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Solutions that Matter

Getting to Effectiveness:

The Special Education Transformation Approach

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How Your District Can Improve Student Outcomes and Build Procedural Compliance

While mandated compliance indicators remain important, under the Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) framework, the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has sharpened its focus on what happens in the classroom to promote educational benefits and improve outcomes for students with disabilities. This shift, coupled with the Supreme Court's recent ruling on the importance of establishing ambitious and challenging Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals (*Endrew* F. v. Douglas County School District), is significantly impacting special education. Taken together, RDA and the Supreme Court's *Endrew* decision require school districts to take a fresh look at what they are doing to transform their special education programs from a compliance-only focus to one of effectiveness.

Much has happened since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 catalyzed what we refer to as special education. PCG suggests through its Special Education Results-Driven Transformation Model that school districts have moved through three distinct, historical phases of special education service delivery: (1) the paperwork phase; (2) the efficiency phase; and (3) the compliance phase. RDA and the *Endrew* decision, among other policy shifts and internal reflection by states and districts, catalyzed a new phase: (4) the effectiveness phase.

For school districts to improve outcomes while maintaining procedural compliance, they must make strategic shifts in how schools cultivate their **people, processes, and cultural mindset**. Leveraging these key drivers with a focus on results will promote districts into the effectiveness phase.

Getting to Effectiveness

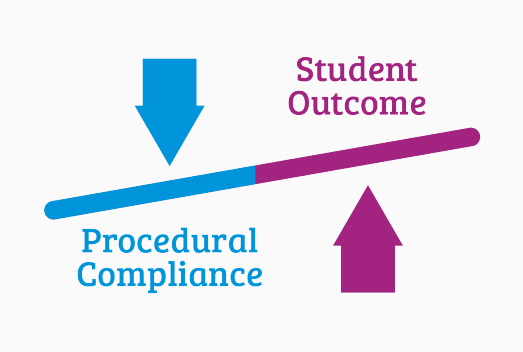
Improving special education outcomes is a complicated endeavor for school districts. But there is a progression that works: the right approach to people, processes, and cultural mindset will support the cultural shift needed to build and sustain effectiveness in your special education programming.

Changing Landscape: Results Driven Accountability (RDA) and the *Endrew* Decision

While it is easy to understand what the letters of RDA stand for, what does it mean for schools and districts? What will have to change? And how does the Supreme Court's *Endrew* decision reinforce it?

Concerned that the achievement, graduation rates, and post-secondary preparation of students with disabilities have remained low for many years, in 2014, OSEP shifted its accountability system to emphasize achieving improved results for children with disabilities. This revised approach is called Results-Driven Accountability—or RDA, for short. This change is based on data showing that the educational outcomes of America's children and youth with disabilities have not improved as expected, despite significant federal efforts to close achievement gaps. This persistent lag is evident in several indicators:

- In 2009, the gap between the average mathematics scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of students without disabilities and those with disabilities was **22 points**. By 2015, the gap had grown significantly to **28 points**.[1]
- Nationally, about **5.9 percent** of students drop out of high school. But among children with learning and attention issues, about **18 percent** drop out of school.[2]
- Across the United States, 63 percent of students with disabilities graduated from high school in 2014 — a rate of graduation **roughly 20 percent lower** than the national average.[3]



The accountability system that existed prior to RDA placed a substantial emphasis on procedural compliance, but it often did not consider how requirements affected the learning outcomes of students with disabilities.[4] The intent of RDA is to strike a balance between the focus on measurable and meaningful outcomes in learning and development for students with disabilities, while still adhering to the compliance requirements of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). RDA is designed to be transparent and understandable and to drive systemic improvements.

> Never forget there are more than 755+ process requirements in IDEA '04 regulations. And even if you could be in compliance with all 755, you would have no assurance of results."
>
> *Dr. W. Alan Coulter, Louisiana State University, Health Sciences, Human Development Center*

Under RDA, both state departments and school districts are now evaluated on a combination of compliance and outcomes indicators. The impact is wide ranging. For states, it means that they are developing and implementing their State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), an ambitious but achievable multi-year plan, that details how the state will improve outcomes for children with disabilities in specific areas such as reading and math, and engage a wide range of stakeholders. For school districts, it means that the level of urgency around how students with disabilities access high levels of rigor and are prepared for graduation and post-secondary opportunities has increased.

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1 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015 Mathematics Assessments.
2 https://www.learningliftoff.com/students-with-learning-disabilities-at-risk-of-dropping-out/
3 https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2013-14.asp
4 April 5, 2012, RDA Summary, U.S. Department of Education at www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/rdasummary.doc.

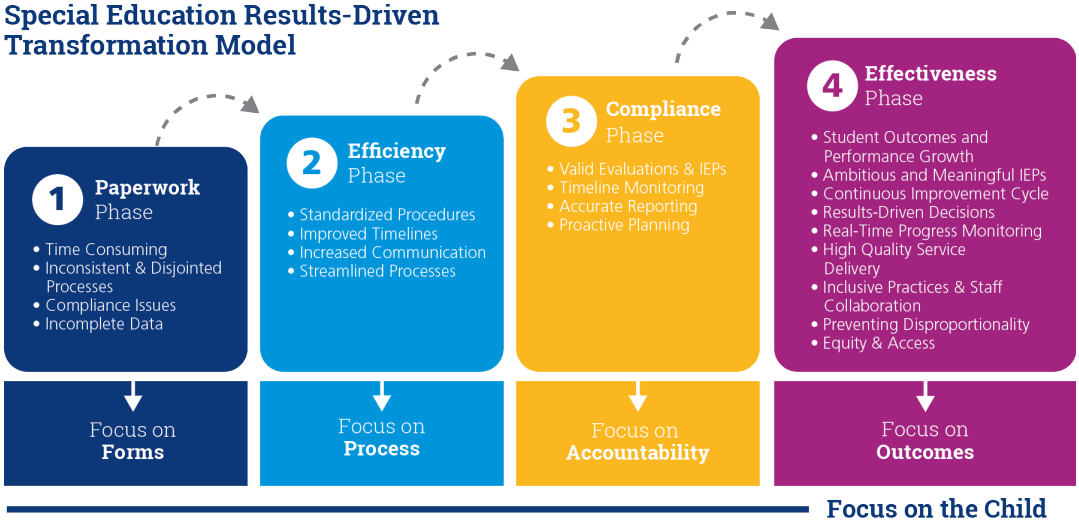
These issues have become even more significant with the March 27, 2017 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Endrew F.* v. Douglas County School District.[5] In this decision, the Court updated its prior standard for determining a school district's provision of an appropriate education for students with disabilities. The *Endrew* case centered on the importance of establishing ambitious and challenging goals that enable each student to make academic progress and functional advancement, and advance from grade to grade. Progress for a student with a disability, including those receiving instruction based on alternate academic achievement standards, must be appropriate in light of his/her circumstances. Furthermore, yearly progress must be more demanding than the "merely more than de minimus" standards that had been used by some lower courts. The Court made it clear that IDEA demands more. In *Endrew*, the Supreme Court reached a balance between the standard established by the 10th Circuit and other circuits (more than de minimis) and the higher standard promoted by *Endrew*'s parents (goal of providing students with disabilities opportunities to achieve academic success, attain self-sufficiency, and contribute to society that are substantially equal to the opportunities afforded children without disabilities).

The *Endrew* decision's most significant impact in the classroom can be seen in: (1) the design and development of rigorous IEPs; (2) the implementation of students' IEPs with fidelity; and (3) increased progress monitoring of IEP goals.

The Special Education Transformation Approach

Although OSEP announced the RDA approach well in advance of its enactment and impact on accountability determinations, this type of change requires time and intentional focus on the part of state departments of education and school districts. Our focus in this paper is on how schools and districts can most productively build upon their compliance orientation to identify opportunities to leverage people, processes, and cultural mindset to drive effectiveness.

This rebalancing of priorities requires more of an evolution, one that builds upon past practices and lays a foundation for future work. Based on our experiences working with schools and districts nationwide, we believe **the transformation of special education can be distilled into four distinct phases: (1) the paperwork phase; (2) the efficiency phase; (3) the compliance phase; and (4) the effectiveness phase.** The fourth phase is the most recent, borne out of RDA and the *Endrew* decision. This model illustrates where school districts have been, where they may presently be, and where they need to be. PCG refers to this as the Special Education Results-Driven Transformation Model.



[5] Retrieved from https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/15-827_0pm1.pdf

On average, it took schools years before they moved from paperwork to efficiency, and from efficiency to compliance. Advancing through these phases required seismic shifts in the way school districts leveraged their people, processes, and cultural mindset.

What will it take to build upon the compliance phase to develop an effective special education program?

Each of the four phases of the Special Education Results-Driven Transformation Model are steeped in the educational priorities of their time. Understanding the context of each phase is important, as each one builds upon its predecessor in a progression from a focus on compliance to one focused on outcomes.

(1) The Paperwork Phase

The mid-1970s to the early-1990s was a historic timeframe in special education policy. For the first time, students with disabilities were required to have a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. This shift was monumental. Students with disabilities began to "mainstream" into public school classrooms and have IEPs to document their placement and annual educational goals. Children and their families were eventually afforded procedural safeguards and due process rights. It was also through these important shifts that school districts were given significant additional paperwork requirements.

During this timeframe, most of the paperwork was on paper, and the focus was on form completion. IEPs, case notes, evaluations, and correspondence was either handwritten or produced on a typewriter with carbon paper. For school districts, this paperwork was time consuming, inconsistent, and disjointed. Typed and handwritten notes exposed school districts to human error. Forms were often incomplete, and data were incomplete.

(2) The Efficiency Phase

The efficiency phase occurred generally between the early-1990s and 1997, when IDEA was authorized and reauthorized for the first time. During this period, the rights of students continued to increase. The definition of educating students in the least restrictive environment evolved. The focus on instruction changed from 'mainstreaming' to 'inclusion'. School districts began to re-tool their staffing models – slowly moving away from segregated 'resource rooms' to having students with disabilities in classrooms with their peers in co-taught settings with both special and general education teachers.

With significant help from computer software and district-housed servers, school districts began to standardize their documentation procedures, improve mandated timelines, increase communication, and streamline processes. The efficiency phase required significant training on the use of computers, word processors, and early IEP management systems.

(3) Compliance Phase

The compliance phase began with the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, which codified in regulation that states had to:

- make determinations annually about the performance of each school district;
- use quantitative and qualitative indicators to adequately measure performance in priority areas;
- develop a state performance plan (SPP) with measurable and rigorous targets;
- collect valid and reliable information as needed to report annually on the SPP.

Even though this reauthorization sought to equalize compliance and educational outcomes, until 2013, OSEP only considered compliance indicators when establishing state determination rankings. This phase put significant requirements on state education departments to collect and monitor special education data.

As a result, states required districts to focus heavily on valid evaluations and IEPs, timeline monitoring, accurate reporting, proactive planning, and accountability. Districts invested significant time and resources into sophisticated data collection tools, next generation IEP

case management systems, and staff training so that accurate data could be collected and reported. Many school districts are still predominantly working in this phase.

(4) The Effectiveness Phase

The effectiveness phase has largely been borne out of RDA and a growing emphasis on equity. The US Department of Education made it clear to states that their priorities were shifting from a compliance only focus to a system that balanced procedural compliance with results for all students. Compliance is still a priority; however, states are now given license and resources to support special education programming that focuses on outcomes. The federal government also changed the way it assesses each state's special education programming, putting additional weight on performance indicators. RDA is focused on systemic improvement. The goal is two-fold: both reducing administrative burdens (reducing the number of data indicators collected, paring down reporting requirements, etc.) and helping states to create one comprehensive improvement plan focused on analyzing and redesigning a system that will improve results. This shift requires states and districts to accurately assess needs, priorities, and capacities of program infrastructures; engage in strategic, collaborative, and integrated improvement planning; and carefully implement evidence-based practices.

The effectiveness phase has placed increase emphasis on student outcomes and performance growth. And through the *Endrew* decision, IEP teams must create ambitious and meaningful IEPs with an ability to monitor and demonstrate measurable student progress. States and school districts have invested in technologies that support and monitor student progress. This phase has placed an increased focus on equity and access – requiring schools to look at patterns of student disability identification by category and race. Schools and districts found by their state to have disproportionate number of students with disabilities, or within a disability category, now must set aside 15% of their district's IDEA funds for the purpose of providing coordinated early intervening services (CEIS) as a means to support struggling learners before they are identified. Through all of this, the central focus is now, more than ever before, on student outcomes.

Call to Action: Getting to Effectiveness with Your People, Processes, and Cultural Mindset

Getting to the effectiveness phase of the Special Education Results-Driven Transformation Model presents an opportunity for schools and districts to build upon the past focus on compliance.

PCG believes there are three key drivers in moving from a focus on compliance to effectiveness: (1) **people**; (2) **processes**; and (3) **cultural mindset**.



Getting to Effectiveness Through Your People

First are the **people**, the talent required to drive special education programming and meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. This includes supporting all

teachers, related service providers, IEP team members, school administrators, administrative assistants, the school superintendent, and the board of education and providing intentional professional learning opportunities.

Some key steps your district can take to leverage the people in your schools and district include:

- **Provide intensive professional learning opportunities on instruction and interventions within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework and inclusionary practices,** which lead to increased access and progress in grade-level learning standards.
- **Invest in professional development opportunities for all district staff that support a culture and climate of shared responsibility.** All employees play a critical role in the educational outcomes of students with disabilities – ensure they are aware of this and set cultural expectations.
- **Collaborate across district departments and community stakeholder groups.** Establish a shared vision of special education services within the district so all internal and external groups know what is expected of them and what they can contribute to efforts around improving student outcomes. Leverage your school district's Special Education Parent Advisory Group as cheerleaders and ambassadors for districtwide initiatives.
- **Work in partnership with teacher preparation programs and training for school and district leaders that are strong and focused on instruction and support for students with disabilities.** Be the driver of change if the area teacher preparation programs are not instilling the skills you need and expect from your future teachers and school leaders.
- **Expand inclusive practices by providing professional development and job-embedded coaching to improve collaboration and implement high yield co-teaching models.** When students with special needs receive core instruction in the general education classroom, with support from the special education teacher, they have the potential to accelerate their learning. Without coordinated training for general education and special education teachers, the power and potential of inclusion are not realized.
- **Treat special education teachers as subject-matter teachers in the areas they are dually certified.** Instead of having "special education teachers who are also certified in a subject matter;" consider them as subject-matter teachers who can also provide instruction to students with IEPs. Include all teachers in the department of their respective discipline. Place special education teachers in subjects that are relevant to their training, subject matter expertise, and teaching certification and include them as peers within general education grade or departmental meetings.

Getting to Effectiveness Through Your Processes

Next are the **processes**. Processes are the action steps taken to achieve high quality special education programming and implement evidence-based practices. These actions can include IEP creation, the technologies leveraged to support IEP development and data collection, and the team meetings that occur where IEPs and student needs are discussed.

Some key steps your district can take to retool the processes in your schools and district include:

- **Use flexible, web-based case management systems** that identify students at risk, support the documentation of student interventions, and drive the creation of IEPs with SMART goals – **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant and **T**ime Bound. Tie all student IEP goals to your state's learning standards. Build systems to measure the progress of these goals by using student data.

- **Build MTSS into all district processes that support struggling learners.** From the classroom to the school-based intervention and referral service teams, ensure that Tier Two and Tier Three interventions are robust, conducted with fidelity, and are leveraged in the event that a student referral is made for special education services.
- **Study your state's SPP and Annual Performance Report (APR).** Take note of your state's SSIP that was created as a result of RDA; compare your results performance against your state's identified measurable result (SIMR).
- **As needed, leverage outside expertise to support your district's special education data and reporting needs.** Conduct an external review of your special education programming; assess your district's MTSS, instructional outcomes, inclusive practices, and family engagement.

Getting to Effectiveness Through Your Cultural Mindset

Cultural mindset refers to the established set of attitudes held by your district's educators. People often have "fixed" or "growth" mindsets about intelligence, abilities, and talents. Mindsets are reinforced by the culture of the organization in which one works.[6] A district's culture, or even an IEP team's mindset, makes the difference between an IEP that provides minimal student benefit versus one that is ambitious. It can also make the difference between district special education programming that is merely compliant versus programming that is focused on individual student outcomes, results, and students' livelihoods. A culture of "academic optimism" in special education will create an environment where growth mindset can be cultivated. This supports the academic optimism construct and sets high expectations for the instruction, support and services delivered to students with disabilities, which will lead to greater student achievement. The development of a growth mindset is critical for the success of all students who are struggling or are high achievers.

Some key steps your district can take to leverage cultural mindset include:

- **Build a system-wide culture of academic optimism.** Cultivate the idea that all students can achieve at high levels, regardless of their disability or other factors. Create an unrelenting expectation regarding instruction that clearly communicates to schools and the broader community that a key focus of your district's special education department is to ensure that students with disabilities make significant progress, to the extent possible, in the general education curriculum, receive rigorous standards-aligned instruction, and experience the high quality delivery of interventions, differentiation, modifications, and specially designed instruction in every class.
- **Establish special education expectations and guidelines.** Be clear about the role of the central office in supporting the learning of students receiving special education: schools must be responsible and accountable for the teaching and learning process while the central office's role is to provide adequate resources, clear guidance, and professional development, and support schools in the consistent and effective implementation of programs and services.
- **Conduct an annual survey to assess teachers' instructional beliefs and practices**, then analyze the results by school and role. Develop a plan to improve over time and measure progress made towards instilling a growth mindset across the organization, along with a culture of shared responsibility for ALL students.
- **Strengthen links between school and home** to help culturally and linguistically diverse parents help their children learn and gain equal access to your district's educational programs and services.
- **Celebrate your district's diversity and the strengths it brings** to create a culture that promotes the successful inclusion and integration of students with disabilities and other underserved, at-risk and economically disadvantaged students.

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[6] Dweck, 2012

Conclusion

The Special Education Transformation Approach presented in this paper advocates for a comprehensive approach that is centered on people, process, and cultural mindset in order to drive effectiveness. Enacting change -- the kind of change that will fundamentally improve the outcomes of students with disabilities -- requires focus, a strong vision from school district leadership, an appropriate allocation of resources, comprehensive professional development, and clear accountability measures. Moving into the effectiveness phase requires the involvement and commitment of the entire faculty and a willingness to set and strive for high expectations for students with disabilities. With a focus on people, processes, and cultural mindset, districts can successfully re-orient their focus from compliance to results.

About the Authors

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About PCG

Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) is a leading public sector solutions implementation and operations improvement firm that partners with health, education, and human services agencies to improve lives. Founded in 1986 and headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, PCG employs over 2,500 professionals in more than 40 offices worldwide—all committed to delivering solutions that change lives for the better. The firm has extensive experience in all 50 states, clients in six Canadian provinces, and a growing practice in Europe. PCG offers clients a multidisciplinary approach to meet challenges, pursue opportunities, and serve constituents across the public sector.

To learn more about how PCG can help your district get to the effectiveness phase, contact us today.

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