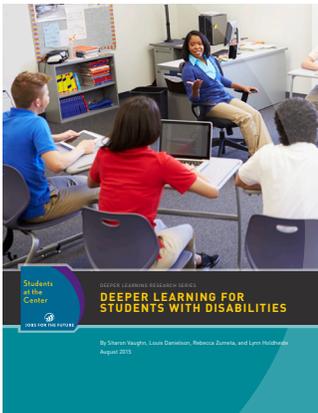## Students at the Center

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES | JULY 2015

DEEPER LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By Sharon Vaughn, Louis Danielson, Rebecca Zumeta, and Lynn Holdheide

More than 6 million students with disabilities—13 percent of the total student population—attend elementary and secondary schools across the United States. The majority spend most of the school day in general education classes. With the proper supports in place, these students are capable of meeting the goals described by advocates of deeper learning: mastering high-level academic content, thinking critically, communicating effectively, working collaboratively, solving complex problems, and learning how to learn.

ACCESS, EQUITY, AND OUTCOMES

By law, all children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education. However, despite the policy reforms of the past two decades that address access, support, and accountability, and despite improved knowledge in the field of special education, outcomes for students with disabilities have remained virtually unchanged.

In response, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs now requires states to detail precise steps they will take to improve results for students with disabilities. This new requirement could open the door for educators to implement proven practices for providing deeper learning opportunities for these students. However, school districts must overcome many existing challenges to ensure that students with disabilities have real opportunities to learn deeply. These include lingering prejudices against this population; insufficient organizational flexibility; poorly designed student assessment systems; and teacher evaluation practices that miss the nuances of effective instruction for students with disabilities.

However, research shows that when schools make use of readily available teaching strategies and supports, even students who face quite serious challenges can develop the full range of knowledge and skills associated with deeper learning. Furthermore, all students, including those with and without disabilities, stand to benefit from these approaches.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

For all of the recent efforts to improve services for students with disabilities, perhaps the most important piece of the puzzle—educators' capacity to provide those services—has not been adequately addressed. Unless teachers actually know how to provide effective instruction to

students with disabilities, and schools create the conditions under which such instruction can take place, outcomes will likely remain unchanged.

Because individuals identified as students with disabilities vary greatly in their skills, talents, and interests, the professional repertoire of every classroom teacher can and should include a number of specific instructional approaches—designed for students with disabilities but often effective for students of all kinds—that will allow them to respond to most learning needs, while leaving them time to provide more intensive support as appropriate. These strategies do not create an undue burden on teachers nor require teachers to give students large amounts of individual attention.

TEACHING CORE CONCEPTS IN THE CONTENT AREAS

Subject-area instruction can be organized in ways that allow students to access meaningful content, grasp key concepts and vocabulary, and participate fully in high-level discussions and projects, even though they may struggle to read and comprehend the material on their own. Instructional strategies include identifying a subject area's big ideas and key concepts and, over time, explicitly connecting them to specific examples and cases; assisting students in learning and using the academic vocabulary of the discipline; and having students work independently at first, to demonstrate comprehension, and then with team members to build, correct, and extend learning about content-area issues.

While these are common teaching strategies, they are particularly important for students with disabilities, for whom research suggests it is critically important that teachers provide these supports deliberately, explicitly, and systematically. While these supports are especially helpful to students with disabilities, they tend to benefit all learners. This approach requires no extraordinary effort or extensive professional development for general education teachers.

SUPPORTING COGNITIVE PROCESSING

Many students with and without disabilities struggle with some aspect of cognitive processing, such as memory, attention, and learning strategies. Students who struggle with cognitive processing tend to trail behind their peers in measures of academic learning and motivation. Using

systematic and explicit instructional routines that are integrated with the teaching of specific academic content and skills can address executive functioning and self-regulation challenges.

When taught to use self-regulatory practices, such as problem solving, defining learning goals, and monitoring their own progress, students significantly improve their school performance and self-efficacy. These students come to recognize that their concrete actions can positively affect their learning and performance.

INTENSIFYING INSTRUCTION

Regular classroom teachers should also be prepared to provide more intensive support to students who need it. These methods leverage school resources more effectively rather than rely on extra efforts of teachers. Combining direct instruction with efforts to coach students in the use of research-based learning strategies is a relatively low-cost way to intensify instruction.

Increasing instructional time has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to help such students learn advanced content and skills. A more expensive but equally important consideration is the reduction of teacher-student ratios. Small group size can be a powerful factor in improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

DIFFERENTIATING WHEN APPROPRIATE

Students with several and persistent learning needs who show little or no improvement, despite teachers' efforts to intensify instruction or the use of other proven practices, often benefit from data-based individualization (DBI). This requires careful integration of assessment and intervention and can result in referral to specialized staff and/or instructional aids. DBI carefully determines which students need support and what types of support they need. DBI can be labor intensive and costly, but when implemented well it leads to improved student outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTEGRATING DEEPER LEARNING

Many educational practices that promote deeper learning for students with disabilities can be effectively implemented at little to no extra cost, requiring only that classroom teachers learn and apply them thoughtfully and consistently. With these considerations in mind, we

offer a number of overarching recommendations for local educators and policymakers at the local and state levels:

> Make it known to leaders and members of the educational community that empirical research strongly suggests that struggling learners can—when given appropriate instructional strategies and tiered levels of instructional and behavioral support—succeed in learning deeply and meeting rigorous achievement standards.

> Make sure that *all* students have access to high-quality instruction in the core content areas.

> Make sure that general education teachers' professional standards, licensure requirements, and job descriptions assign them clear responsibility to provide effective instruction to students with disabilities.

> Ensure that teachers' pre- and in-service programs equip them to provide interventions that can help students with disabilities to access deeper learning.

> Ensure that state policies require schools to provide tiered levels of instructional and behavioral supports.

> Ensure that state policies create incentives for all teachers to share responsibility for providing effective instruction and supports to students with disabilities.

> Ensure that state and local educator evaluation systems reward—or at least do not penalize—teachers who use appropriate, evidence-based instructional strategies when working with students who have disabilities.

> Ensure that states implement college and career readiness assessments that address the full range of deeper learning competencies and include accommodations that enable students with disabilities to show what they know and can do.

Students with disabilities have the potential to succeed in college, careers, and civic life, and integrating research-based recommendations can pave the way, with the added bonus of benefiting *all* students.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. We work to achieve the promise of education and economic mobility in America for everyone, ensuring that all low-income, underprepared young people and workers have the skills and credentials needed to succeed in our economy. Our innovative, scalable approaches and models catalyze change in education and workforce delivery systems.

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Students at the Center—a Jobs for the Future initiative—synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life. This project is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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The full report is available at http://www.jff.org/publications/deeper-learning-students-disabilities