CONSTRUCTING AN EQUITABLE FRAMEWORK FOR THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS: THE 'IDEA' OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTIONAL AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Today's public schools support students who bring with them a variety of special education, linguistic and exceptional needs. Many of these students are required to make progress within the general education curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards frameworks, which focus on two areas: English language arts and mathematics. In high school, however, the English language arts standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language are also translated to literacy standards in history and social studies, science, and technical subjects (Conley, 2011). The United States Department of Education ("USDOE") expects that students will develop literacy skills specific to these subject areas in addition to what they learn in their language arts classes. However, students who present with special education and learning-diverse needs are often coached to make minimal progress based on high stakes testing that is erroneously used as the primary measurement of their success with the Common Core. To this end, in order for all educators and school leaders to provide an equitable inclusive framework for students who possess learning-diverse needs, they must construct an educational system that is based on these learners' needs and is interwoven with rigor, meaning and equity while using standards as a meaningful and ethical guide rather than the final measure of student-success.

INTRODUCTION

The Common Core State Standards ("CCSS") were developed under the sponsorship of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2010. The emergence of the CCSS was a response to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation that was a part of the Elementary Secondary Education Act ("ESEA"). Today, these standards focus on two areas: English language arts and mathematics. In high school, however, the English language arts standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language are also translated to literacy standards in history and social studies, science, and technical subjects (Conley, 2011). Overall, The United States Department of Education ("USDOE") expects that students will develop literacy skills specific to these subject areas in addition to what they learn in their language arts classes. Conley maintains that an unstated goal of the standards is to specify key knowledge and skills in a format that makes it clear what teachers and assessments need to focus on. Whereas another goal is to raise the achievement bar to a level comparable to those of the best education systems in the world, in accordance with the historical *A Nation at Risk Report* (1983). The CCSS may be a gift horse for some but tends to create an unequal yoke for others.

Students with learning disabilities and other exceptionalities are expected to learn and meet the same standards as their non-disabled peers. To do this, the CCSS may become a vehicle through which instruction and assessment provide meaningful access to the curriculum (Williams, 2013). However, De Nisco maintains that the Common Core is presenting a new challenge—and offering little guidance—to special education teachers working to keep their students on pace with their peers (2014). De Nisco argues that the CCSS addresses students with disabilities in a 1 ½-page document and states that students in special education 'must' have support services, individualized instruction, and assistive technology to "enable their access to the general education curriculum" (p. 27). However, the CCSS fails to identify what these services are or how they should be implemented for students who are served under the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Very little can be done to close the access gaps that exist between students with disabilities and non-disabled students around equitable access to the CCSS without the collaboration of teachers and school leaders (Williams, 2013).

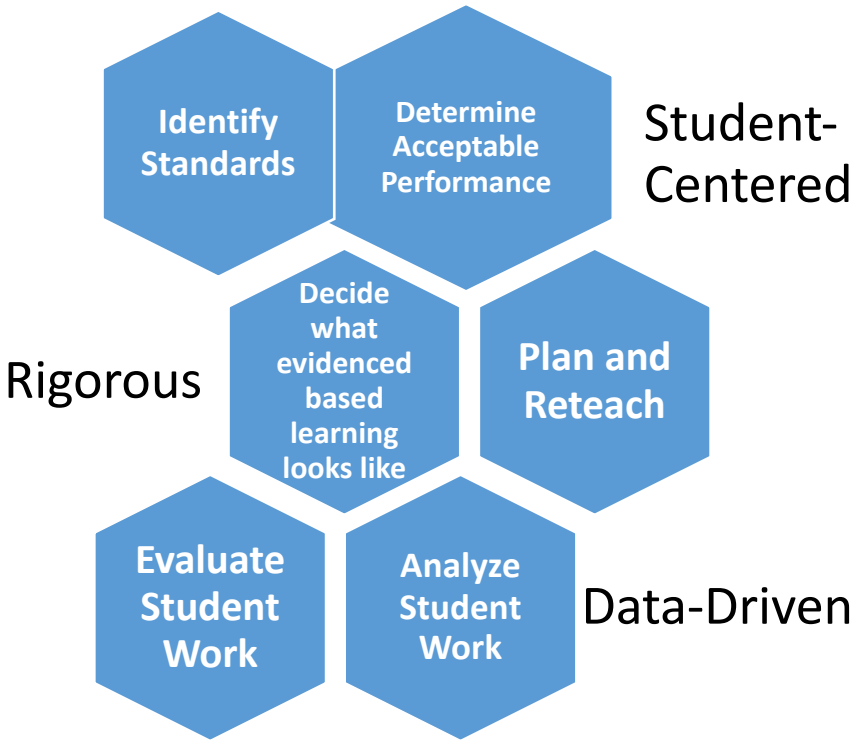

Figure 1 Representation of the core of the CCSS

School leaders have the responsibility of deciding how to best meet these standards and this entails reviewing and analyzing a variety of factors that impact the effective implementation of the CCSS. Most importantly, culturally competent leadership and collaboration, guided by ethical principles of instructional leadership, teaching, and best practices can prove helpful in this endeavor (Benjamin, 2011; Brown, 2004; Williams, 2008). Because of the immediacy and requirements from state departments of education, many schools may find themselves dictating instructional changes that have not been carefully considered in an effort to implement these standards under the CCSS. Without culturally competent leadership to guide ethical policy and practice, students and teachers are likely to experience frustration and failure, thus reminiscent of the achievement gap (Ford & Grantham, 1998; Ikpa, 2003; Williams, 2008). To avoid another avalanche of failed school reform, school leaders must consider and meet certain challenges, while implementing specific elements as they embark on this new initiative.

In the ensuing discussion, the intersection of the CCSS and its practical application for providing supports for students with learning disabilities is analyzed. Next, an analysis of instructional and curricular strategies are analyzed to ensure the success of students' Free Appropriate Public Education ("FAPE") through meaningful educational progress (Rowley, 1985). Lastly, recommendations for collaboration between teachers and school leaders for the purpose of constructing an equitable paradigm, whereby students receiving services under the IDEA are able to have adequate access to the CCSS within their traditional or charter school and not be left behind through limited curricula and/or specifically designed instructions that do not correlate with their educational and post-secondary interests (Gewertz, 2015). Only through

culturally responsive collaboration with special education teachers and school leaders can equitable access and achievement be maintained within this continuum of the CCSS.

Special Education and The Common Core

Samuels maintains that one of the common arguments confronting the field of special education is the notion that students with learning disabilities must first master basic literacy and life skills before access to higher order thinking skills, governed by standards, can be meaningful (2014). Since many students receiving special education tend to struggle with basic reading, writing, mathematics, speaking and listening, then educators often see the CCSS as exclusive and disabling rather than enabling. Samuels notes that particularly teachers of students with severe disabilities see the CCSS as secondary to the basic life skills their students must first possess. Often, these curricula conflict with instructional supports that might create access to some of the CCSS for students with more complex needs successful (Dukes, Darling & Bielskus-Barone, 2017).

Dukes et al., suggest that students with severe disabilities require support to develop skills in daily living, self-determination/interpersonal, employment/transition, and the like that might receive less attention in some policies (2014). As such, the CCSS, which originated from a call for more effective college and career readiness for all students, were in part created to ensure that students have equal opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for successful life outcomes. The authors suggest that in order to implement the CCSS for students with moderate to severe disabilities with fidelity, a clear distinction between the standards and the initiative to implement those standards must be analyzed while keeping the needs of the students at the forefront (Dukes et al., 2014). The authors contend that since CCSS is intended for all students, it is logical to assume that the policy can/should be implemented to ultimately serve students with severe disabilities. Since this is likely the mandate under the USDOE, there are some unique features to consider when judging the viability of a policy that can actually serve all students. This is especially important since, in the past and not too long ago, special education was often considered a place for students who couldn't learn and where general educators often held low expectations and/or lacked sufficient knowledge, which fueled the misperception that students with severe disabilities lacked the capacity to learn (Dukes et al., 2014). Gewertz maintains that there may be some good that can come from all of this, namely the improvement of secondary transition planning (2015).

According to Gewertz, the IDEA requires secondary transition planning to occur as early as age sixteen. The planning for students receiving special education services falls across the employment, education, and independent living domains. As such, special education teachers must make sure to align a set of coordinated activities with both curricula supports and student-centered instruction that may meet the aims of their chosen post-secondary interests. For example, if a student with mild dyslexia has a desire to become a nurse, then his/her reading and mathematics instruction should be aligned with measurable IEP goals so as to provide a road map for assuring measurable success. Here, the CCSS may become a guide to utilize in identifying the most appropriate math and reading supports and are commensurate with the grade and reading levels. Gewertz states that in 2012-13, the most recent year for which data are available, states reported that on average, 87 percent of the lEPs for students in transition planning met the law's requirements. In some states, that number was as low as 23 percent. But the overall average is 7

percentage points higher than in 2009-10 (Gewertz, 2015). Additionally, some states are beginning to embrace standards-driven IEP's, which overall, align the core to the students' IEP goals. This alignment assures some accessibility to the standards-based curricula, which assumes rigor and also provides some evidence of an approved curricula, rather than a tailor-made one. However, if teachers and schools do no collaborate and determine what is considered accessible and eligible content, then very little instruction, measurement, and assessment aligned with the CCSS can take place (Lynch & Abrahams, 2008). Relatedly, Rowe, Mazotti and Sinclair (2015) recommend that educators utilize the CCSS to ensure that students with disabilities are college and career ready and include preparation and development with the skill of self-determination.

Rowe et al., maintain that self-determination has been operationally defined as "the ability to make choices, solve problems, set goals, evaluate options, take initiative to reach one's goals, and accept consequences of one's actions (p. 131). Not only can self-determination skills create more K-12 success for students with learning disabilities, improved self-determination skills in high school can lead to greater student involvement in the transition planning process, which can ultimately promote in-school and post-school success for students with disabilities (Rowe et al., 2015). The standards include anchor standards that specifically address components of self-determination. The authors suggest that by integrating these standards, teachers will have a prime opportunity to teach self-determination skills while addressing the CCSS.

The inclusion of teaching to the standards within the framework of self-determination skills can successfully be done through the use of multi-tiered systems of support ("MTSS"). The framework of MTSS can be described as the overarching framework that guides the improvement process and planning to include early identification and quick response to the needs of all learners (Rowe et al., 2015). The authors also contend that with the implementation of the CCSS and providing services in an MTSS, it is imperative to develop collaborative relationships with families, general educators, and other school personnel in order to make the academic content relevant by infusing self-determination instruction and providing appropriate supports across the curriculum. Spooner, Saunders, Root and Brosh (2017) maintain that problem solving is a self-determination skill.

According to Spooner et al. (2017), there is a need to teach the pivotal skill of mathematical problem solving to students with severe disabilities, moving beyond basic skills like computation to higher level thinking skills. Problem solving is emphasized as a Standard for Mathematical Practice in the CCSS across grade levels. Hence, problem solving is more than a mathematics skill. When thinking in behavioral terms, mathematical problem solving is a chained task, with each phase dependent upon successful completion of the previous step for correct execution and ultimate arrival at a correct answer. The authors contend that educators teach students to recognize the underlying problem structures in word problems for better generalizability to real-world situations. By integrating the CCSS with math and basic operations, including computation and multi-step problem solving, students with disabilities are able to access the curricula on a basic level, while also making it authentic and meaningful. Haager and Vaughn (2013) note that the CCSS in reading provides several fundamental themes for directing instruction that are likely to be familiar to most elementary reading teachers, and several themes that are likely to require adjustments in instruction and materials for these same teachers. Haager and Vaughn maintain that because students with learning disabilities have been increasingly included in inclusion classes in reading and have more access to state level assessments, there has been increased focus on strengthening literacy instruction for students with a reading disability and also written expression deficits (Haager& Vaughn, 2013). The authors note that the rigorous grade-level expectations

under the CCSS, particularly the emphasis on increasing the amount and complexity of text and the application of deep analysis to text, has by default set a higher benchmark that has, overall, increased the dialogue around how teachers can best support students with a LD in reaching these goals and heightened benchmarks and standards. As such, more dialogue has evolved around building foundational skills, functional skills, collaboration and balanced assessment. Although there is yet more to do in order to close the achievement gaps that exist between general and students receiving special education, a fair amount of progress may have already occurred under the CCSS.

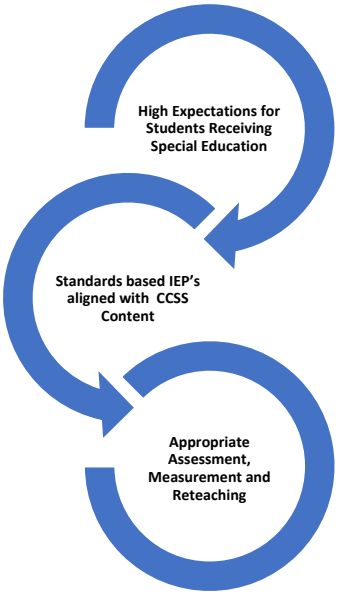

Figure II. The sequential process using CCSS to close the Achievement Gap in SPED

Curriculum Integration for Special Education and the CCSS

Leko, Brownell, Sindelar & Kiely (2015) maintain that Special Education Teachers (SETs), more than any time in history, are expected to play a role in developing and supporting rigorous content instruction for students with disabilities that is technology rich. Additionally, SETS will need well developed collaboration skills to communicate and work with various service providers in the ways required to design cohesive and precise instruction (Leko et al., 2015; p. 26). One important aspect of delivering a sound curriculum is the level of collaboration. Leko et al., suggests that collaboration will focus on planning, instruction, assessment, measuring student's outcomes for learning and making instructional decisions around student learning. The authors also recommend implementing MTSS with fidelity to prevent academic and behavioral difficulties through high quality, research-based core instruction that is provided to all students and increasingly intensive, personalized tiers of intervention that incorporate evidence-based interventions when students are unable to respond successfully (Leko et al., 2015; pp. 26-27). Leko et al. also recommends High-Leverage Practices ("HLP") and High--Leverage Content ("HLC").

Explicit instruction, engaging guided practice, corrective feedback, and collecting and interpreting progress-monitoring data might be considered core competencies for HLP in special

education. Once such strategies are identified, the authors maintain that they can be utilized across various content related areas of instruction, such as: literacy circles, word walls, and quick writes with common core based ELA. Utilizing HLP with rigorous and engaging historical fiction or fantasy novels, and connecting with award winning novels is consistent with HLC. Leko et al. suggests that as preservice SETs, also considered to be instructional leaders, learn how to teach, they will also need to learn how to coordinate their efforts with general education to provide effective MTSS that helps students with disabilities achieve the CCSS (p. 29). Overall, by considering the best practices commensurate with students' learning needs and strengths, interwoven with HLP and HLC in tiers two and three of MTSS demonstrates strong curriculum integration. The process of differentiation is also a strong curriculum tool. According to Lowrey, Aleksandra, Hollingshead, Howery & Bishop (2017) UDL and Differentiation provide greater flow of content and accessibility for all students, especially those in special education inclusive classrooms.

The concept of Universal Design for Learning ("UDL") has been one of the most widely used instructional designs that constructs a framework for addressing learner variability by minimizing barriers in the curriculum and CCSS. Through the use of multiple means of representation, engagement and expression, students have multiple tiers of content at their disposal. Lowery et al. (2017) note that there are, however, various benefits associated with the use of the UDL framework. Some benefits include teacher-reported increases in teacher efficacy, the efficacy of instruction, and the self-efficacy in reaching diverse learners (Benton-Borghi & Chang, 2012). In this narrative inquiry study, the authors collected stories from general education teachers. Semi-structured interview questions were designed using both UDL and narrative inquiry literature. Four themes emerged across all participants' stories: (a) designing for learner variability, (b) talking about inclusion, (c) teaming fosters success, and (d) differing descriptions of UDL. All of the teachers shared stories about the ways in which the UDL framework allowed them to address various students' needs, provide options, and develop plans to overcome barriers in instruction. Designing for learner variability was a consistent finding across participants and emergent themes, which was a primary component of UDL. Wakeman, Karvonen & Ahumada (2013) recommend curriculum change in order to support the inclusion of the CCSS for students who have more moderate to severe disabilities and cognitive needs.

Wakeman et al. (2013) outlined change that can occur in the instructional format in which students with significant cognitive disabilities can demonstrate knowledge in a content area. What is key to this strategy is the ease through which the amount of information presented to the student can change to increase or decrease complexity. The authors also suggest that teachers may utilize hands on learning using manipulatives such as building blocks and even an abacus for math. Additionally, common aids for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities to reduce the complexity of the content are demonstration teaching and scaffolded instruction using manipulatives and models within the context of math instruction (Wakeman et al., 2013). As such, students may also benefit from visuals, 1:1 support in small group, or direct instruction by using various parts of the CCSS and curriculum in chunked fashion and/or materially adapted. The authors also note that time and retention considerations are important. Students with significant cognitive disabilities may need several lessons to fully address a content standard. One change that may occur within planning and instruction is determining the proximity of the lesson content to the identified content standard (Wakeman et al., 2013; p. 9). In summary, successful integration of any curriculum model requires careful culturally responsive collaboration and ethical leadership, across the school, the student's home, and within the community, so as to assure

continuity and consistency towards meaningful progress for students receiving special education (Williams, 2014).

Special Education Instructional Strategy	Key Features
Special Education Teachers (SETs)	Highly qualified dual certified teachers under the Every Student Succeeds Act who are prepared to deliver rigorous and evidenced based instruction and curriculum to students eligible for special education under the IDEA.
Multi-tiered Systems of Support	These systems are comprised of at least three tiers that provide moderate to intensive levels of instruction, behavior supports and remediation for special education students and at-risk students. (Sometimes known as Response to Intervention – RTI in some states)
Differentiation	This is the process of using multiple means of content representation, engagement and expression for students who require specifically designed instructions (SDI). This process allows more depth of the curriculum for students.
High Leverage Practices (HLP)	These are practices that engage learners at multiple levels of intensity that also include pre-teaching, drilling down, adapting content and assessing for outcomes.
High Leverage Content (HLC)	This practice involves utilizing HLP above with research based content, such as Caldecott novels or researched based mathematics in a cycle of teaching with a focus on strengthening student knowledge and skills required to engage the curriculum.
Universal Design Learning (UDL)	This is the process of planning and creating lessons that provide equitable access and participation to the general CCSS curriculum utilized while also including students with special education needs in all phases of instruction.
Content Adaptation (Changing Content)	This is the process of materially changing, revising and or editing content so that it may be accessible to the student who has an identified special education need.

Figure III. Examples and Descriptions of Instructional Strategies for Special Education Students

Site-Based Culturally Responsive Leadership and Collaboration at the *Core*

Successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards will depend on principals' leadership and their ability to work with teachers, parents, and staff to promote the progression of mathematical and literacy skills across grades. Manthy (2010) suggests collaboration and ethical

leadership is essential if school leaders are to close the achievement gaps that exist within and across subgroups, such as special education students, ESL and minority students, including all students who are living in low SES school communities. Inevitably, culturally responsive collaboration takes center stage as the comprehensive framework, whereby the CCSS and special education curricula integration takes center stage, is implemented with fidelity by SETs and school leaders, and includes curriculum supervisors and special education supervisors. Under this paradigm, leadership is comprised of culturally responsive teaching and leadership (Seashore, Louis & Wahlstyrom, 2011; Shapiro, 2006; Williams, 2008; 2013), ethically sound decision making (Shapiro, 2006; Gross, 1998; 2006), and culturally inclusive collaboration (Knight & Wiseman, 2005; Williams, 2018)

Culturally responsive leadership requires school leaders and administrators to understand the context of the school, community, faculty, and student body, along with any variables that may impact the successful inclusion of students who present with learning differences and exceptionalities. To this end, the culturally competent school leader maintains a posture of reciprocity for his / her staff that allows changes to flow from both directions and are both site-based and leadership-based. For example, the Culturally Responsive Leader ("CRL") identifies with at least two key principles that function at the core of the teaching community. First, the CRL identifies instructional leadership autonomy. This allows teacher and instructional leaders to make curricular changes for exceptional students, which are interwoven with principles of the CCSS. Eilers and D'Amico (2012) suggest that school leaders have the responsibility of deciding how best to meet these standards by moving faculty and staff to uncharted territory. Secondly, the CRL creates a community of care (Noddings, 2002). The CRL demonstrates care about the whole student, not just the academic performance and/or progress around measurable IEP goals. Standardized testing under the CCSS is not an end, but instead, is seen as a means to an end for his or her school. As such, high stakes testing, assessment, evaluation, and measurement are parts of the fabric of instructional and school based leadership, not ends in themselves. The above works together with the principles of inclusion, Least Restrictive Education placements ("LRE"), FAPE, and ethical decision making (Shapiro, 2006; Gross, 2006).

Gross and Shapiro identify four ethical paradigms that school leaders must understand if they are to lead successfully and competently. These four paradigms include the ethics of: justice, critique, care, and the profession (2004). The ethic of justice focuses on rights and law and is part of a liberal democratic tradition which posits education as the great equalizer for many, but socially unjust and inequitable for others. The CRL must realize that, especially for students attending high-needs urban schools that resources must flow both ways, and that curriculum must be student-centered rather than solely results-oriented. According to Gross and Shapiro, the ethic of critique not only forces us to rethink important concepts, such as democracy, but also redefines and/or reframes concepts such as: privilege, power, culture, language, and justice. This ethic asks educators to deal with the hard questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference, and includes such questions as: who makes the laws? In this view, the CRL understands how poverty, low SES, and students with severe learning needs and disabilities may not be able to make meaningful progress in the general curriculum. As such, careful adaptation, progress monitoring, and the principles of partial participation and UDL may provide just the right amount of engagement with the CCSS, which is required in providing equitable access based on the principles of LRE and FAPE. The authors maintain that the ethic of care asks that individuals consider the consequences of their decisions and actions. In this view, the CRL might ask him/herself and or the staff to consider questions such as: Who will benefit from what I decide?

Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today? And, if someone helps me now, what should I do in the future as far as giving back to this individual or to society in general? (Gross & Shapiro, 2004; p. 48). Finally, the authors note that the ethic of the profession is largely based on state and national standards adopted by licensing agencies and organizations, such as those that provide credentials for school principals and superintendents. In this ethical view, a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. In conclusion, with the CRL implementing ethical decision making with fidelity, he/she must also be able to create a safe community of practitioners, SETs, parents, administrators and students inside and outside of the school walls through the process of culturally inclusive collaboration (Williams, 2017).

Fonte and Barton-Arwood (2017) maintain that schools today must focus on inclusive models of education for students with disabilities that include higher expectations and increased teacher accountability. To this end, the CRL must envision multiple models of collaboration from the ground-up and outside the four walls of his or her school building. Collaboration has been defined as a professional partnership between two or more coequal educators, who share responsibility, accountability, and resources (Friend & Cook, 1990). Fonte and Barton-Atwood maintain that collaboration is more than working together; rather, it has multiple meanings across different actors and settings. Effective collaboration occurs when professionals voluntarily work together with a common goal and end in mind. The authors also maintain that collaboration is more than working with special educators and/or students, but truly understanding their needs, wants, dispositions, strengths, and more. Culturally inclusive collaboration is extended in special education for the purposes of curriculum integration, instruction, and assessment for learning. Culturally inclusive collaboration entails three key principles: (a) shared governance across all content teachers; (b) integrating multiple models of instruction for all learners to the extent possible under the IDEA principle of LRE; and (c) providing instructional and leadership supports for all personnel that have meaningful contact with students receiving specialized instruction (Williams, 2008). This includes training for PCA's, technicians, BCBA's, related service providers, and parents. It does indeed take a village of individuals to make special education inclusion go around, and with the CCSS at the core, curriculum integration and culturally responsive leadership practices must come to the forefront (Williams, 2014).

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this article provided a full discussion of the purpose of the CCSS and its practical utility for the field of special education, including practical application for providing supports for students with learning disabilities through various teaching practices, methodologies, and the best and/or most promising practices. This work is just beginning and is never truly completed, as students' learning needs continue to evolve and as SETs and school leaders are confronted with multiple levels of adversities - from affluent, resource-rich, parent-driven schools, to some of the most high-needs, residentially segregated schools where students struggle for a free and appropriate education (Williams, 2013).

Next, an analysis of instructional and curricular strategies occurred to consider how educators might assure the success of a student's FAPE, so that they might make meaningful educational progress (Rowley, 1985). Various strategies were outlined, such as MTSS and HLC, and HLT including UDL. The literature recommends that these strategies be implemented with purpose and fidelity so as to assure growth and adequate access to the CCSS for students with high

and low incidence disabilities, or the content becomes unattainable and inconclusive, which may result in larger gaps in achievement than we already sustained under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001).

Lastly, recommendations for culturally responsive and inclusive leadership and collaboration between teachers and parents were analyzed. The purpose of the CRL was emphasized in the role of leading with ethical decision-making, with the needs of all learning-diverse and special education students in mind, so as to promote achievement. The construction of this equitable paradigm allows students receiving services under the IDEA to have adequate access to the CCSS within their traditional or charter school and not be left behind while being limited to watered down curricula and/or specifically designed instructions that have little meaning for their educational and post-secondary interests (Gewertz, 2015). Only through culturally responsive collaboration with special education teachers and school leaders can equitable access and achievement be maintained within this continuum of the CCSS.

The following recommendations are being made for school and instructional leaders, for the purpose of implementing effective CCSS in Special Education:

1. Conduct an instructional needs assessment based on special education compared to general education student performance and achievement data based on the CCSS.
2. Create a site-based special education inclusion curriculum action plan that focuses on the strengths and needs identified within the school setting across SETs.
3. Create a tiered intervention team that will review the resources available to use to support curriculum enhancement and innovative teaching using the CCSS, and starting with some of the specific curricula recommendations noted in Figure 3.
4. Offer community-based information sessions about the importance of standard-aligned IEP's interwoven with high-impact teaching strategies and rigorous content using the CCSS.
5. Provide access and entry points for special education students from high incidence to moderate/severe disability levels to participate in inclusive and HLC based classes using the CCSS.

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