Why Students with IEPs Are Still Left Out—And How to Change That with Deeper Learning

Students at a partner school in Grand Island, Nebraska, engage in deeper learning. Every student—including students with IEPs—is integrated in this rigorous and supportive learning environment.

By: Michael D. Toth and Dr. Merewyn E. Lyons

We visit thousands of classrooms every year looking for indicators of rigor and student-centered learning during RigorWalks. Too often, we see students with IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) situated on the periphery of learning in inclusion classrooms.

It is visually obvious when you enter these classrooms that there is a different classroom experience for students with and without IEPs. This distinction means students with IEPs are often not fully integrated into the learning process, which

negatively impacts their learning outcomes and disconnects them socially from a true sense of belonging with other students.

This isn't due to a lack of care or effort from educators. Rather, it occurs because teachers are saddled with a legacy model of teacher-centered instruction that is not designed to meet the needs of today's learners. Simply layering additional strategies on the foundation of teacher-centered instruction has not been enough.

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Contrast this with classrooms implementing the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning that helps teachers implement student-led team learning with more rigorous tasks. The emphasis is on mixed ability teams of students leading their own learning process with rich dialogue around the content. Students have roles and protocols for helping one another as they complete the learning task. Protocols ensure all students are participating equally in the learning. These student-led teams soon form strong social bonds during the learning process.

When we visit these classrooms, students with IEPs are not immediately apparent, even to expert observers. That is because these students are fully enculturated into the team-based learning process and feel academically and socially integrated as valued members of the team.

To truly transform the experience and achievement of students with IEPs in inclusion classrooms, we need a different model of instruction—one that allows *all* learners to engage in deeper learning.

Real Classroom Example: What a Fully Integrated Classroom Looks Like

Starr Elementary in Grand Island, Nebraska, worked with our team to shift from traditional teacher-centered instruction to a model that would integrate all students into the learning. An observer from our Applied Research Center shared the following story after visiting a third-grade inclusion classroom.

Toward the end of the school year, I visited a classroom where students were working in teams of four. The students were used to working with each other by this time—debating, discussing, and following the procedures of a high-performance team. I noticed one student, Josh, who had a small behavior reminder card taped to his desk. He was sitting on a cushion, and he also had the option of using his desk as a standing desk.

When I asked the teacher about Josh, she told me he had an individualized education program (IEP) that allowed him to use different strategies to manage his ADHD as well as his emotions. I wondered if the other students would be frustrated by his accommodations, or with having to coach and support him in the work. But it turned out the opposite was true. Josh was able to participate because the other team members treated him as an equal. I watched closely as they took turns talking, and when Josh participated, they did a group high-five. I asked the teacher if she had coached the team to do this as a way to motivate them. "No," she assured me. "They came up with this strategy on their own."

The students worked as a team and didn't give up on each other. I noted that this was a group who probably wouldn't choose to work with each other under other circumstances, but their different backgrounds actually helped them learn. The team facilitator and other members learned patience, empathy, and peer support. And Josh learned to feel accepted, truly part of a team, despite his disabilities.

– Sara Croll in *The Power of Student Teams* (Toth & Sousa, 2019, p. 44)

Shifting Away from Teacher-Centered Instruction Is a Prerequisite for Fully Integrating Students with IEPs

Most Classrooms Are Teacher-Centered

Students with IEPs—like most students—experience traditional, teacher-centered instruction in the vast majority of classrooms.

The teacher-centered, legacy model of instruction is one that virtually all teachers have been taught to deliver (Cuban, 1984; Mehta & Fine, 2017).

The hallmarks of teacher-centered instruction are:

- The teacher's voice dominates the lesson
- Students listen quietly to the teacher
- The teacher prompts students throughout lesson activities
- Students exercise little or no voice or choice in the learning process (Patall, 2024)
- For students with disabilities, this instruction too often includes low-rigor worksheets and isolated seatwork (Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014)

This kind of instruction was not designed to develop students into independent critical thinkers (Mehta, 2022), nor was it designed to benefit students with disabilities.

For deeper learning to happen, all students—including students with IEPs—must experience student-led team learning.

The Benefits of Student-Led Team Learning for Inclusion

In authentically student-centered instruction—as Instructional Empowerment defines it—"teachers plan lessons with group tasks aligned to academic standards. Students working together have clear roles and individual accountability as well as

group accountability. There are norms for student talk and use of academic vocabulary…The teacher alternates between delivering short mini-lectures, laying and scaffolding foundational concepts, and encouraging group work. This allows students to engage meaningfully with the content as they produce visible and audible evidence of their learning while they interact with their peers" (Toth & Sousa, 2019, p. 24-25).

All students, including students with IEPs, are integrated in classrooms that are authentically student-centered.

The benefits of inclusion in a student-centered classroom include:

- **A sense of belonging and acceptance** as students of all abilities learn and grow together. This helps to reduce stigma and promote acceptance and understanding among peers.
- **Enhanced social skills** as students with IEPs interact with peers in a regular classroom setting and build meaningful relationships.
- **Equal access** to educational opportunities between students with and without disabilities.
- **Improved academic outcomes** as students with IEPs are exposed to the same curriculum and high expectations as students in general education.
- **Preparation for the real-world** by exposing students with disabilities to different environments and teaching them how to navigate social and academic challenges.

All students, including students with IEPs, are integrated in classrooms that are authentically student-centered.

Integrating Students with IEPs into Deeper Learning Classrooms

Researchers at our Applied Research Center spent decades analyzing pedagogy in thousands of classrooms. Our findings show that student-centered instruction with

deeper learning is best achieved through a research-based pedagogy model. This model helps teachers and students shift from teacher-centered instruction and to team-based learning with higher rigor tasks.

The **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning™** is designed to support ALL students. There is strong alignment between the research base of effective practices for students with IEPs and our model.

Research Base for Students with IEPs	How the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning Implements the Research
Students with IEPs Benefit from Explicit, Integrated Routines Students with disabilities develop stronger cognitive processing, executive function and self-regulation skills when provided with instructional routines and processes that are systematic, explicit, and fully integrated within teaching of academic content and skills (Vaughn et al., 2015, 2017).	**The Model Provides Student and Teacher Resources with Explicit, Integrated Routines** Students use step-by-step guides and videos for implementing student-led teams. Resources include student role cards, agree/disagree cards with discussion starter stems, and team norms and protocols to help teams self-manage their learning.
Students with IEPs Benefit from Team-Based Learning Learning activities in teams of 3-4 allow students with disabilities to build and extend on their learning in a wide variety of advanced academic content and skills (Vaughn et al., 2015, 2017) and are effective in improving their reading skills (Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014).	**The Model Is Designed with Team-Based Structures and Support for Academic Discourse** Students use team-based structures to engage in rigorous, grade level discussions of academic content that elicits critical thinking and builds vocabulary and logical reasoning.

Students with IEPs Benefit from Mixed Ability Groups Participation in mixed ability groups benefits students with disabilities by providing peer support within challenging learning tasks and opportunities to learn and exercise leadership skills (Klimaitis & Mullen, 2021).	**The Model Provides Teachers with Supports and Protocols to Develop Mixed Ability Teams** Teachers intentionally compose student teams to include a wide range of ability. Structures and protocols within teams guide students to support each other in their learning. As students develop greater fluency with their teaming skills, teachers release more autonomy to the teams to self-manage their learning tasks and exercise more leadership skills. Each member of the learning team is expected to contribute fully.
Students with IEPs Benefit from Peer Tutoring When students with disabilities engage in peer-tutoring, both as the recipient and as the tutor, they develop higher levels of self-esteem as they improve their academic skills (Elbaum et al., 1999).	**The Model Is Designed for Peer Tutoring and Support** As students master deeper learning skills in their teams and peer coach and tutor one another, they gain greater confidence and self-esteem. They also experience a strong sense of belonging, empathy for others, and acceptance. Student teams form a student-owned learning culture that ensures all members can contribute their full effort to reach their maximum potential.
Students with IEPs Benefit from Specific Learning Goals and Self-Monitoring Teachers can support cognitive processing by providing students with IEPs with specific learning goals with benchmarks that allow them to monitor their own progress toward attaining those goals (Vaughn et al., 2015, 2017).	**The Model Is Designed with Learning Targets and Self and Team Monitoring** Students receive specific learning targets and success criteria with which students then track their own progress during each team task. There is a specific Learning Monitor role, which ensures every student in the team is making progress to achieving the lesson's learning target.

Students with IEPs Benefit from Individualized Teacher Support Placing students in small groups makes it possible for teachers to provide interventions to students with disabilities without impacting learning time for other students (Elbaum et al., 1999).	**The Model Frees Up Teachers to Support Students with IEPs Without Impacting Learning Time for Other Students** Students self-managing their learning in teams provides more time for teachers to monitor and coach teams in their learning. Students continue learning in their teams while the teacher pulls individual students or a small group for brief interventions when needed to overcome learning difficulties, then returns them to continue working in their teams.
Students with IEPs Benefit when Academic Development Is Integrated into Collaborative Learning Students with IEPs benefit from deliberate, explicit, and systematic instruction in critical foundational skills in reading, mathematics, and writing, but these skills develop best through opportunities to learn in cooperation with peers in which all students are engaged and persist in challenging tasks (Vaughn et al., 2015, 2017).	**The Model Explicitly Develops Students' Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Skills in Teams for Fully Integrated Collaborative Learning** The model provides research-based resources and deliberate, systematic, and explicit practices to develop student self-regulation, impulse control, appropriate communication and other interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. These skills help students become more effective, collaborative academic learners in their teams as they can persist in challenging tasks.

Empowered to Learn: Insights from a Director of Specialized Student Services

Amanda Leatherby is the Director of Specialized Student Services at School District U-46, the second largest district in Illinois. U-46 partners with Instructional Empowerment to implement the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning districtwide, including in classrooms serving students with IEPs. High expectations for students with disabilities is a cornerstone of the work Amanda leads. She highlights how the model supports students of all abilities to develop agency, which is the ability to self-direct their own learning.

"Instructional Empowerments Model of Instruction has shown positive benefits for our students with disabilities. It offers a structured and clear approach to increased rigor and academic instruction. Each lesson begins with clarity around the standard, learning target, and success criteria, which helps create the roadmap for students to know where they are going and how they will know they are successful. Even our students with moderate to significant disabilities are using these tools, with visual support and technology tools to enhance understanding and participation.

When teachers use the workshop model or academic teaming, we've seen how powerful it can be for our students with disabilities to have an assigned role within the group. That role, combined with explicit instruction on how to fulfill it, gives them a sense of purpose and participation in the learning task that is aligned to the learning target. It empowers students to own their learning, ask questions, and take pride in their progress. That's how we build student agency, and it's absolutely possible for students of all ability levels."

– Amanda Leatherby, Director of Specialized Student Services, School District U-46

Results from Students with IEPs Participating in the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Students with disabilities represent a wide variety of abilities. We do not suggest that the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning is a substitute for the specialized services that your students require under their IEPs.

We do, however, believe that your students with IEPs will experience greater success in the team-based learning environment of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, and results from our partner schools and districts support that.

Reduced Achievement Gaps

Students with disabilities in classrooms implementing the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning have narrowed the achievement gap with their peers without disabilities.

The Applied Research Center analyzed data from 2023-2025 across 4 districts (Instructional Empowerment Applied Research Center, 2025).

- Students with disabilities in the elementary grades (1-5) have closed the achievement gap by **12-58% in English Language Arts** and **16-90% in Math**.
- Students with disabilities in the middle grades (6-8) have closed the achievement gap by **9-58% in English Language Arts** and by **14-92% in Math**.

During the pandemic disrupted 2020-21 school year, students with disabilities at partner school Lakewood Elementary saw significant gap closures.

- **47-109% in English Language Arts** (Percentages over 100% mean the gap closed entirely)
- **11-75% in Math**

Improved Graduation Rates

At North High School in Des Moines, Iowa, 21% of students were classified as special education. Their graduation rates were much lower than that of their peers in general education.

After one year of implementing deeper learning, **graduation rates for students in special education increased by 16.42%**, nearly closing the gap with students in general education. See figure 1.

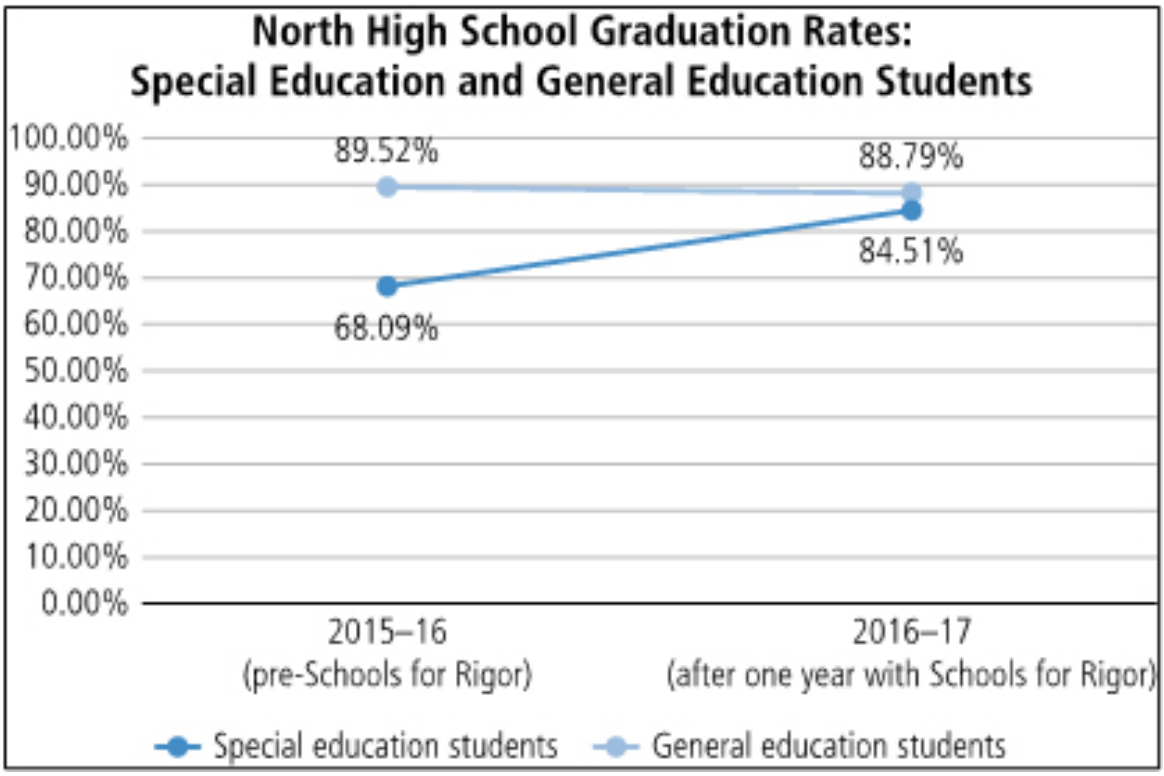

Figure 1. North High School participated in Schools for Rigor, which is now called the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning (Toth & Sousa, 2019, p. 96).

Teachers Share the Impact of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning on Their Students

"I think my SPED students have benefited… because I see that they're more actively engaged instead of letting someone else do it. They're coaching one another and helping each other learn. So I think it's helping all students become engaged in more complex tasks than what we're used to."

***– Second grade teacher**, Des Moines, Iowa*

"I think that this has made a positive change for my students and their learning because they are becoming more independent students. They're not relying on me to answer every single question. As a special education teacher, those students really look for confirmation from their teacher to know, "yes, I'm doing this right, or no, I'm not doing this right – I need to fix it". Working with a partner or a group, they know that they are doing it correctly without me having to tell them."

***– Teacher of special education students**, Grand Island, Nebraska*

Students' Own Words About Learning in Teams

Three high school students with disabilities in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, participated in an interview about the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning in 2024. The names used below are not the actual student's names.

"Throughout middle school and high school, I used to be really shy. And I used to get bullied because I don't talk.

I like group work because it helps me communicate more and it helps me learn better. And I like to talk about, like, my thoughts and my opinions about something.

It makes me feel smart when I'm with people. Because when I communicate with other kids, that's how I learn. I can't just sit there and not be able to communicate with the kids to make sure I'm doing something right. It just makes me feel smart."

***– Anne**, 12th grader with autism*

"If it's like a whole classroom, I can't really talk that much, but I don't mind it in a group. So that's how I feel comfortable.

A lot of communication is really important, especially after high school. If you're like trying to find a job or somewhere you have to talk.

I've been more open and communicating with other kids than last year which helped me a lot because now I have more new friends than I had last year, so it really helped me out a lot."

***– Parker**, 10th grader with dyslexia*

I don't really focus much. I have ADHD, so I can't, unless I'm hyper focused on something, I can't pay attention.

The teaming was helpful. Too noisy, was my initial thought. And then, what I think now is, this is okay, I can participate in the class.

I've gotten to the point where I can talk about why I feel the way I feel. I've been more talkative in my classes.

***– Jerry**, 11th grader with ADHD*

Benefiting ALL Students in an Era of Uncertain Funding

IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004) requires schools to ensure that students with IEPs have the maximum opportunity to learn alongside their peers without disabilities (Congressional Research Service, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2015, 2017).

In this period of uncertain federal funding and lower full-time equivalent (FTE) funding from the states due to lower student enrollment, district leaders and principals are faced with difficult questions:

1. How can we **improve educational quality for all students** while fully providing for the level of special educational services needed by students with disabilities?

2. How do we ensure that limited budgets are allocated in ways that **promote inclusion and increase rigor**?

The answer lies in a scalable, research-based model of instruction that will fulfill IDEA's promise and equip general education teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to support all students, including students with disabilities. Simply

layering additional strategies onto traditional teacher-centered instruction has not been enough to ensure meaningful inclusion.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning provides a proven approach to making this vision a reality. District leaders can create classrooms where *all* students, including those with disabilities, are fully engaged, challenged, and prepared for future success.

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About the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

There has always been deeper learning for *some* students – but not for *all* students in every classroom, every day. Now it is possible with the research-based Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning™, which provides every teacher and all students with the professional learning, support, and resources to achieve deeper, more rigorous learning of the curriculum.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning places students at the center of their learning, shifting from traditional teacher-directed methods to student-led team learning. In this approach, students collaborate in structured, interdependent teams, guided by clear roles and responsibilities. Unlike traditional grouping, this approach ensures equal participation and accountability – fostering deeper understanding, critical thinking, and collaboration.

We guide you through the process, starting with a well-designed pilot involving volunteer principals and teachers, then scaling success with a districtwide rollout that meets the district's goals, timeline, and resources.

About the Authors

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Michael D. Toth is founder and CEO of Instructional Empowerment (IE) and leads IE's Applied Research Center. He is also the author of the multi-award-winning book *The Power of Student Teams* with David Sousa; author of *Who Moved My Standards*; and co-author with Robert Marzano of multiple books. Most recently, he co-authored peer-reviewed research articles published in academic journals in collaboration with researchers Lindsey Devers Basileo, Merewyn Lyons, Barbara Otto, and Natalie Vannini.

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