

Navigating

***the
TOP***

5

CHALLENGES

in Special Education



This eBook will uncover the top 5 pressing pain points that special educators face and offer strategies to help navigate them effectively to ensure your students have every opportunity to thrive.

eBOOK





LIFE IS FULL OF CHALLENGES. Whether you're trying to figure out how to add more hours to the day to check off every box on your to-do list, or trying to be in two places at once, it comes as no surprise that each day presents new, daily obstacles. *This rings especially true for special educators.*

While working with students with moderate to severe disabilities can be incredibly rewarding, it also poses its own set of unique challenges.

The one-size-fits-all instructional approach that may work in general education cannot be replicated for students receiving specially designed instruction and related services (and rightfully so!). A personalized approach to learning for special education students requires careful consideration and a solid understanding of the federal education laws in place to protect our student population.

In this eBook, we will uncover the top 5 pressing pain points that special educators face and offer strategies to help you navigate them effectively to ensure your students have every opportunity to thrive.

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APPROPRIATE RIGOR

Providing an appropriate rigor that is based on the general education curriculum will help your students remain motivated, while challenging them on an individual level.

FIRST UP – APPROPRIATE RIGOR!

In special education it is necessary to provide students with moderate to severe disabilities access to educational opportunities that are both challenging and meaningful, while also recognizing their individual learning needs. [Academic rigor](#) refers to the level of difficulty and complexity of instruction, which we know plays a key role in learning.

Providing an appropriate rigor that is based on the general education curriculum will help your students remain motivated, while challenging them on an individual level. When students are taught within their zone of proximal development (think *Goldilocks and The Three Bears*—not too easy, not too hard, but just right!), the result will be a [boost](#) in confidence and academic performance.

Yet, while the benefits are clear cut, many schools struggle to provide appropriate rigor for students with disabilities for several reasons.

One reason? **Lack of funding.** With a lack of funding generally comes a lack of resources. In special education, trained teachers and service providers, along with access to an adapted core curriculum and learning interventions, are imperative to student success. Schools with limited budgets struggle to offer these differentiated resources, resulting in inappropriate rigor for students. Some students with disabilities will have difficulty accessing the instruction and activities because they don't have the appropriate level of support to engage with the learning materials, and other students may miss opportunities to reach their full potential.

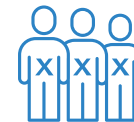
Another reason? Lots of schools across the nation are dealing with **high teacher turnover and staff shortages**, especially in special education departments. With teachers and service providers [leaving the profession](#) at a faster rate than new hires entering it, it can be challenging to maintain consistency and continuity of instruction. This ultimately impacts the quality of education that is offered to students.



LACK OF FUNDING



HIGH TEACHER TURNOVER



SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFF SHORTAGES



ADAPTED CURRICULUM

APPROPRIATE RIGOR

continued...

There are federal laws in place to support students with disabilities and their right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).

We mentioned **trained teachers** above...This is another contributing factor as to why many schools find it challenging to provide special education students with appropriate rigor. Without specific training in low-incidence disabilities, newer special educators may not have the expertise to effectively adapt the general education curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

What about **access to an adapted curriculum**? Certain schools may already have a set curriculum in place for all students which isn't, or cannot easily be, adapted to meet the needs of students with disabilities. If special education students do not have access to a standards-based, adapted core curriculum that provides access to the general education curriculum, it is likely they are not going to be appropriately challenged at a level that meets their abilities. In this case, students may end up watching educational videos on YouTube frequently, OR they may interact with the same preferred activities repetitively.

Rather than providing academic rigor that addresses the unique needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities, some schools place more focus on teaching specifically to **standardized tests**. On the other hand, some schools place a large curricular focus on standardized tests. Prioritizing instruction to prepare students on standardized tests is understandable, particularly when a school or district is under the oversight of an improvement plan and resources are tied to growth measured by standardized tests. However, our most complex learners may access alternative assessments. Students who are appropriate for alternative assessments require a core curriculum that has been adapted to their learning needs.

There are federal laws in place to support students with disabilities and their right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). When these laws, like the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), are not upheld and students are not receiving access to a meaningful and equitable and inclusive education (academic rigor!)—districts can be met with litigation.

Students who are appropriate for alternative assessments require a core curriculum that has been adapted to their learning needs.

THREAT OF LITIGATION

Districts do not want to be the target of any lawsuit, and families do not want to initiate lawsuits. However, what happens when students do not receive access to the educational opportunities they have a right to? **Lawsuits.**

Schools are federally mandated to provide students with disabilities access to specially designed instruction and services. If a school fails to provide eligible students with these services, legal action can be taken to ensure the students' rights are protected.

Below are two examples of what this can look like.

EXAMPLE 1:

Gerald is a student with autism. Gerald has an IEP that outlines that he must spend 80% of his day in an inclusion classroom with typically developing peers, and the other 20% of his day will be spent receiving pull out support, like speech or occupational therapy. Due to staffing shortages in the school, Gerald has spent 100% of his days over the last 6 months in an inclusion classroom, receiving none of his required services.

Schools are federally mandated to provide students with disabilities access to specially designed instruction and services.

Does this place Gerald's school out of compliance? **YES.**

Can Gerald's family pursue legal action against the school? **YES.**



Why else can legal action be pursued? Under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), schools are required to provide **equal access to education** for students with disabilities.

Similarly to what happens if IDEA is not upheld, if ADA is not upheld, schools are at risk again for litigation.

If a school fails to provide eligible students with [specially designed instruction] and services, legal action can be taken to ensure the students' rights are protected.



THREAT OF LITIGATION

continued...

EXAMPLE 2:

Molly is a student who uses a wheelchair for mobility. Her school's entrance ramp is in shambles and has recently become inaccessible. Despite consistent outreach to the school personnel, there is no ETA on when this ramp will be fixed. This means that Molly's parents have to continue to bring her to school together each morning and pick her up each afternoon so that one parent can lift Molly up the stairs, while the other lifts the wheelchair to the main entrance.

Does this place Molly's school out of compliance? **YES.**

Can Molly's family pursue legal action against the school? **YES.**

JUST RECENTLY IN THE NEWS...

Examples like these are a **reality** for districts across the country. Just recently, a school district in MI made the [news](#) for failing to provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE) under IDEA for a student, Miguel Perez.

Following legal proceedings, the MI school district settled the claim under IDEA. What happened next? Perez's family then filed with the Federal Court for compensatory damages under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Federal Court dismissed the Perez family's new case since the original claim was already settled under IDEA. After the Perez family appealed this decision, the Supreme Court [overturned](#) the lower court's ruling in Perez's favor.



What does this mean for districts? Families are pursuing every avenue of justice available to them to—and rightfully so, which makes upholding special education laws for districts the highest priority.

To put it simply, if a school does not uphold special education law, there is a very real risk of heading to court. It is *essential* that schools work proactively to ensure they are meeting the needs of all students (through avenues like [adapted core curriculum](#) that provides access to the general education, OR providing accessible handrails in buildings) and maintaining compliance.

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TEACHER RETENTION

As we underscore the issues around litigation threats, we can't look past the increasing number of educators leaving the special education profession.

As we underscore the issues around litigation threats, we can't look past the increasing number of educators [leaving the special education profession](#). Do the two topics relate?

Yes. But do they also stand alone as individual challenges? Also, yes. When licensed special educators leave the profession, districts must find a solution to fill the vacancies. Classrooms may be staffed by new-to-the-field teachers (e.g., a general education teacher who moves to a special education classroom, or a high-incidence special education teacher who moves to a low-incidence disability classroom). Job-embedded teachers, substitutes, and administrators may also fill these spots.

When licensed special educators leave the profession, districts must find a solution to fill the vacancies.

Let's first address WHY special educators are leaving the profession.

First and foremost—special educators have a tremendous workload that includes writing IEPs, collecting and analyzing student data, collaborating with multidisciplinary team members, completing compliance paperwork and delivering individualized instruction for all students. **That's A LOT.** This significant workload often leads to increased stress, and in turn, higher levels of burnout.



TEACHER RETENTION

continued...

We're all familiar with the ties between high workload and burnout. Think about how this plays out in your personal life, too:

*When you wake up on a Saturday morning and think about everything you need to accomplish in one day—it can be draining. You wake up—load/unload your dishwasher, throw in a load of laundry, fold and put away the laundry, tackle grocery shopping, run your 3 kids to multiple different practices/games, find time for meals, tidy your house, take 30 minutes for self-care, again... **it's A LOT.** All of this can lead to feeling burnt out with no time to decompress.*

Raise your hand if you've been here before!

For special educators, feeling alone in this uniquely demanding workload can be frustrating, especially since most of their colleagues in general education don't have the same experiences. When all of this frustration

boils over, what happens? Some teachers decide it's time to move on. *Then what happens?* Schools are left facing unprecedented staff shortages, and in turn less experienced special educators, to meet the individual needs of our complex learners. This is one way the threat of litigation can increase.

Not only are schools in need of educators, but they are also in need of **good data** to support learning outcomes.

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NEED FOR GOOD DATA

How can special educators gauge what level of instruction is working for students without data to support it? Can you confidently say that your student is progressing and meeting all of their educational goals unless you have the concrete data to back up that statement? *Probably not.*

EDUCATOR 1:

“McKenna is progressing in two-digit addition because she is answering problems correctly more often than not.” *This is anecdotal evidence.*

EDUCATOR 2:

“Over the last 6 weeks, McKenna has moved from exposure to mastery of two-digit addition. When I initially began taking data, McKenna was answering problems correctly 25% of the time. Over the course of the last 6 weeks, she has progressed tremendously and is now answering problems correctly 95% of the time as measured by our bi-weekly probes.” *This is concrete evidence based on data.*

Good data is key in helping special educators make informed decisions about the instructional strategies and interventions that are most effective for their students. In addition to data being *helpful*, the collection of data is a *requirement* set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Schools must collect data for students receiving special education and related services to monitor progress and ensure that the appropriate services are being provided to our most complex learners.

Can you confidently say that your student is progressing and meeting all of their educational goals unless you have the concrete data to back up that statement? Probably not.



Anecdotal evidence is based on experience and observation. It is subjective, and unable to be independently verified.
Concrete evidence is based on **data**.

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NEED FOR GOOD DATA

continued...

However, there are common barriers that prevent some special education teachers from collecting and using good data. One particular barrier? **Lack of consistency across data collection within a district. Having access to consistent data.** Every school is unique and the software or processes to collect and use data may vary within the same district. This poses the risk of inconsistent or inaccurate types of data within the same district. Data collected for James in an Elementary school in a suburban district can vary drastically from what data is being collected on Jen in a High School of the same district. For example, James' teacher has access to enCORE, which provides usage, growth, and standards-



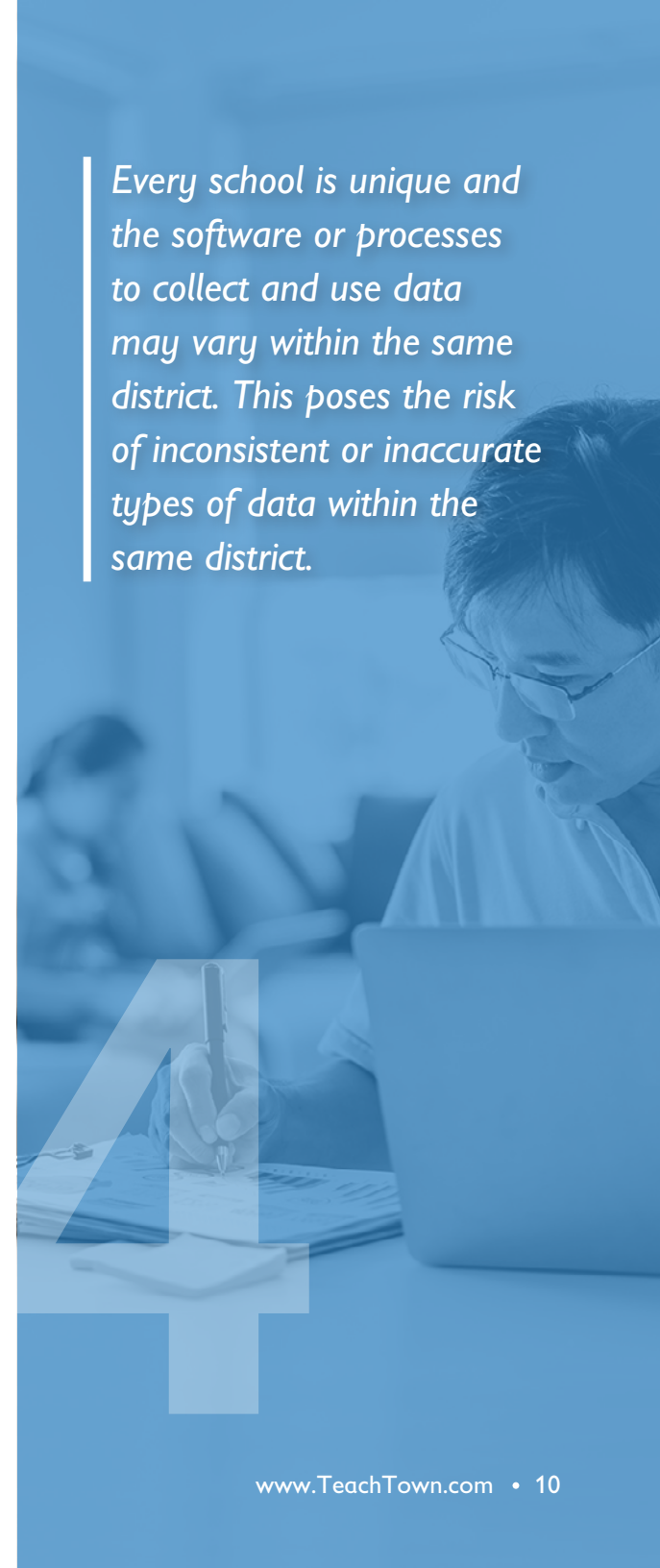
based reporting for his progress in the adapted core curriculum. Jen's teacher does not have access to enCORE or any other comprehensive core curriculum, so she must piecemeal curriculum and write her own assessments. The end results? Data collection and progress monitoring for these two students looks quite different.

On the other hand, while some schools have access to impactful resources and data collection software, for many schools the **lack of funding (or lack of knowledge about allowable uses for the funding), overextended staff, limited training and access to the best learning technologies**, all make it challenging to both collect and use data effectively. Outdated or insufficient technology certainly impacts the ability of special educators to track and record consistent student data.

Addressing the barriers that prevent special educators from collecting and using data will help ensure students with moderate to severe disabilities receive the support they are federally required to receive *and need* to thrive.

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Special educators must provide personalized instruction to meet the needs of their students.

EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING

In special education, another hot button topic frequently discussed is equitable and inclusive learning.

- What is equitable and inclusive learning?
- How can we achieve equity and inclusion in the classroom?
- What does equity and inclusion look like, and why is it important?
- Why are some schools NOT offering equitable and inclusive opportunities for their students with disabilities?

Raise your hand if any of those questions have popped up in conversations you've had!

Providing students with disabilities with access to an [equitable and inclusive education](#) means that they receive access to the general education curriculum and learn alongside their typically developing peers to the maximum extent possible.

And although school districts may be putting forth their best effort to educate their most complex learners, often they do not have the funding, training, and/or resources to provide an equitable and inclusive education for all students.

For example, special educators must provide personalized instruction to meet the needs of their students. This could be in the form of different accommodations, modifications or adaptations of what typically developing peers are learning. But, what happens when a district is experiencing staff shortages, as we mentioned earlier, and newer-to-the-profession special educators lack the experience to adapt curriculum in the way that some students need? Equity and inclusion remains a lofty goal just out of reach—not for lack of trying, but due to lack of training.

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EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING

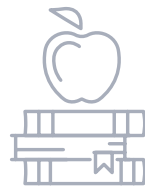
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Often, special education students don't have access to culturally-responsive, and socially and developmentally appropriate instruction. Why not? Funding for one reason. High-quality adapted core curriculum for a district can be pricey, and although worth every penny, allocating funds in a school budget is no easy task. Our student population **deserves** to have access to instruction that avoids stereotyping and represents what they are experiencing in real life.

Often, special education students don't have access to culturally-responsive, and socially and developmentally appropriate instruction. Why not?

Additionally, access to assistive technology, like speech-to-text software, or [augmentative and alternative communication \(AAC\) devices](#), iPads, or other devices that support student communication is necessary to support equitable and inclusive learning for many. Consider the barriers to an equitable and inclusive education when the students who need assistive technology don't have access.

All students regardless of ability deserve to access equal educational opportunities.



Now that we have fully outlined the specific challenges that many schools and special education departments are facing today, how can we relieve some of the burden to support students with moderate to severe disabilities?

TEACHTOWN'S ROLE

As the leading provider of K-12 standards-based, adapted core curriculum, TeachTown is committed to **measurably improving** the academic, behavioral and adaptive functioning of students with disabilities, including autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Composed of a team of BCBA's, PhD's, SLP's, and veteran educators, **our team has been where you are on the front lines of special education**, and not only do we recognize the unique challenges that you face as a special educator, but we understand what our complex learners need to be successful.

Our adapted core curriculum, enCORE, and supporting learning interventions have been designed to provide educational pathways that are built on evidence-based practices to promote positive learning outcomes, alongside ease and efficiency for the educators who implement them.

HERE'S HOW

enCORE is the **ONLY K-12 standards-based**, adapted core curriculum built on the science of learning, including the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and systematic, explicit instruction, that provides students with moderate to severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum.

enCORE offers instruction that is **just right** for each of your students. How?

- **Differentiation** is built in across the entire curriculum for students who need the most to least support (teacher materials, student-facing worksheets, adapted reading library).
- All content respects **chronological maturity** of students and meets developmental learning needs.
- Aligns to grade-level books, providing **equitable** access to the general education curriculum
- High-quality, realistic imagery facilitates **generalization** to real world.
- The learning platform is responsive, automatically **analyzing student data** to tailor lessons and activities to individual student needs. This ensures students are practicing within their zone of proximal development.
- Hands-on—**students are active participants** in their learning, engaging with personalized lessons and materials.
- Every single unit and lesson segment in enCORE is structured to flow through a gradual release of responsibility, guiding students from **exposure to mastery**.
- All lesson plans are completely **scripted** at 3 levels of differentiation, allowing brand-new and veteran educators to provide high-quality instruction.



“**TeachTown saves teachers a lot of time** in the sense that data recording is a very big part of any special educator’s job. And TeachTown automatically does that for us.”

- Kathy M., Teacher

“When it comes to a one-stop shop, TeachTown has it made. From core curriculum, to Social Skills, to Transition and beyond, along with data collection that is ideal when reporting progress—choosing TeachTown is a no-brainer.”

- Kristen V., Educational Diagnostician

“My students’ reading comprehension has skyrocketed since introducing enCORE’s leveled adapted books and leveled worksheets. They make it so easy for students to understand, participate, and learn because they are tailored to their individual abilities.”

- Brittany P.W., Teacher

While enCORE is the comprehensive, academic core of the learning experience, TeachTown offers learning interventions, including TeachTown Basics, Social Skills and Transition to Adulthood, that all work together to support adaptive, social, emotional, and behavioral needs—a whole child approach!

TeachTown solutions are grounded in the evidence-based practices that have been shown to be effective for students with moderate to severe disabilities in formal research studies. Our core academic curriculum is aligned to state and national standards and provides extensive data and reporting options to help measure student progress. Not only do we help districts deliver a whole child education for students with significant support needs, we also help you maintain compliance with federal education law.



Interested in more information about TeachTown, our curriculum and interventions, and how we can help you navigate the top 5 challenges in special education?

[Schedule some time to chat 1:1 with a member of our team!](#)

