



**Inclusive Leadership in Special Education
DISES Professional Learning Gallery Module
Research Brief**

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School administrators must lead their schools in providing equitable and accessible educational environments for all learners, particularly students with disabilities. As schools around the world strive to meet the needs of diverse student populations, school leadership that supports inclusion, collaboration, and shared responsibility becomes essential. Inclusive leadership helps support systems, policies, and practices that promote belonging and meaningful participation for every student, educator, and family. Research on inclusive leadership states that leaders who intentionally encourage equity, collaboration, and belonging improve student achievement, strengthen educator engagement, and cultivate positive school climates (Ainscow, 2020; Booyesen, 2013; Dillon & Bourke, 2016). For example, studies of system reform show that inclusive leaders can reduce exclusion by using evidence-based practices, shared decision-making, and flexible resource allocation (Ainscow, 2020). Similarly, organizational research indicates that practices such as staff empowerment, trust-building, and psychological safety can lead to higher teacher commitment, engagement, and innovation (Booyesen, 2013). Likewise, Dillon and Bourke (2016) identify six core traits of inclusive leaders (commitment, courage, awareness of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration) that have been associated with stronger staff belonging and performance. Inclusive leadership aligns with the global vision of education articulated in the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2016), which emphasizes quality education and lifelong learning for all. Leaders are encouraged to promote inclusive practices using data-based decision-making, continuous improvement cycles, and equitable resource allocation.

Definitions

Inclusive leadership is defined as a leadership style that actively counteracts discrimination, bias, and inequity based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. School leaders who desire to be inclusive intentionally cultivate environments that make all students, families, teachers, and staff feel valued and respected (Kugelmass et al., 2004). Prime & Salib (2014) found that inclusive leaders across several countries engage in behaviors that make their stakeholders feel included and

valued, exhibiting a strong commitment to equity and belonging. Thus, inclusive school leaders create and ensure the appropriate implementation of policies and practices that support equitable learning outcomes and distribute resources equitably.

Barriers and Challenges

One of the most persistent challenges is resistance to change among educators and administrators in school settings who hold deficit-oriented beliefs about disability and diversity (Kugelmass et al., 2004). Additionally, structural barriers, such as limited funding and high student-to-teacher ratios, limit schools' capacity to implement inclusive frameworks. Moreover, school leaders must balance accountability mandates with inclusive values, especially when schools and state agencies prioritize standardized testing and performance (Ainscow, 2020). This exacerbates the need for political advocacy to support broader systemic change. Finally, the absence of meaningful family and community engagement weakens the ecosystem support needed to sustain inclusion.

International research shows that inclusive leadership is often interpreted differently across countries due to differences in policy priorities, cultural attitudes toward disability, and resource availability (Prime & Salib, 2014; Kaltenecker-Retto De Queiroz, 2021). For example, while some nations emphasize collaborative decision-making and community partnerships, others rely heavily on hierarchical leadership structures that limit shared ownership of inclusion. Therefore, inclusive leadership practices must be adapted to differences in national culture, communication norms, and organizational policy contexts (Kaltenecker-Retto De Queiroz, 2021).

Evidence-Informed Strategies and Practices

Five interrelated strategies and practices, when implemented with fidelity by school leaders, create inclusive school environments. These five are: a) ecological systems collaboration; b) data-driven continuous improvement; c) multi-tiered supports for learning and behavior; d) high-leverage practices; and e) high-leverage practices implemented with evidence-based practices. These five strategies and practices demonstrate effectiveness across contexts for building strong, inclusive school environments, improving student behavior, and elevating academic achievement.

Ecological Systems Collaboration.

An ecological systems approach connects schools, families, communities, and government agencies in a coordinated effort to support children (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; CHLS Ecological Model). In both Ireland and Australia, research evidence shows that collaborative decision-making through stakeholder engagement, shared visioning, and planning supports inclusive education. For example, in Australia, a scoping review found that teacher-family health collaboration was considered important for students with disabilities (Vlcek & Somerton,

2023). Similarly, in Ireland, research on inclusive leadership has shown that distributed leadership and stakeholder involvement can foster inclusive school cultures (Morrissey, 2021). These findings suggest that aligning stakeholder goals and improving communication can support all learners and their families (Ainscow, 2020).

Continuous Improvement and Reflective Practice

The Cycle of Continuous Improvement developed through the Ohio Improvement Process illustrates how systematic data collection, reflection, and monitoring can guide sustainable educational change. The use of reflective frameworks, such as Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model, also helps educators critically examine their own beliefs, identify areas for growth, and refine their leadership practices (Kolb, 1984).

Tiered Supports

Evidence-based tiered frameworks such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) provide proactive approaches to addressing both academic and behavioral needs. MTSS provides a whole-child-focused, school-wide preventive framework through tiered supports that adjust the intensity of intervention based on student progress, while RTI promotes early identification and intervention to prevent academic failure (American Institute for Research, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Similarly, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides safe, supportive learning environments that promote social-emotional, mental, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Center on PBIS, 2025).

Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Leadership

It is imperative for inclusive school leaders to be trained on the impact of trauma and cultural context on learning. As Crnabori (2020) explained, trauma-informed schools promote resilience and safety by recognizing students’ emotional and psychological needs. If trauma stemming from exclusionary practices or bias needs to be addressed, school leaders must become culturally responsive (Dillon & Bourke, 2016).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

[The UDL Guidelines](#) provide a visual depiction of the three principles, guidelines, and considerations to support school leaders and teachers in understanding and implementing UDL (CAST, 2024). UDL can guide educators in designing instruction that reduces barriers and supports learners’ differences, rather than trying to accommodate individual students with varied needs into a previously designed instructional plan. Grounded in the principles of inclusive education, UDL suggests that learner differences should be seen as the norm and anticipated through flexible curriculum design (CAST, 2024). The framework is organized around three principles: providing multiple means of engagement (the “why” of learning), representation (the “what” of learning), and action and expression (the “how” of learning), which support student

motivation, access to content, and opportunities to demonstrate understanding in diverse ways. Instructionally, UDL encourages the use of varied instructional materials, flexible assessment formats, and culturally relevant practices. UDL has been shown to provide equitable access and meaningful participation for students with and without disabilities (Meyer et al., 2014). In practice, UDL aligns with broader inclusive frameworks by ensuring that all students can engage in rigorous, grade-level learning experiences within general education settings.

High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices

High-leverage practices (HLPs) are research-based practices that, when implemented with fidelity by classroom teachers, provide the highest-quality classroom environment for strong collaboration among stakeholders and appropriate instruction and supports for all students to achieve at higher levels (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024). Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are those that have been shown through rigorous research to be effective for implementation in schools. HLP and EBP, as a “promising pair” (McCray et al., 2017) provide the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ for teachers. School leaders should be knowledgeable of HLP and EBP and ensure appropriate training for their teachers, with expected implementation in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Inclusive leadership can transform educational systems into equitable and empowering spaces for all learners. Frameworks like tiered systems (i.e., MTSS, RTI, PBIS) and the Cycle of Continuous Improvement, along with strong practices (i.e., trauma-informed, culturally responsive, HLP, EBP) allow leaders to create sustainable structures and school environments that promote belonging, collaboration, and high expectations for every student. Ultimately, inclusive leadership is not a single initiative but a mindset that encourages a continuous commitment to reflection, shared responsibility, and justice in education.

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