

High-Leverage Practices in Special Education

In fall 2014, the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Board of Directors approved a proposal from the Professional Standards and Practice Committee (PSPC) to develop a set of high-leverage practices (HLPs) for special education teachers. The CEEDAR Center at the University of Florida, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education programs, provided a sub-award to CEC to support the project. The members of the HLP Writing Team included representatives from the PSPC, CEC's Teacher Education Division, CEEDAR, the Council for Chief State School Officers, and CEC staff.

The fundamental purpose of CEC's HLP project was to identify improved methods for supporting special education teacher candidates as they learn to use effective practices in their classroom. Although effective teacher practices had previously been identified, these mainly comprised undifferentiated, overall lists with brief descriptions of each practice.

The HLPs identified by the Writing Team directly apply to the classroom practices of teachers in K–12 settings. (CEC's Division for Early Childhood has developed recommended practices providing guidance to practitioners and

families about effective practices when working with children birth through age 5.)

The HLPs (see Table 1) are organized around four aspects of practice: collaboration, assessment, social-emotional-behavioral practices, and instruction. Practices in these areas are integrated and reciprocal.

scratches the surface in addressing the many issues that will arise in enacting this new vision of teacher preparation. It is intended that the HLPs are a working and evolving set of practices that can be used as teacher educators collectively develop an understanding of core practices, determine how such practices may be best used, and identify how they can be improved.

The HLPs identified by the Writing Team directly apply to the classroom practices of teachers in K–12 settings.

Effective instruction by special education teachers requires a deep and comprehensive understanding of students with disabilities. This allows them to develop highly responsive, explicit, and systematic instructional and behavioral interventions that support the success of students with disabilities and responds to their diverse and complex needs. *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* (McLeskey et al., 2017), the final report of the HLP Writing Team, provides an overview of the development of the HLPs and the research base for each of the practices—and yet only

In an effort to ensure wide understanding of the HLPs, CEC and CEEDAR will be distributing *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* to policy makers, educators, and certification agencies throughout the United States. In addition, CEC is launching a new website focused on the HLPs, which includes interactive content from the final report, and which will be enhanced in the coming months with videos and other media intended to enrich understanding of these essential practices.

Table 1. CEC’s High-Leverage Practices in Special Education

Collaboration	
HLP1	Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.
	Collaboration with general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff is necessary to support students’ learning toward measurable outcomes and to facilitate students’ social and emotional well-being across all school environments and instructional settings (e.g., co-taught). Collaboration with individuals or teams requires the use of effective collaboration behaviors (e.g., sharing ideas, active listening, questioning, planning, problem solving, negotiating) to develop and adjust instructional or behavioral plans based on student data, and the coordination of expectations, responsibilities, and resources to maximize student learning.
HLP2	Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.
	Teachers lead and participate in a range of meetings (e.g., meetings with families, individualized education program [IEP] teams, individualized family services plan [IFSP] teams, instructional planning) with the purpose of identifying clear, measurable student outcomes and developing instructional and behavioral plans that support these outcomes. They develop a meeting agenda, allocate time to meet the goals of the agenda, and lead in ways that encourage consensus building through positive verbal and nonverbal communication, encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives, demonstrating active listening, and soliciting feedback.
HLP3	Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.
	Teachers collaborate with families about individual children’s needs, goals, programs, and progress over time and ensure families are informed about their rights as well as about special education processes (e.g., IEPs, IFSPs). Teachers should respectfully and effectively communicate considering the background, socioeconomic status, language, culture, and priorities of the family. Teachers advocate for resources to help students meet instructional, behavioral, social, and transition goals. In building positive relationships with students, teachers encourage students to self-advocate, with the goal of fostering self-determination over time. Teachers also work with families to self-advocate and support their children’s learning.
Assessment	
HLP4	Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs.
	To develop a deep understanding of a student’s learning needs, special educators compile a comprehensive learner profile through the use of a variety of assessment measures and other sources (e.g., information from parents, general educators, other stakeholders) that are sensitive to language and culture, to (a) analyze and describe students’ strengths and needs and (b) analyze the school-based learning environments to determine potential supports and barriers to students’ academic progress. Teachers should collect, aggregate, and interpret data from multiple sources (e.g., informal and formal observations, work samples, curriculum-based measures, functional behavior assessment [FBA], school files, analysis of curriculum, information from families, other data sources). This information is used to create an individualized profile of the student’s strengths and needs.
HLP5	Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.
	Teachers interpret assessment information for stakeholders (i.e., other professionals, families, students) and involve them in the assessment, goal development, and goal implementation process. Special educators must understand each assessment’s purpose, help key stakeholders understand how culture and language influence interpretation of data generated, and use data to collaboratively develop and implement individualized education and transition plans that include goals that are standards-based, appropriate accommodations and modifications, and fair grading practices, and transition goals that are aligned with student needs.

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Table 1. (continued)

HLP6	Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.
	After special education teachers develop instructional goals, they evaluate and make ongoing adjustments to students’ instructional programs. Once instruction and other supports are designed and implemented, special education teachers have the skill to manage and engage in ongoing data collection using curriculum-based measures, informal classroom assessments, observations of student academic performance and behavior, self-assessment of classroom instruction, and discussions with key stakeholders (i.e., students, families, other professionals). Teachers study their practice to improve student learning, validate reasoned hypotheses about salient instructional features, and enhance instructional decision making. Effective teachers retain, reuse, and extend practices that improve student learning and adjust or discard those that do not.
Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices	
HLP7	Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment.
	To build and foster positive relationships, teachers should establish age-appropriate and culturally responsive expectations, routines, and procedures within their classrooms that are positively stated and explicitly taught and practiced across the school year. When students demonstrate mastery and follow established rules and routines, teachers should provide age-appropriate specific performance feedback in meaningful and caring ways. By establishing, following, and reinforcing expectations of all students within the classroom, teachers will reduce the potential for challenging behavior and increase student engagement. When establishing learning environments, teachers should build mutually respectful relationships with students and engage them in setting the classroom climate (e.g., rules and routines); be respectful; and value ethnic, cultural, contextual, and linguistic diversity to foster student engagement across learning environments.
HLP8	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.
	The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. Effective feedback must be strategically delivered and goal directed; feedback is most effective when the learner has a goal and the feedback informs the learner regarding areas needing improvement and ways to improve performance. Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). Teachers should provide ongoing feedback until learners reach their established learning goals.
HLP9	Teach social behaviors.
	Teachers should explicitly teach appropriate interpersonal skills, including communication, and self-management, aligning lessons with classroom and schoolwide expectations for student behavior. Prior to teaching, teachers should determine the nature of the social skill challenge. If students do not know how to perform a targeted social skill, direct social skill instruction should be provided until mastery is achieved. If students display performance problems, the appropriate social skill should initially be taught, then emphasis should shift to prompting the student to use the skill and ensuring the “appropriate” behavior accesses the same or a similar outcome (i.e., is reinforcing to the student) as the problem behavior.
HLP10	Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans.
	Creating individual behavior plans is a central role of all special educators. Key to successful plans is to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) any time behavior is chronic, intense, or impedes learning. A comprehensive FBA results in a hypothesis about the function of the student’s problem behavior. Once the function is determined, a behavior intervention plan is developed that (a) teaches the student a pro-social replacement behavior that will serve the same or similar function, (b) alters the environment to make the replacement behavior more efficient and effective than the problem behavior, (c) alters the environment to no longer allow the problem behavior to access the previous outcome, and (d) includes ongoing data collection to monitor progress.

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Instruction	
HLP11	Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.
	Teachers prioritize what is most important for students to learn by providing meaningful access to and success in the general education and other contextually relevant curricula. Teachers use grade-level standards, assessment data and learning progressions, students’ prior knowledge, and IEP goals and benchmarks to make decisions about what is most crucial to emphasize, and develop long- and short-term goals accordingly. They understand essential curriculum components, identify essential prerequisites and foundations, and assess student performance in relation to these components.
HLP12	Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.
	Teachers help students to develop important concepts and skills that provide the foundation for more complex learning. Teachers sequence lessons that build on each other and make connections explicit, in both planning and delivery. They activate students’ prior knowledge and show how each lesson “fits” with previous ones. Planning involves careful consideration of learning goals, what is involved in reaching the goals, and allocating time accordingly. Ongoing changes (e.g., pacing, examples) occur throughout the sequence based on student performance.
HLP13	Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
	Teachers assess individual student needs and adapt curriculum materials and tasks so that students can meet instructional goals. Teachers select materials and tasks based on student needs; use relevant technology; and make modifications by highlighting relevant information, changing task directions, and decreasing amounts of material. Teachers make strategic decisions on content coverage (i.e., essential curriculum elements), meaningfulness of tasks to meet stated goals, and criteria for student success.
HLP14	Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.
	Teachers explicitly teach cognitive and metacognitive processing strategies to support memory, attention, and self-regulation of learning. Learning involves not only understanding content but also using cognitive processes to solve problems, regulate attention, organize thoughts and materials, and monitor one’s own thinking. Self-regulation and metacognitive strategy instruction is integrated into lessons on academic content through modeling and explicit instruction. Students learn to monitor and evaluate their performance in relation to explicit goals and make necessary adjustments to improve learning.
HLP15	Provide scaffolded supports.
	Scaffolded supports provide temporary assistance to students so they can successfully complete tasks that they cannot yet do independently and with a high rate of success. Teachers select powerful visual, verbal, and written supports; carefully calibrate them to students’ performance and understanding in relation to learning tasks; use them flexibly; evaluate their effectiveness; and gradually remove them once they are no longer needed. Some supports are planned prior to lessons and some are provided responsively during instruction.
HLP16	Use explicit instruction.
	Teachers make content, skills, and concepts explicit by showing and telling students what to do or think while solving problems, enacting strategies, completing tasks, and classifying concepts. Teachers use explicit instruction when students are learning new material and complex concepts and skills. They strategically choose examples and non-examples and language to facilitate student understanding, anticipate common misconceptions, highlight essential content, and remove distracting information. They model and scaffold steps or processes needed to understand content and concepts, apply skills, and complete tasks successfully and independently.

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Table 1. (continued)

HLP17	Use flexible grouping.
	Teachers assign students to homogeneous and heterogeneous groups based on explicit learning goals, monitor peer interactions, and provide positive and corrective feedback to support productive learning. Teachers use small learning groups to accommodate learning differences, promote in-depth academic-related interactions, and teach students to work collaboratively. They choose tasks that require collaboration, issue directives that promote productive and autonomous group interactions, and embed strategies that maximize learning opportunities and equalize participation. Teachers promote simultaneous interactions, use procedures to hold students accountable for collective and individual learning, and monitor and sustain group performance through proximity and positive feedback.
HLP18	Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
	Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies that result in active student responding. Active student engagement is critical to academic success. Teachers must initially build positive student–teacher relationships to foster engagement and motivate reluctant learners. They promote engagement by connecting learning to students’ lives (e. g., knowing students’ academic and cultural backgrounds) and using a variety of teacher-led (e.g., choral responding and response cards), peer-assisted (e. g., cooperative learning and peer tutoring), student-regulated (e.g., self-management), and technology-supported strategies shown empirically to increase student engagement. They monitor student engagement and provide positive and constructive feedback to sustain performance.
HLP19	Use assistive and instructional technologies.
	Teachers select and implement assistive and instructional technologies to support the needs of students with disabilities. They select and use augmentative and alternative communication devices and assistive and instructional technology products to promote student learning and independence. They evaluate new technology options given student needs; make informed instructional decisions grounded in evidence, professional wisdom, and students’ IEP goals; and advocate for administrative support in technology implementation. Teachers use the universal design for learning (UDL) framework to select, design, implement, and evaluate important student outcomes.
HLP20	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.
	The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. Effective feedback must be strategically delivered and goal directed; feedback is most effective when the learner has a goal and the feedback informs the learner regarding areas needing improvement and ways to improve performance. Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). Teachers should provide ongoing feedback until learners reach their established learning goals.
HLP21	Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.
	Effective teachers use specific techniques to teach students to generalize and maintain newly acquired knowledge and skills. Using numerous examples in designing and delivering instruction requires students to apply what they have learned in other settings. Educators promote maintenance by systematically using schedules of reinforcement, providing frequent material reviews, and teaching skills that are reinforced by the natural environment beyond the classroom. Students learn to use new knowledge and skills in places and situations other than the original learning environment and maintain their use in the absence of ongoing instruction.
HLP22	Provide intensive instruction.

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	<p>Teachers match the intensity of instruction to the intensity of the student’s learning and behavioral challenges. Intensive instruction involves working with students with similar needs on a small number of high priority, clearly defined skills or concepts critical to academic success. Teachers group students based on common learning needs; clearly define learning goals; and use systematic, explicit, and well-paced instruction. They frequently monitor students’ progress and adjust their instruction accordingly. Within intensive instruction, students have many opportunities to respond and receive immediate, corrective feedback with teachers and peers to practice what they are learning.</p>
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Note. From *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* (pp. 17–25), by J. McLeskey et al., 2017, Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children and CEEDAR Center. Copyright 2017 by Council for Exceptional Children. Reprinted with permission.

Reference

<p>McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., Brownell, M., Jackson, D., Kennedy,</p>	<p>M., . . . Ziegler, D. (2017). <i>High-leverage practices in special education</i>. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.</p>	<p><i>TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 49, No. 5, pp. 355–360. Copyright 2017 The Author(s).</i></p>
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