-leadership-guides
What works clearninghouse	https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc

To ensure that school-wide change is both deeply rooted and sustainable, the aforementioned components must operate as an integrated system rather than isolated initiatives. By synthesizing high-quality professional development

practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) with a multi-tiered arc of administrative support, schools can create a predictable pathway toward teacher mastery. This process relies on the systematic fading of scaffolding as teacher efficacy grows, moving from expert modeling to independent, high-fidelity classroom implementation (Knight, 2017; McCray et al., 2017). Furthermore, by embedding this arc within the collaborative structures of professional learning opportunities and reinforcing it through data-driven instructional supervision, administrators provide the longitudinal support necessary to translate complex UDL, EBPs, and HLP frameworks into permanent fixtures of the school culture (Benedict et al., 2016; McLeskey et al., 2018). Figure 5 illustrates this comprehensive Multi-Tiered Professional Development Arc, highlighting the relationship between administrative scaffolding, collaborative peer structures, and the continuous cycle of feedback and reflection.

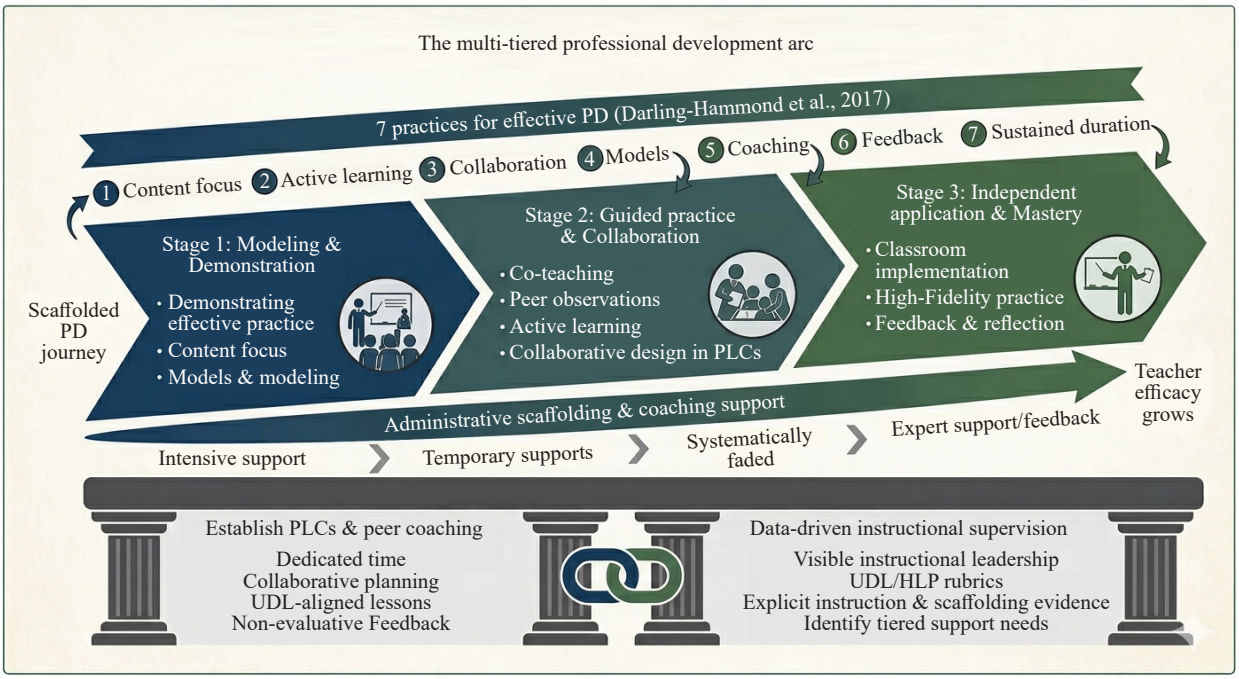


Figure 5. Professional development plan for administrators

4. Discussion

The transition toward truly inclusive educational environments requires a fundamental shift in both administrative philosophy and technical execution. As outlined in this article, the role of the school leader is not merely to oversee compliance, but to actively cultivate a culture where diversity across students is viewed as an institutional asset rather than a deficit to be managed. Administrators who prioritize inclusive practices and provide the necessary infrastructure for teachers to implement UDL, EBPs, and HLPs with confidence and efficacy. This systemic support, ranging from protected co-planning time to the strategic use of data-sharing platforms, transforms inclusion from an isolated classroom experiment into a sustainable, school-wide reality. Ultimately, the success of inclusive education hinges on a nuanced understanding of each student's unique profile. While federal categories provide a legal framework for eligibility, the intra-categorical variability among students demands that leaders move away from generalized instructional strategies in favor of individualized, evidence-based supports. By bridging the gap between district-level leadership and the specific legal and clinical needs of the student, administrators can ensure that the promise of IDEA (2004) is realized. When leadership is rooted in advocacy and equity, schools move beyond simple integration toward a model of genuine belonging that empowers every student to reach their full academic and social potential.

The findings presented in this manuscript based on the review of literature, reinforce a well-established, yet

persistently uneven, landscape of inclusive education in which access to the general education environment is mediated not only by student need, but by the organizational capacity and leadership practices. Consistent with prior research, the variability in placement across disability categories reflects systemic inequities in how schools operationalize the LRE mandate (Hehir et al., 2016). Students identified with high-incidence disabilities are more frequently educated in general education settings, whereas students with more complex support needs are disproportionately served in more restrictive environments. This pattern aligns with McLeskey et al. (2012) who argue that inclusive schools are often contingent upon leadership-driven cultural shifts that challenge deficit-based assumptions about disability. Without such shifts, categorical labels may continue to function as proxies for placement decisions, thereby constraining equitable access.

The integration of UDL, EBPs, and HLPs emerge as a critical mechanism for disrupting these patterns. As research suggests, when these frameworks are implemented in a cohesive manner, they strengthen the capacity of general education environments to accommodate a wider range of learners, thereby reducing reliance on pull-out or segregated services (Benedict et al., 2016; McLeskey et al., 2017). UDL functions as a proactive design framework that minimizes barriers before they signal individual intervention and when coupled with HLPs, schools are better positioned to provide tiered support within inclusive classrooms (McCray et al., 2017). The present findings suggest that schools with lower inclusion rates for certain disability groups may lack the systemic integration of these frameworks, reinforcing the need for leadership-driven instructional coherence.

The emphasis for enhanced professional development can also be a lever for change, and is strongly supported in research. Effective professional development that includes sustained duration, active engagement, and alignment with instructional goals, has been shown to significantly influence teacher practices and student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2001). The recommendation for scaffolded, job-embedded professional development aligns with research indicating that one-time workshops are insufficient for producing meaningful instructional change (Knight, 2017). Instead, ongoing coaching, peer collaboration, and data-informed feedback are necessary to ensure high-fidelity implementation of inclusive practices which are of utmost importance given that teacher efficacy is closely linked to both the adoption of inclusive practices and teacher retention (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that positions school administrators as central agents in advancing inclusive education. Leadership that prioritizes data use, resource allocation, and collaboration are essential for translating inclusive philosophy into practice (Grillo, 2022; Sider et al., 2017). By identifying exclusion risk points and aligning them with targeted interventions, administrators can move beyond compliance toward systemic transformation. In doing so, they not only uphold the legal mandates of IDEA, but also advance a more equitable and responsive educational system.

5. Recommendations

Collectively, the literature posits that school administrators are central architects of an inclusive school system, moving beyond procedural compliance toward cultivating environments where accessibility, collaboration, and belonging are embedded within the entire culture of the school (Steed et al., 2024). Research across multiple disability contexts noted that effective inclusion is not achieved through placement alone, but through intentional leadership that prioritizes belonging, accessibility, and a shared responsibility related to student placement and learning experiences which collectively point to the critical role administrators play in shaping inclusive systems that extend beyond compliance and toward meaningful participation for all students. For school leaders, it is of utmost importance to adopt a systems-level inclusion mindset grounded in flexibility, responsiveness, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), paired with intentional promotion and professional development for all staff on EBPs and HLPs across instructional settings (Benedict et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2001; Hallahan et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2013; McLeskey et al., 2017).

Similarly, parent perspectives and input related to inclusion emphasized the importance of students feeling valued, understood, and genuinely welcomed within the school community. Practical guidance for administrators seeking to strengthen inclusive school cultures should ensure that accessibility is embedded into daily school practices and procedures, rather than treated as an accommodation added after the fact (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). This could include supporting flexible classroom environments, proactively addressing individualized student needs, and

a centeredness focused on strong family-school partnerships. Administrators need to create structures that normalize inclusive design and encourage proactive collaboration with families to foster environments where belonging becomes a foundational expectation rather than an aspirational goal (Lepore-Stevens & Sosland, 2025; Miyauchi et al., 2022).

Finally, the importance of school leadership is further reinforced by research examining early-career educators and the disconnect between their preparation and the realities of actual implementation in a school/classroom setting (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). Inclusive leadership requires more than philosophical support for inclusion; it requires active organizational commitment where school administrators establish and communicate a school-wide vision that values the inclusion of all students, with and without disabilities (Benedict et al., 2016; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Administrators must also engage general education teachers as active participants in inclusion efforts by encouraging them to partake in inclusive opportunities rather than merely comply with legal requirements and work to systematically identify and remove structural barriers that limit access, participation, and engagement for students with disabilities in collaboration with other school staff.

6. Limitations and future research

While this manuscript synthesizes national placement data and existing research to identify exclusion risk points, several limitations must be addressed. First, the limited number of empirical research studies that specifically address the implementation of inclusive practices at the administrator level. A lack of research in this specific area is indicative of the lack of support that administrators may receive in supporting teachers school-wide in the implementation of inclusive practices. Additionally, the reliance on aggregated national data constrains the ability to account for local contextual variables such as district resources, staffing models, or demographic differences. Placement patterns may vary significantly across state, districts, and individual schools, limiting the generalizability of broad conclusions. Future research should prioritize multi-level analyses that integrate school and district level data to better understand how contextual factors influence inclusion practices.

Next, the interpretation of placement data as indicative of systemic barriers, while supported by existing literature, remains inferential. The data do not directly capture the decision-making processes of IEP teams, nor do they reflect the quality or intensity of services provided in each setting. Therefore, conclusions regarding the causality between administrative practices and placement outcomes should be approached with caution. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are needed to examine how specific leadership actions (e.g., scheduling, professional development, and staffing allocations) directly influence student placement trajectories.

Finally, this manuscript primarily centers on structural and instructional factors, with less attention given to student and family perspectives. Inclusion is not solely defined by physical placement but also by a sense of belonging and meaningful participation (Hehir et al., 2016). Future studies should incorporate qualitative data from students with disabilities and their families to better understand how placement decisions impact their educational experiences. Such research would provide a more holistic understanding of inclusion and inform more student-centered activities.

Declaration of generative AI use

Google Gemini and OpenAI ChatGPT were used as assistive tools for the design and preparation of certain figures in this manuscript. The figures were developed by the authors based on the article's original content, data, and cited sources. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and presentation of all figure content. Relevant source attributions are provided in the corresponding figure notes and references where applicable.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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