

Student Supports: Introduction

Center on Instruction

Today's students are extraordinarily diverse, representing a wide range of experiences, cultures, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, disabilities, and perspectives. These students all differ in their instructional and support needs, but all are expected to be successful. Districts and schools must organize themselves to ensure that every student has a pathway to success and is supported through a wide variety of programs and instructional approaches. This chapter will focus on supports for struggling and at-risk students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students transitioning from middle to high school. Support can come from school-based personnel, community partners and volunteers, parents, and families and should include a wide range of research-based strategies designed with flexibility in mind.

Often the first step in serving diverse students is identifying those in need of support and intervention. Screening for deficits in academics and behavioral functions (for example, self-management and relationship skills) and monitoring progress at regular intervals are effective ways of identifying students needing support or intervention. Districts will often play a critical role in assisting schools with the selection of appropriate measures to accurately assess these needs.

After assessing needs, schools frequently need guidance on instructional methods appropriate for each student. For instance, students with disabilities must receive high-quality, research-based instruction within the least restrictive environment. English language learners require effective instruction to build academic language proficiency and guided instruction to build vocabulary. These students, along with other students identified as at risk, may also require supplemental services provided outside the general classroom.

These could take the form of one-on-one or small-group tutoring in one or more academic skill areas, specific interventions targeting social-emotional needs (such as social and emotional learning), or targeted language interventions.

Students transitioning from middle school to high school often need targeted support. This period in a student's life is sometimes characterized by disengagement and a decline in grades, motivation, and attendance. Furthermore, many students enter ninth grade unprepared to manage the increased academic and social expectations. Research supports the implementation of transition programs and suggests that these interventions are linked to positive student outcomes.

Community partners and students' families can be great resources to schools in need of improvement. Many schools have developed partnerships with various community entities (e.g., businesses, universities, and faith-based and non-profit organizations) and receive support in the form of volunteers for tutoring, donations of school supplies, assistance with after-school programs, and support for educational employment opportunities. Furthermore, engaging parents in their children's academic progress has shown to improve students' learning. These interventions should occur in a positive school climate where students feel safe, where the academic and behavioral competencies of all students are supported, and where instruction responds to student needs. A positive school climate is associated with good achievement gains and a reduction in behavior problems, achievement gaps, and dropout rates.