

Strategic Investment in Special Education: Enhancing Quality, Equity, and Outcomes for All Students

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Executive Summary

Public education systems across the United States are facing increasing pressure to meet the academic and developmental needs of diverse student populations while managing workforce shortages and resource constraints. Oregon reflects these national trends. Schools are serving students with increasingly complex learning needs while simultaneously experiencing shortages of specialized professionals required to deliver special education services.

Students with disabilities represent approximately 15 percent of Oregon's student population, a rate comparable to the national average of approximately 15 percent reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023). However, the intensity of services required by many students has increased over time. For example, the number of students identified with autism has nearly doubled since the 2007–2008 school year, and developmental delay classifications have increased significantly during the same period.

At the same time, schools are facing significant workforce shortages. National survey data indicate that 76 percent of school leaders report difficulty filling special education teaching positions (EdWeek Research Center, 2024). Oregon reflects similar challenges, with more than 1,000 open education related positions reported statewide in 2023, including teachers, counselors, and support staff.

Despite these challenges, research consistently demonstrates that inclusive instructional practices improve academic outcomes and social engagement for students with disabilities while strengthening instructional quality for all learners. Strategic investment in inclusive education, workforce development, and coordinated service systems provides a practical pathway for improving educational equity and long-term student outcomes.

This report recommends three primary actions:

- Expand implementation of inclusive instructional practices and high leverage teaching strategies across Oregon districts.
- Strengthen the educator workforce through recruitment, preparation, and retention initiatives.
- Build coordinated partnerships among education systems, families, and community organizations to support comprehensive student services.

These strategies represent scalable and sustainable solutions that can improve outcomes for students with disabilities while strengthening Oregon's education system.

Introduction

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this report is to examine the current landscape of special education in Oregon and to identify evidence-based strategies that improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. The report outlines practical approaches that can be implemented by the Oregon Department of Education and local education agencies within existing fiscal and operational constraints.

These strategies prioritize inclusive instructional practices, workforce sustainability, and coordinated systems of support that allow students with disabilities to access instruction alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate as determined by their individualized education programs.

The Core Challenge

Ensuring equitable access to high quality education for students with disabilities requires systems that are both responsive and sustainable. Schools must provide individualized supports while maintaining access to grade level curriculum and inclusive learning environments.

However, increasing student needs, workforce shortages, and uneven access to specialized resources create challenges for many districts. Rural and geographically isolated communities often experience additional barriers related to staffing availability and access to specialized expertise.

Addressing these challenges requires strategic investment in instructional practices, educator preparation, and collaborative support systems that strengthen both teaching capacity and service delivery.

Background and Literature Review

The Diverse Student Population:

Oregon schools serve a diverse population of students whose experiences reflect a wide range of economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

Statewide demographic data indicate that 74 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, highlighting the importance of educational systems that address barriers related to poverty and access to resources. In addition, 18 percent of students are identified as ever English learners, demonstrating the importance of instructional approaches that support linguistic diversity.

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Housing instability and student mobility also affect educational access. Approximately 3 percent of Oregon students are identified as experiencing homelessness, and 13.9 percent are considered mobile students, meaning they change schools during the academic year.

Oregon's student population is also becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Current data indicate that 59.7 percent of students identify as White, 25 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino, 7.1 percent identify as multiracial, 4 percent identify as Asian, 2.3 percent identify as Black or African American, 1.1 percent identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.8 percent identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Students receiving special education services represent approximately 15 percent of the statewide student population, reflecting the significant role that special education plays within Oregon's broader education system.

Research consistently demonstrates that inclusive educational environments support stronger academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities. Students who learn alongside their peers demonstrate improved academic performance, stronger communication skills, and increased postsecondary participation (McLeskey et al., 2017; Sailor et al., 2021).

Inclusive environments also benefit nondisabled peers by promoting collaboration, empathy, and shared problem solving within classrooms (Hattie, 2023).

The Early Intervention Foundation (EI/ECSE):

Early childhood education plays a critical role in supporting developmental growth and preparing children for school success. Oregon's Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education programs serve children from birth through age five and emphasize services delivered in natural and inclusive environments.

Providing developmental services in homes and community-based settings allows children to build communication, motor, and social skills within familiar environments while strengthening family engagement in the learning process.

Early identification of developmental needs allows children to receive targeted supports such as speech and language therapy, audiological services, or consultation from specialized educators. For example, students who are deaf or hard of hearing may receive services including audiological support, sign language interpretation, consultation from teachers of the deaf or hard of hearing, and speech language instruction.

Research demonstrates that early intervention programs significantly improve cognitive development, communication skills, and long-term educational outcomes for children with disabilities (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Guralnick, 2017).

Investing in early childhood systems is therefore one of the most effective strategies for improving educational equity and reducing the need for more intensive services later in a student's educational experience.

Problem Analysis: System Needs and Policy Gaps

Escalating Intensity of Student Need

Across the United States, schools are experiencing shifts in both the number of students receiving special education services and the complexity of the supports required. Oregon reflects these national patterns. While overall enrollment trends have fluctuated in recent years, the proportion of students requiring specialized services continues to evolve.

Longitudinal data show that average daily membership and individualized education program identification rates are not increasing at the same pace, indicating that the overall student population is changing differently than the population receiving special education services. At the same time, the types of disabilities represented in individualized education programs are shifting toward categories that require more intensive instructional and therapeutic support.

For example, the number of students identified with autism has nearly doubled since the 2007–2008 school year, reflecting both improved identification practices and increased recognition of the spectrum of developmental needs. Similarly, developmental delay classifications have increased approximately threefold during the same period, suggesting a growing need for early developmental and instructional supports.

Students are also increasingly identified with multiple diagnoses, which may require coordinated services across several areas such as communication, behavior, and cognitive development. These students often need support from multidisciplinary teams that include special education teachers, related service providers, and behavioral specialists.

At the same time, the proportion of students identified with speech or language impairment has declined over the past fifteen years, suggesting that schools are now identifying broader developmental and neurological differences that require more comprehensive services.

These shifts have significant implications for schools. Students with more complex support needs often require specialized instructional approaches, assistive technology, behavioral supports, and coordinated services across multiple professionals. Research indicates that inclusive educational environments can effectively support these students when educators

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implement structured instructional frameworks and collaborate across disciplines (McLeskey et al., 2017; Sailor et al., 2021).

However, when systems are not adequately resourced or staffed, schools may struggle to maintain consistent implementation of these practices. As the intensity of student needs continues to increase, strategic investment in effective instructional frameworks and workforce capacity becomes essential to ensure that students receive services in the least restrictive environment.

The Special Education Professional Shortage

Workforce shortages represent one of the most significant barriers to consistent and effective special education service delivery across the nation. Oregon is experiencing similar challenges.

A national survey conducted by the Education Week Research Center found that 76 percent of principals and district leaders reported experiencing some level of difficulty filling special education teaching positions during the 2023–2024 school year. Only 8 percent reported that hiring was relatively easy, while 16 percent reported no open positions. These findings illustrate the widespread recruitment challenges facing school systems across the country.

State level data reflect similar concerns. As of November 2023, Oregon school districts reported more than 1,000 open education related positions, including teachers, counselors, and support staff. In response to these shortages, districts have increasingly relied on emergency licensure to fill special education positions, with more than 130 educators working under emergency credentials in special education roles.

While emergency licensure allows schools to continue providing services, it also reflects the depth of the workforce shortage. Educators working under emergency credentials may require additional training and mentoring to effectively implement specialized instructional practices.

Shortages extend beyond special education teachers. Many districts report difficulty recruiting and retaining related service providers and specialized personnel. High need roles include:

- School psychologists
- Speech language pathologists
- Occupational therapists
- Physical therapists
- Teachers for students who are visually impaired
- Teachers for students who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Autism and behavior specialists
- Instructional and educational assistants

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These professionals provide essential services that support student access to instruction, communication development, and social emotional growth. When positions remain vacant or caseloads become excessively large, the ability of schools to deliver timely and comprehensive services may be compromised.

Research consistently shows that workforce shortages increase educator workload and contribute to higher rates of professional burnout and turnover among special educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). High caseloads, complex compliance requirements, and limited opportunities for collaboration can further intensify these challenges.

Addressing workforce shortages requires a coordinated approach that includes educator preparation partnerships, financial incentives, and career pathways that support long term retention.

Impact

The combination of increasing student needs and workforce shortages has significant implications for students, educators, and school systems.

When districts struggle to recruit qualified staff, existing educators often assume larger caseloads and expanded responsibilities. This can reduce the time available for collaborative planning, individualized instruction, and professional learning. It may also limit opportunities to implement inclusive instructional models that rely on coordinated collaboration between general and special educators.

Students may experience delays in evaluation, reduced access to specialized services, or inconsistent instructional support when staffing shortages persist. In rural communities and geographically isolated districts, these challenges may be further compounded by limited access to specialized expertise and professional development opportunities.

Despite these challenges, research consistently demonstrates that schools implementing inclusive instructional frameworks and collaborative teaching models achieve stronger academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities (Mitchell, 2015; McLeskey et al., 2017). When systems are supported through strategic investment and coordinated policy implementation, schools are better positioned to provide equitable access to high quality instruction.

For Oregon, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that aligns instructional best practices with workforce development and cross agency collaboration. Strategic investments that strengthen educator capacity, expand inclusive instructional models, and support coordinated services will help ensure that students with disabilities can learn alongside their peers to the maximum extent appropriate.

Proposed Solutions: Investing in Best Practices

Improving outcomes for students with disabilities requires instructional systems that expand access to grade level curriculum while remaining feasible for districts to implement within existing staffing and resource constraints. The strategies outlined in the Oregon Quality Education Commission presentation emphasized the importance of scaling practices that are already demonstrating success across schools, rather than introducing entirely new initiatives.

For Oregon, the most promising approaches build on instructional models that many districts are already implementing in some capacity, and that can be strengthened through coordinated support from the Oregon Department of Education. These approaches focus on improving the quality of core instruction, strengthening inclusive classroom practices, and supporting educators with evidence-based instructional strategies.

Three approaches provide the strongest opportunity for statewide scaling while minimizing additional burden for local education agencies: inclusive co-teaching structures, high quality instructional materials designed with Universal Design for Learning principles, and high leverage instructional practices.

Inclusive Instructional Models and High-Quality Instructional Materials

Inclusive instructional models ensure that students with disabilities have access to grade level instruction alongside their peers while receiving the individualized supports outlined in their individualized education programs. Research consistently demonstrates that students with disabilities achieve stronger academic and social outcomes when they participate in inclusive learning environments supported by effective instructional practices (McLeskey et al., 2017; Sailor et al., 2021).

One widely used approach to inclusive instruction is co-teaching, in which general and special educators share responsibility for planning, delivering, and assessing instruction within the general education classroom. Co-teaching allows educators to provide differentiated support while maintaining access to grade level curriculum. Structures such as parallel instruction, station teaching, and team teaching enable teachers to work with smaller groups of students and provide targeted instructional support.

At the same time, high quality instructional materials serve as the foundation for rigorous and accessible instruction. Many modern curriculum programs are intentionally designed using principles aligned with Universal Design for Learning, meaning accessibility and flexibility are embedded within the materials themselves (CAST, 2024).

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When high quality instructional materials incorporate Universal Design for Learning principles, educators are provided with built-in supports that allow students to access content in multiple ways. These materials often include varied representations of concepts, embedded scaffolds, opportunities for multiple forms of student expression, and digital tools that allow students to interact with content through different formats.

Leveraging high quality instructional materials that already reflect Universal Design for Learning principles reduces the need for educators to redesign lessons or develop additional accommodations. Instead, teachers can use the structures within the materials to provide access to grade level standards for a wide range of learners, including students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students who benefit from varied instructional approaches.

Because many Oregon districts are already engaged in curriculum adoption and implementation cycles, focusing on effective use of high-quality instructional materials allows districts to strengthen inclusive instruction while building on existing instructional systems rather than implementing additional initiatives.

The Oregon Department of Education can support this effort by providing guidance on selecting and implementing instructional materials that incorporate Universal Design for Learning principles and by offering professional learning that helps educators maximize the accessibility features embedded within those materials.

When implemented together, high quality instructional materials designed with Universal Design for Learning principles, inclusive co-teaching structures, and high leverage instructional practices form a complementary instructional system. High quality instructional materials provide the foundation for rigorous, accessible curriculum. Co-teaching structures allow educators to deliver that instruction collaboratively within inclusive classrooms. High leverage practices guide how educators provide explicit instruction, assessment, and feedback to support student learning.

Together, these strategies reinforce one another and create a scalable approach that strengthens inclusive instruction while minimizing additional implementation burden for Oregon's local education agencies.

Positive Behavioral Supports and Inclusive Learning Environments

In addition to strengthening academic instruction, schools must also provide environments that support student engagement and positive behavior. Positive Behavioral Interventions and

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Supports provide a framework for promoting positive school climate and consistent behavioral expectations across learning environments.

This framework focuses on teaching behavioral expectations, reinforcing positive behaviors, and using data to guide decision making. Schools implementing these practices establish clear expectations for student behavior, provide consistent reinforcement for positive actions, and analyze behavioral data to identify areas where additional support may be needed.

Research indicates that schools implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports experience reductions in disciplinary referrals and improved classroom engagement, allowing educators to spend more time focused on instruction (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Within inclusive classrooms, positive behavioral supports complement academic instructional practices by creating predictable and supportive learning environments where students can focus on learning. When paired with high quality instructional materials and collaborative teaching models, behavioral supports strengthen the overall effectiveness of inclusive instructional systems.

High Leverage Instructional Practices

High leverage practices represent instructional strategies that consistently produce strong outcomes for students with disabilities and other diverse learners. These practices focus on the actions educators use most frequently when delivering instruction and supporting student learning.

Examples of high leverage practices include explicit instruction, frequent formative assessment, structured feedback, and collaboration among educators. These strategies strengthen everyday classroom instruction and allow educators to address diverse learning needs within inclusive environments.

Because high leverage practices are embedded within typical instructional routines, they can be implemented across grade levels and subject areas without requiring additional programs or staffing. Professional learning focused on these practices can strengthen instructional capacity across districts while improving outcomes for students with disabilities as well as their peers (McLeskey et al., 2017).

When implemented alongside inclusive co-teaching structures and high-quality instructional materials designed with Universal Design for Learning principles, high leverage practices help ensure that rigorous curriculum is delivered in ways that are accessible and responsive to student needs.

Evaluation and Impact Assessment

Strategic investments in special education must be accompanied by clear measures of success and ongoing evaluation to ensure that resources support meaningful improvements in student outcomes. Evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed strategies requires examining both student outcomes and the implementation of inclusive instructional practices within schools.

Because the strategies outlined in this report focus on strengthening core instruction through high quality instructional materials, inclusive co-teaching structures, and high-leverage instructional practices, evaluation efforts should measure both student access to rigorous instruction and educator capacity to implement inclusive instructional practices effectively.

Measuring Student Access to Grade Level Instruction

A primary goal of inclusive instructional systems is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to grade level curriculum alongside their peers. Evaluation efforts should therefore focus on indicators that measure student participation in inclusive learning environments and progress toward academic standards.

Key indicators may include:

- The percentage of students with disabilities receiving instruction in general education settings for the majority of the school day
- Student progress toward grade level standards in literacy and mathematics
- Graduation rates and completion of credit requirements
- Participation in statewide assessments and demonstrated academic growth

Monitoring these indicators allows educators and policymakers to assess whether instructional systems are successfully expanding access to rigorous learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

Monitoring Implementation of Inclusive Instructional Practices

In addition to measuring student outcomes, evaluation efforts should examine the degree to which districts are implementing the instructional strategies described in this report.

For example, districts may monitor:

- The use of high-quality instructional materials that incorporate Universal Design for Learning principles
- The expansion of co-teaching structures that support inclusive instruction

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- Professional learning opportunities focused on high-leverage instructional practices
- Implementation of positive behavioral supports that strengthen classroom engagement
- Tracking implementation helps ensure that the strategies outlined in this report are applied consistently and allows the Oregon Department of Education to identify areas where additional support or technical assistance may be needed.

Systemwide Impact and Continuous Improvement

When implemented together, high quality instructional materials, inclusive co-teaching structures, high-leverage instructional practices, and positive behavioral supports create an instructional system that benefits all students. These approaches strengthen the quality of core instruction, improve access to grade level curriculum, and support educators in addressing diverse learning needs within inclusive classrooms.

Evaluation should therefore also consider broader system indicators such as educator collaboration, instructional quality, and workforce stability. Monitoring teacher retention, participation in professional learning, and access to collaborative planning structures can provide insight into whether instructional systems are sustainable over time.

Ongoing data review, stakeholder engagement, and collaboration among educators, families, and policymakers will support continuous improvement and ensure that investments remain responsive to student needs. Through sustained evaluation and refinement of these strategies, Oregon can continue to strengthen inclusive instructional systems and improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Oregon's education system continues to evolve in response to changing student needs, shifting demographic trends, and workforce challenges that affect schools across the nation. As this report demonstrates, the increasing complexity of student needs, combined with shortages of specialized professionals, has significant implications for how schools deliver services and support learning for students with disabilities.

Despite these challenges, Oregon schools have strong foundations upon which to build. Research and practice consistently show that inclusive instructional frameworks, collaborative teaching models, and evidence-based instructional practices can improve academic outcomes and social engagement for students with disabilities while strengthening the quality of instruction for all learners (McLeskey et al., 2017; Sailor et al., 2021). When these approaches are implemented within supportive systems that prioritize educator collaboration and access to high quality instructional materials, schools are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students.

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The strategies outlined in this report emphasize strengthening instructional systems that already exist within Oregon schools. By expanding inclusive co teaching models, supporting the effective implementation of high-quality instructional materials designed with Universal Design for Learning principles, and promoting the use of high leverage instructional practices, Oregon can scale approaches that improve access to grade level curriculum while remaining feasible for districts to implement.

At the same time, addressing workforce shortages is essential. Investments in educator preparation, recruitment, and retention initiatives will help ensure that districts have access to the specialized professionals needed to support students with disabilities. Strengthening partnerships among educational institutions, state agencies, and community organizations can further expand the capacity of schools to deliver coordinated and responsive services.

Evaluation and continuous improvement must remain central to these efforts. Monitoring student access to inclusive learning environments, tracking implementation of instructional practices, and examining long-term outcomes will allow policymakers and educators to refine strategies and ensure that investments are producing meaningful results.

Ultimately, the goal of Oregon's education system is to ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education that prepares them for meaningful participation in their communities and future opportunities. Strategic investments in inclusive instructional systems, educator workforce development, and collaborative service delivery represent critical steps toward achieving that goal. By building practices that are already demonstrating success across schools, Oregon can continue to strengthen inclusive learning environments and ensure that students with disabilities receive the instruction and support they need to thrive.

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