ASSESSING AND IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION

A Program Review Tool for Schools and Districts Engaged in Rapid School Improvement

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About the Center on School Turnaround (CST). The CST is one of 7 national Content Centers in a federal network of 22 Comprehensive Centers. The U.S. Department of Education charges the centers with building the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs) to assist districts and schools in meeting student achievement goals. The goal of the CST is to provide technical assistance and to identify, synthesize, and disseminate research-based practices and emerging promising practices that will lead to the increased capacity of SEAs to support districts in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The CST is a partnership of WestEd, the Academic Development Institute, the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia, and the National Implementation Research Network.

For more information on the CST, visit http://centeronschoolturnaround.org

About the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS). The NCSECS advocates for students with diverse learning needs to ensure that if they are interested in attending charter schools, they are able to access and thrive in schools designed to enable all students to succeed.

For more information on the NCSECS, visit http://www.ncsecs.org/

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Introduction

Anecdotal reports from those who have worked extensively in efforts to turn around persistently low-performing schools, and at least one state study of such schools,[1] suggest that our lowest-performing schools tend to have above-average enrollment of students with disabilities. For schools in which this is the case, successful turnaround will depend on a focused and data-driven effort to ensure that those students are provided with a high-quality special education program. This program review tool was developed by the Center on School Turnaround to assist school districts or individual school leaders in catalyzing conversations about, and reviewing and improving the quality of, their special education program as a key component of school improvement efforts.

The tool was developed through the use of Leading by Convening,[2] a stakeholder-engagement strategy from the IDEA Partnership at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Leading by Convening engages individuals representing different stakeholder groups in an approach to program improvement that is rooted in shared goals; in this case, the goal is having a high-quality special education program in every district. Participating in the process were 21 individuals from 19 agencies or other organizations representing youth, families, school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, occupational therapists, special educators, school social workers, school psychologists, higher education, and state education agency and technical assistance center personnel. Building from their collective experience and expertise, including knowledge of the research, participating stakeholders started by identifying 16 features that they consider essential to a high-quality special education program and, for each feature, provided examples of practices that demonstrate the highest standard, an acceptable standard, and an unacceptable standard.

The tool consists of three parts: an overview of the program features with examples of the features at three different levels of quality (i.e., high, acceptable, and unacceptable); a template for conducting a special education program review inventory; and a template for developing a quality improvement plan based on results of that inventory. The templates are created as "fillable forms," which means they can be completed directly in this document.

Appendix A includes a more detailed description of the essential features and offers additional examples at each level of quality for users who may be interested in understanding more about how the features typically manifest in practice. Appendix B outlines

1 LiCaisi, C., Citkowics, M., Friedman, L. B., & Brown, M. (June 2015). *Evaluation of Massachusetts Office of District and School Turnaround assistance to Commissioner's districts and schools: Impact of school redesign grants.* Washington, DC: AIR, p. 25. Retrieved from http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/15-2687_SRG_Impact-Report_ed_FINAL.pdf

2 Cashman, J., Linehan, P., Purcell, L., Rosser, M., Schults, S., & Skalski, S. (2014). *Leading by convening: A blueprint for authentic engagement.* Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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the methodology used to develop this program review tool and acknowledges the contributors.

Instructions

The program review tool is designed to be used by individuals or teams responsible for recommending strategies to improve special education programs. Among those for whom the tool might be most useful are

- District administrators or staff members leading transformation efforts who are knowledgeable about the general education and special education programs at both the school and the district level, and school administrators and staff members who are charged with identifying the aspects of special education programming that need to be improved; and

- Groups of stakeholders representing diverse roles and perspectives who, as part of the broader school transformation effort, have been convened to engage in conversations about the quality of the school's and district's special education program and to identify the features that need to be improved.

Depending on the size of their district, district-level administrators may use the tool to structure their collaborative work with individual schools embarking on a focused school improvement effort. Alternatively, individual school leaders or special education coordinators may use the tool to drive their internal school improvement planning.

The review process involves six steps:

1. Read and consider the Essential Features of a High-Quality Special Education Program (p. 3).

2. Identify specific practices and behaviors in the school being reviewed that most closely align with the examples provided in this tool. (See appendix A, p. 21, for more detail about the features.)

3. Complete a special education program review inventory (template on p. 11).

4. Review the data and draw conclusions about program strengths and needed improvements.

5. Identify actions for addressing the needed improvements and develop a special education program quality improvement plan (template on p. 15).

6. Integrate targeted special education improvement actions into the broader school turnaround plan.

While a district or school may customize how it uses the program review tool, those planning to convene discussion groups may find the following questions helpful:

1. Which essential features of a high-quality special education program are evident in our school? What are some examples in our school of the features that demonstrate the highest standard of quality, an acceptable standard of quality, an unacceptable standard of quality, or that are simply missing?

2. What data will provide information about the level of quality that our program demonstrates for each essential feature? If data about a particular feature are not currently available, what steps should we take to gather the information we need?

3. As we begin to plan how to improve our special education program, where do we see alignment with other components of our district and school improvement planning?

Special Education Program Review Tool

Essential Features of a High-Quality Special Education Program

Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
STAFF QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERTISE			
1. Highly qualified staff	• Staff hold full credentials/licensure and advanced degrees in content area. • Staff are experts in working with children and adolescents with and without disabilities. • Staff collaborate with specialized instructional support personnel as needed.	• Most staff hold full credentials/ licensure and advanced degrees in content area, with a small percentage holding temporary credentials. • Staff schoolwide demonstrate a commitment to increasing knowledge of research, evidence-based and promising practices, and models of collaboration.	• A high percentage of staff have not met licensure requirements and/or do not have content expertise. • Instructional and educational practices are not evidence based. • Instructional staff rarely or never collaborate among themselves. • Special education teacher serves as classroom aide. • Related services personnel are disconnected from the academic environment.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
2. Expert knowledge of policies and regulations	• Special and general education staff and administration demonstrate high level of knowledge about implementing effective programs for students with disabilities. • Program reflects understanding of how state and local policies and regulations support quality programs for students with disabilities.	• Administration and special education staff demonstrate knowledge of regulations, policies, special education process, and individualized education programs (IEPs), and meet essential timelines.	• Staff rely heavily on special education administrator and special education teachers to meet compliance requirements. • Focus is on policies and procedures rather than connections to student learning.
3. Staffwide expertise in social-emotional and behavioral needs	• Staff and administration receive specialized training in how to respond to mental health issues, including how to respond in non-academic settings and/or during out-of-school time. • Specialized instructional support personnel are present to facilitate delivery of instruction and supports.	• Administration and school staff are aware of connections between mental health, physical health, and school success, and they work to address needs of students. • Supports include academic, social-emotional, and behavioral health.	• Supporting student mental health is responsibility of staff according to their respective role (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor, school nurse, social worker). • Strategies are not aligned to support physical health and mental health.
4. High-quality professional learning	• Administration prioritizes professional learning (PL) through effective scheduling. • PL activities meet the needs of staff in their roles. • PL activities are embedded and include classroom observations, peer observations, and self-check inventories. • Training is provided on working in partnership with families. • PL is aligned with evidence-based and promising practices, and with state mandates.	• PL activities are embedded and meet needs of staff in their roles. • PL is available for staff and related service providers on effective ways to work with families.	• PL focuses primarily on recertification and credential renewal and does not include embedded activities. • Focus of PL is on roles and responsibilities connected to position (e.g., special education teacher, general education teacher, school psychologist).

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT			
5. Student access to the general curriculum	• All students have access to rigorous curriculum, with full continuum of services, in general education setting. • All students have access to co-curricular activities, with supports as needed.	• IEPs include goals to increase amount of time students spend in general education settings. • Some students with disabilities are involved in co-curricular activities.	• Students with disabilities are mostly served in pullout settings, that is, outside the general education setting. • Students have little or no access to co-curricular activities. • Programs are not meaningfully individualized; students are expected to fit to available program rather than provided access to programs designed to meet their individual needs. • Basic compliance is the standard.
6. Positive learning environment	• Evidence-based practices are implemented. • Positive behavioral supports are in place. • Schools implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) with high level of fidelity. • School leadership and all school staff are invested in success for all students. • Families are partners in schoolwide programs.	• Administrative guidelines and policies related to behavior are implemented with fidelity. • Responsibility for positive learning environments is shared with families.	• Different behavioral expectations exist for students with IEPs compared to those for the majority of the student body. • Relationships with families are minimal and are not collaborative.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
7. Student engagement	• All students are included in all school activities. • All students are held to high expectations for regular attendance. • All students, with or without disabilities, have embedded opportunities to interact in academic and non-academic settings. • PL and training about student engagement are available for staff, families, and community, aimed at reducing likelihood of students dropping out of school.	• Students with disabilities are generally engaged in schoolwide activities. • All students are held to minimum attendance expectations. • Dropout prevention strategies are implemented by staff in a variety of roles. • Staff advocate for student inclusion and engagement opportunities.	• Exclusionary practices exist for co-curricular activities. • A high rate of absenteeism appears to be acceptable for students with disabilities. • No strategies are in place to increase engagement of students with disabilities and to reduce their likelihood of dropping out of school.
8. Family support and engagement	• Staff communicate and work effectively with parents. • Staff support families through child's transition between grade levels. • Families are included in development of school materials, with attention paid to language and culture. • High percentage of families of students with disabilities are active in the parent-teacher organization. • Parent input and needs are collected through a variety of data-collection tools.	• Parents receive required notifications and invitations, and they attend meetings. • Staff are skilled in communicating effectively with families about their child's disability. • Parents of students with disabilities are involved with the school community activities. • Families of students with disabilities are involved with the parent-teacher organization.	• School staff do not recognize families as essential partners in education programs for children. • No collaboration exists between school staff and families on school programs and activities. • There is little or no transparency in school decision-making. • Families are not supported when they have questions about policies, rules, expectations, or administrative decisions. • Few families of students with disabilities are involved with the parent-teacher organization.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
EFFECTIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES			
9. Data-driven decision-making	• Evidence of data-based decision-making is apparent to all stakeholders. • Programs and practices reflect data-driven decisions. • Data come from multiple sources, including comparative data generated through use of universal screening tools. • IEP meeting notes reflect data-driven decisions.	• Student data are used to support development of and changes to student IEPs. • Benchmark data and continuous progress monitoring provide timely information for decision-making. • Families and students understand basis of decisions.	• Students' information is gathered by using tools and data that are outdated and misaligned with intended practices. • The lack of transparency about the basis of decisions leaves family and student without sufficient information.
10. Effective secondary transition	• Transition planning and exploration of postsecondary opportunities begin when students enter high school, if not earlier. • Multiple providers are involved in transition planning. • There is evidence of enrollment in postsecondary education or training, employment, and independent living. • Families are provided the support they need to connect their children to appropriate transition services.	• All students with disabilities have a plan for postsecondary experiences, including further education or training, employment, and/or independent living. • Students have opportunities to explore interests. • Families receive information about and support in connecting with appropriate transition services.	• A transition plan is part of the IEP, but family is expected to follow up on opportunities without support (e.g., family is given a packet of information with little or no offers of assistance to make connections with appropriate transition services). • There is limited evidence of successful participation in postsecondary education or training, employment, and/or independent living.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
11. Culturally competent practice	• Practices adhere to Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards. (https://minorityhealth. hhs.gov/omh/browse. aspx?lvl=2&lvlid=53) • Translation and interpretation services are available to all non-English speakers. • All families feel welcome at school. • Staff are representative of the community's cultural diversity. • Administration and staff actively support LGBT students and families. • All staff receive PL for meeting special culture-based needs of students and families. • Staff proactively track data and monitor for disproportionality in disciplinary actions. (This program review tool uses the term disproportionality to refer to the over- or under-representation of any student group — compared to that group's presence in the overall student population — in special education and/or in disciplinary action.)	• School staff are actively engaged in welcoming diverse students and families through outreach and availability of interpreting services. • Some schoolwide activities honor cultures within the school community. • School staff and administration are aware of the potential for disproportionality when implementing and reviewing disciplinary policies and procedures.	• There is little or no systematic approach to welcoming and assimilating diverse students and families. • Disproportionality in disciplinary practices and/or identification of students with disabilities is evident, and there is no plan to address the issue.
12. Effective early childhood transition from part C to part B	• Family members are coached in ways to engage their child in development of self-determination attitudes and skills when the child is very young.	• Families, community providers, and school staff work together to support the child's transition to school.	• Professionals lead families through transition from early childhood services to school-age services rather than facilitate families' abilities to manage their child's transition.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION			
13. Authentic team approach	• Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff all have input into how IEPs will ensure that students receive supports. • Administrators are integral to the team. • Families and students are respected as essential team members. • Team members include those in non-mandated roles (e.g., employer of student in work-setting transition activities).	• The team is composed of all required members, as well as individuals in roles that will support implementation of the student's IEP. • Families and students receive some preparation and support for being team members. • The administration supports team recommendations and assists in providing adequate resources for programming.	• The school takes a top-down approach, and the team does not include all roles essential to IEP implementation. • Paperwork and IEP implementation are the sole responsibility of the teacher of record. • Families and students receive little or no preparation or support for being team members.
14. Creativity	• Programs are developed to meet the needs of individual students. • Students receive academic and non-academic support in the least intrusive ways. • Special education services are integrated into general learning activities. • An effective problem-solving process is in place.	• IEPs reflect student interests, abilities, and preferences. • Supports and accommodations are available in general learning activities. • Problems are addressed on a case-by-case basis as they arise.	• Services are provided based on labels and disability categories. • Many IEPs are similar to one another, with goals and accommodations that are not truly individualized. • Programs are not customized for students' abilities, interests, and preferences. • There is no flexibility or willingness to look at alternative approaches to address needs. • Problems are not anticipated, and there is no process for addressing them.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS			
15. Community partnerships (e.g., with child- and family-serving agencies, businesses)	• All students have access to opportunities for volunteer work, internships, employment, and recreation programs. • Students with disabilities are engaged in service learning/ community-based instruction that is linked to the general curriculum and classroom instruction. • Community agencies are partners in planning and implementing community-based programs for students.	• A program is in place for students to connect with the community to extend classroom learning and participate in community service and outreach. • Interagency collaboration exists among community agencies and schools.	• Only students with IEPs are provided with services, and most job opportunities are limited to the school/campus. • Access to community-based learning experiences is very limited or non-existent. • Community agencies rarely if ever collaborate with each other or with schools.
16. Adequate funding of special education programs	• Administrators take proactive steps to coordinate funding of special education services within the larger school program. • Community outreach and activities educate the public on school programs and student successes. • Staff have necessary resources for effective instruction.	• Funding for special education is understood to be an integral part of the whole school budget. • The community is informed about school programs and student activities. • Staff have necessary resources for effective instruction.	• Funding special education is seen as separate from funding general education. • Special education is considered to be a financial burden that creates a hardship on general education programs. • Resources and materials are outdated and not developmentally appropriate. • The school is seen as separate from the community, resulting in diminished support for school budgets and capital projects.

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Special Education Program Review Inventory (Template)

Instructions

1. For each feature, note the level of quality you believe your program demonstrates by adding H (highest), A (acceptable), or U (unacceptable) in the cell, followed by a colon. Then document the evidence that supports your determination of quality.

2. If a feature is not applicable to your program, write N/A in the cell.

Program features	Program demonstration of quality
STAFF QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERTISE	
1. Highly qualified staff	
2. Expert knowledge of policies and regulations	
3. Staffwide expertise in social-emotional and behavioral needs	

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Program features	Program demonstration of quality
4. High-quality professional learning	
EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	
5. Student access to the general curriculum	
6. Positive learning environment	
7. Student engagement	
8. Family support and engagement	

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Program features	Program demonstration of quality
EFFECTIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES	
9. Data-driven decision-making	
10. Effective secondary transition	
11. Culturally competent practice	
12. Effective early childhood transition from part C to part B	

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Program features	Program demonstration of quality
TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION	
13. Authentic team approach	
14. Creativity	
SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS	
15. Community partnerships (e.g., with child- and family-serving agencies, businesses)	
16. Adequate funding of special education programs	

District/School Special Education Program Quality Improvement Plan (Template)

Instructions

Template begins on next page.

1. For each category in which feature-specific improvement is needed, indicate the feature(s), the objective(s) of the improvement, and the action(s) needed to achieve it.

2. For each feature to be improved, determine expected evidence of success, connection to the district/school improvement plan, who is responsible for overseeing and monitoring the improvement effort, and the time frame in which improvement is expected.

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FEATURE CATEGORY: STAFF QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERTISE						
Feature needing improvement	Objective(s) for improving quality of feature(s)	Action needed	Evidence of success or implementation	Connection to district/school improvement plan	Individual responsible	Time frame

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FEATURE CATEGORY: EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT						
Feature needing improvement	Objective(s) for improving quality of feature(s)	Action needed	Evidence of success or implementation	Connection to district/school improvement plan	Individual responsible	Time frame

FEATURE CATEGORY: EFFECTIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES						
Feature needing improvement	Objective(s) for improving quality of feature(s)	Action needed	Evidence of success or implementation	Connection to district/school improvement plan	Individual responsible	Time frame

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FEATURE CATEGORY: TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION						
Feature needing improvement	Objective(s) for improving quality of feature(s)	Action needed	Evidence of success or implementation	Connection to district/school improvement plan	Individual responsible	Time frame

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FEATURE CATEGORY: SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Feature needing improvement	Objective(s) for improving quality of feature(s)	Action needed	Evidence of success or implementation	Connection to district/school improvement plan	Individual responsible	Time frame

Appendix A: Expanded Description of Features of a High-Quality Special Education Program

This appendix describes how each feature contributes to program quality, suggests sources and types of data for better understanding the quality of a given feature in your special education program, and provides additional examples of what the feature looks like at different levels of quality.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
STAFF QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERTISE			
1. Highly qualified staff *Connection to program quality* A program with highly qualified staff: • Ensures access to quality core academic instruction for all students with disabilities or at risk of having a disability • Reflects expertise in development and learning for children ages Birth-to-3, and, for those in preschool/kindergarten, an expertise that informs implementation of quality elementary school practices • Leverages knowledge of K–12 education overall to ensure quality at each grade level • Uses data to ensure quality practices • Contributes to successful postsecondary outcomes *Suggested data types and sources* • Credential records • Professional development plans and documentation • School self-assessment	• Teachers have credentials, have certifications beyond grade-level/content area, and have received training in current issues and trends. • Teachers have higher-level degrees (master's, doctorate) in areas of content and program relevance. • All staff have expertise in child and adolescent development and in working with students both with and without disabilities. • All staff have expertise in data-based decision-making, including using data to improve instruction for all students. • Classroom teachers collaborate and co-teach with related service providers and specialized instructional support personnel. • Professional learning (PL) is available to staff, and there are training opportunities for all stakeholders, including families and others in the community. • PL and other training for staff, families, and others in the community include state-adopted student learning standards and current education issues.	• Some staff hold temporary licensure. • Staff work to increase knowledge of research, evidence-based practices, child and adolescent development, and data-based decision-making — and to apply that knowledge to instruction and education practices. • PL and other training include state-adopted student learning standards and current education issues. • Program administrators provide support for collaboration and co-teaching among general education teachers, special education teachers, and related service providers.	• Many staff members have not met licensure requirements. • Few, if any, staff have expertise or are working to increase knowledge of research, evidence-based practices, child and adolescent development, and data-based decision-making. • PL has not kept up with state-adopted student learning standards and current education issues. • Collaboration between special and general educators is not encouraged or supported by administration. • Service providers work with students in a fashion that is disconnected from the academic environment (i.e., using a medical model as opposed to education model).

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
2. Expert knowledge of policies and regulations *Connection to program quality* A program whose staff have expert knowledge of policies and regulations: • Reflects best ways to apply and navigate policies and regulations in order to meet students' individual needs • Differentiates among students who qualify for other programs/supports (e.g., Section 504) • Ensures access to Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) • Reduces likelihood of litigation *Suggested data types and sources* • State education agency (SEA) and local policies and procedures • SEA monitoring • District information in state performance plans	• Administration and school staff are knowledgeable about and experienced in implementing effective programs for students with disabilities. • Students with disabilities are appropriately identified. • All staff understand how statutes, policies, and regulations support quality programs for students with disabilities. • Administrators, staff, service providers, and parents receive training to develop knowledge of FAPE in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and implications for student outcomes; training results in changes in behaviors or practices.	• Administration and special education staff have knowledge of regulations and policies related to students with disabilities, as well as understanding of process and of IEPs, and knowledge of and expertise in meeting essential time lines. • Student and school data suggest appropriate identification of students with disabilities. • Administrators and special education staff understand how statutes, policies, and regulations support quality programs for students with disabilities. • PL supports administrators and school staff in keeping abreast of current issues related to quality programs for students with disabilities; training results in changes in behaviors or practices.	• Administrators and special education staff have limited knowledge of regulations and policies related to students with disabilities. • Meeting compliance requirements is the standard for programs for students with disabilities. • There is not sufficient information to know whether students with disabilities are appropriately identified. • Administrators and special education staff focus on policy and procedure rather than the connections to student learning. • PL does not focus on current issues related to quality programs for students with disabilities and does not result in changes in administrative or teaching behaviors or practices.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
3. Staffwide expertise in social-emotional and behavioral needs *Connection to program quality* A program with staffwide expertise in students' social-emotional and behavioral needs: • Increases appropriate identification of students with disabilities • Reduces inappropriate disciplinary responses and disproportionality • Helps reduce stigma *Suggested data types and sources* • Numbers of specialized instructional support personnel engaged • Agreement or scope of work with behavioral health agency that outlines school-based mental health supports being provided • Samples of students' positive behavioral support plans	• Program provides mental health literacy curriculum (e.g., Youth Mental Health First Aid) to school community, including staff, students, families; it also provides access to outside agency supports. • Staff and administration receive specialized training and supports for responding to mental health issues to ensure that the highest level of intervention support is available, including in non-academic settings and during out-of-school time. • Specialized instructional support personnel are integral to delivery of instruction and supports. • Programs for all students reflect awareness of connections between mental health, physical health, and school success. • All students and school staff are aware of how to access mental health supports in school and community. • Supports are based in research or informed by evidence.	• Administration and school staff are aware of connections between mental health, physical health, and school success, and they work to address needs of students. • Supports include academic, social-emotional, and behavioral health. • Students, families, and all staff know of availability of mental health supports in school and community.	• Supporting student mental health is the responsibility of staff by role (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor, school nurse, social worker). • Strategies are not aligned to support physical health and mental health. • Students, families, and staff may be unaware of availability of mental health supports in school and community.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
4. High-quality professional learning *Connection to program quality* A program with high-quality professional learning: • Supports recruitment and retention of personnel (special education and related services) • Helps all stakeholders be aware of each other's role • Supports staff's professional growth and collaboration with colleagues *Suggested data types and sources* • Individual PL plans • School-level PL plan • District-level PL plan • Calendar of PL sessions • Minutes of school board meetings • Personnel shortage data • Longevity of personnel in positions/vacancies • Data on orienting and re-orienting new personnel to positions • Exit interviews with staff	• There are clear job descriptions that detail responsibilities. • PL activities are embedded and meet needs of staff in their roles. • The administration prioritizes PL through creative scheduling. • There is PL for working in partnership with families. • The professional practices of individual administrators and staff reflect improvement from PL. • Self-directed PL includes time for reflection and consultation with peers. • Peer coaching and mentorships pair experienced staff with newer staff. • All staff and volunteers are trained to work with students with disabilities. • Training in Understanding by Design includes sensory, motor, cognitive, and visual approaches, as well as technology. • There is PL to support instructional and program creativity. • PL aligns with state mandates, national trends, and broader school vision. • PL and training are available for cross-stakeholder groups, including families, school staff, and community. • The school accesses PL and training available through national organizations. • Family and youth receive training and supports, including mentoring, to effectively carry out their roles.	• Basic job descriptions provide guidance as to responsibilities of each role. • PL activities are embedded and meet needs of staff in their roles. • Staff and related service providers receive PL on effective ways to include families in planning and meetings. • Staff report that PL is influencing their own professional practice.	• There are no job descriptions. • Roles and responsibilities are assumed to be connected to position (e.g., special education teacher, general education teacher, school psychologist). • PL focuses on recertification and credential renewal as main purpose. • PL does not include effective ways to include families in planning and meetings. • Little or no training is available to support schoolwide programs and to contribute to a positive learning environment. • Robust supports and services for students with disabilities are not in place despite PL activities. • Staff exhibit no change in their own professional practice.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
EDUCATION OPPORTUNTIES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT			
5. Student access to general curriculum *Connection to program quality* A program providing students with access to the general curriculum: • Establishes the expectation that all children can learn and achieve to high standards • Prepares all students for postsecondary experiences • Supports disability awareness and acceptance • Supports students' development of executive functioning and "soft skills" for college and career readiness *Suggested data types and sources* • IEP documentation of services and supports in general education setting • Assessment and alternate assessment participation numbers	• All students have access to rigorous curriculum with full continuum of services in general education setting. • All students have access to all co-curricular activities with supports as needed. • The classroom teacher is the teacher of record. • The classroom teacher, special education teacher, and related service providers co-teach. • Multi-tiered systems of supports are in place. • High-quality implementation of Universal Design for Learning is evident.	• IEPs include goals to increase amount of time students spend in general education settings and to increase their involvement in co-curricular activities. • Some students with disabilities are involved in co-curricular activities when interests align. • Case manager communicates with classroom teachers, other instructional staff, and related service providers.	• There is no shared understanding of the meaning of "access," with interpretation differing within the school. • Students with disabilities have little to no access to co-curricular activities. • Delivery of services for students with IEPs is most often in pullout settings. • Procedural safeguards for compliance are met, but there is no connection to improving program quality for students in order to improve outcomes; program does not truly individualize IEPs.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
6. Positive learning environment *Connection to program quality* A program that ensures a positive learning environment: • Supports student achievement by providing a safe, supportive learning environment • Increases quality of instruction • Increases instructional time *Suggested data types and sources* • Student and/or family surveys; feedback from focus groups • Attendance records • Graduation rates • Number of students with disabilities involved in co-curricular activities • Disciplinary referrals and data • Disproportionality data	• An evidence-based approach to creating a positive learning environment is in place, as are positive behavioral supports. • Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is implemented with fidelity. • Families engage as partners in schoolwide programs. • School leadership and all school staff are invested in the success of all students.	• Administrative guidelines and policies related to intentionally creating a positive learning environment are in place. • Responsibility for positive learning environments is shared with families.	• There are no administrative guidelines or policies related to intentionally creating a positive learning environment. • Relationships with families are superficial and not collaborative. • There are different behavioral expectations for students with IEPs than for the majority of the student body.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
7. Student engagement *Connection to program quality* A program with student engagement: • Increases student achievement • Supports on-time completion of high school • Results in fewer disciplinary incidents • Increases attendance/graduation rates • Reduces truancy rates • Promotes student self-determination • Supports college and career readiness • Reduces stigma *Suggested data types and sources* • Student and family surveys; feedback from focus groups • Staff surveys, feedback from focus groups • Numbers of students with disabilities engaging in all school activities • Attendance records • Disciplinary records • Bullying data • Graduation rates	• All students are included in all school activities. • There are embedded and intentional opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact in academic and non-academic settings. • All students are held to high expectations for regular attendance. • PL for staff and training for families and community are provided to reduce likelihood of students dropping out of school.	• Engagement of students with disabilities in schoolwide activities is evident. • Staff advocate for student inclusion and engagement opportunities. • All students are held to minimum attendance expectations. • Dropout prevention strategies are implemented and owned by staff in a variety of roles.	• There are exclusionary practices in co-curricular activities. • Students with disabilities most often are included in the periphery of curricular and co-curricular activities. Examples include: separate work areas within classroom; students with disabilities serving as "student helpers" rather than as full team or club members; students with disabilities being "allowed" to participate in all school activities rather than being entitled to participate with needed supports. • A high rate of absenteeism appears to be acceptable for students with disabilities. • No strategies are in place to increase student engagement and reduce the likelihood of students with disabilities dropping out of school.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
8. Family support and engagement *Connection to program quality* A program with family support and engagement: • Promotes and supports students' school readiness • Strengthens and encourages parent participation in child's educational program • Promotes and supports student self-determination • Links learning opportunities between home and school *Suggested data types and sources* • Family surveys; feedback from focus groups • IEP meeting notes • Evidence of parent involvement in IEP development • Evidence of parents involved in school programs • Evidence of parents involved in development of behavioral supports for the school as a whole as well as for their own child • State education agency information on complaints and negative reports	• Staff communicate and work effectively with parents. • Staff work to develop partnerships with families in order to effectively implement programs for students with disabilities. • Parent and family input is analyzed and valued as administrative and program decisions are made. • A high percentage of families of students with disabilities are active in the parent-teacher organization. • Parent comments and needs are elicited using a variety of data-collection tools. • Stakeholder voice is communicated openly in the school environment. • Families are included in the development of school materials, with attention to language and culture; this includes communications about school programs, policies, rules, expectations, and administrative decisions. • Staff support families through child's transition between grade levels.	• Parents receive all notifications and invitations and attend meetings. • Staff are skilled in communicating effectively with family about child's disability. • Families have access to school staff and administration when they have questions about school programs, policies, rules, expectations, or administrative decisions. • Families and school staff are involved with the parent-teacher organization. • Parent comments and needs are gathered through a survey or other information-gathering effort. • Parents of students with disabilities are involved with school community activities. • All school communications materials are available in students' home language.	• Communication between school and home is limited. • School staff do not recognize families as essential partners in education programs for children. • Families are not supported when they have questions about policies, rules, expectations, or administrative decisions. • No collaboration exists between school staff and families on school programs and activities. • There is little or no transparency in school decision-making. • Parent comments and needs are not solicited. • Few families of students with disabilities are involved with the parent-teacher organization. • Not all school communications materials are available in the home language of students.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
EFFECTIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES			
9. Data-driven decision-making *Connection to program quality* A program using data-driven decision-making: • Uses data to inform accountability systems • Fosters prioritization of outcome-driven goals and behaviors • Ensures that decisions are evidence based *Suggested data types and sources:* • Documentation of student performance • Student outcomes/performance data; district/school outcomes/ performance data; IEP meeting documentation • Informal data/anecdotal data • Student-maintained data (e.g., student portfolios) • Family-maintained data • Staff, parent, student responses to survey items	• IEP meeting notes reflect that decisions related to services and supports are data-driven. • Data come from multiple sources, including comparative data generated through universal screening tools. • Stakeholders understand how data are collected and applied to decision-making. • Routine use of data is evident in conversation and practices.	• Student data are used to support development of and changes to IEPs. • Benchmark data and continuous progress monitoring provide timely information for decision-making. • Families and students understand the basis of decisions.	• Students' information is gathered by using tools and data that are not aligned with use and do not effectively inform practices (e.g., using diagnostic tests to track performance). • Lack of transparency in decision-making leaves family and student without sufficient information.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
10. Effective secondary transition practices *Connection to program quality* A program with effective secondary transition: • Prepares students for life after high school: employment, community integration, postsecondary education or training • Supports development of self-advocacy or self-determination skills *Suggested data types and sources* • District-level reports on Indicators 13 and 14 of State Performance Plan submitted to U.S. Department of Education • Number of students employed and/or enrolled in further education or training after high school	• Transition planning and exploration of postsecondary school opportunities takes place when students enter high school, if not earlier; multiple providers are involved in transition planning. • Students explore interests and have opportunities to develop and practice self-advocacy and "soft work skills" as part of school day. • Transition services are community based, providing opportunities for students to interact with community members. • Families are provided with the support they need to connect their children to appropriate transition services. • Schools engage in conversations with families and students that identify differences in terminology and language used in other community settings (e.g., work place, medical environment, other child-serving agencies). • Schools lead conversations with community partners to address stigma and to increase disability awareness. • Enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary education/training, employment counseling, and/or independent living programs is evident.	• All students with disabilities have a plan for postsecondary experiences, including further education/training, employment, and/or independent living. • Students have opportunities to explore interests. • Transition services are community based, providing opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with community members. • Families receive information about, and support for, connecting with appropriate transition services. • There is evidence of students with disabilities having transitioned to postsecondary education/training, employment, and/or independent living.	• All students with disabilities have transition plans as part of their IEP. • Students have few or limited opportunities to explore interests. • Transition services are not necessarily community based. • Families are expected to follow up on opportunities without adequate support from team (e.g., family is given a packet of information with little or no offers of assistance to make connections with appropriate transition services). • There is limited evidence of students' successful participation in postsecondary education/training, employment, or independent living.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
11. Culturally competent practices *Connection to program quality* A program using culturally competent practices: • Supports effective school staff interaction with children, families, and community service providers • Supports a team approach • Addresses disproportionality • Increases appropriate identification of students with disabilities *Suggested data types and sources* • Number of students of diverse cultures involved in co-curricular activities • Evidence of support for translation and interpretation services for all students and families who need it • Tribal agreements and partnerships in districts with Native American students • Evidence of services available to children living in poverty • Evaluation reports • School disciplinary data	• Program adheres to Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards. • Translation and interpretation supports are available to all speakers of languages other than English. • All families feel welcome at school. • Staff proactively track data and monitor for disproportionality in disciplinary actions. • Staff represent the cultural diversity of community. • Administration and staff actively support students who are LGBT and their families. • Handbooks and resources are available in different languages and at different literacy levels. • All staff have opportunities to learn about cultures represented in the community, including those of the deaf and hard-of-hearing, of military families, and any related to specific disabilities. • English language education is available for parents and families. • School provides disability awareness education to community partners to support community-based transition activities and services for students. • Staff and student body have learning opportunities that reinforce acceptance and understanding of characteristics of disabilities, as well as of behavioral and belief differences among cultures and faiths.	• School staff actively engage in welcoming diverse students and families through outreach and by providing translation and interpretation services. • Some schoolwide activities honor cultures within the school community. • School staff and administration are aware of the possibility of disproportionality when implementing and reviewing disciplinary policies and procedures.	• There is little or no systematic approach to welcoming and assimilating diverse students and families. • Disproportionality exists in identification of students with disabilities and/or in disciplinary practices, and there is no plan to address the issue.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
12. Effective early childhood transition from part C to part B *Connection to program quality* A program providing effective early childhood transition from part C to part B: • Promotes and supports school readiness • Prepares family, child, and staff for child's transition • Facilitates transition from one system to another • Engage students in self-determination from an early age *Suggested data types and sources* • Number of children with disabilities included in general education classroom(s) • IEP and IEP meeting minutes • Level of family engagement in school activities • Family reports of satisfaction with supports through child's transition to school	Family members are coached in ways to engage child in development of self-determination attitudes and skills when child is very young.	Families, community providers, and school staff work together to support the child's transition to school.	Professionals lead families through their child's transition from early childhood services to school-age services rather than facilitate families' abilities to manage their child's transition.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION			
13. Authentic team approach *Connection to program quality* A program that takes an authentic team approach: • Supports a seamless approach to providing services • Improves student achievement • Reduces gaps in services and supports • Supports effective transitions from grade-to-grade through school years *Suggested data types and sources* • Evaluation notes on team construction • Team members' description of their involvement in the process. • Role of community services evident in IEP • State education agency information on dispute resolution and number of complaints	• Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff all have input as to how to support students. • Administrators are integral to a student's IEP team. • Families and students are respected as essential team members. • The team includes those in non-mandated roles (e.g., employer for student in transition).	• The team is constructed of all required members, as well as of people in other roles that will help support the student's program. • Some preparation and support is available for family and student in their roles as team members. • Administration supports team recommendations and assists in providing adequate resources for programming.	• The team doesn't include all roles essential to implementation of IEP. • The approach is top-down. • Paperwork and implementation of IEPs are the sole responsibility of the teacher of record. • There is little or no preparation and support for family and student in their roles as team members.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
14. Creativity *Connection to program quality* A program that embraces creativity: • Addresses the unique needs of each child and youth *Suggested data types and sources* • IEPs • Evidence of student engagement • Formal and informal reports of school planning for program innovation (e.g., meeting minutes, newsletters, school improvement plans, school climate/safety surveys for students, parents, and staff)	• The administration encourages innovation in scheduling and types of classes and activities. • Programs are developed to meet the needs of individual students. • Students receive academic and non-academic support in the least intrusive ways. • Special education services are integrated into general learning activities. • Demonstration of proficiency through multiple means is a component of all learning activities. • An effective problem-solving process is in place for resolving issues.	• School leadership encourages and supports creative approaches to learning. • IEPs reflect student interests, abilities, and preferences. • Supports and accommodations are available in general learning activities. • Students have the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in multiple ways. • Problems and challenges are addressed on a case-by-case basis as they arise.	• The administration does not encourage or support creativity. • Services are based on labels and disability categories. • Many IEPs are similar to one another, with the same goals and accommodations that are not truly individualized. • Programs are not customized to student abilities, interests, and preferences. • In demonstrating proficiency, students are limited to specific strategies rather than free to use multiple means of representation. • There is no flexibility or willingness to explore multiple strategies for addressing students' unique needs. • Problems are not anticipated, and there is no process for addressing them.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS			
15. Community partnerships (e.g., with child- and family-serving agencies, businesses) *Connection to program quality* A program that builds community partnerships: • Fosters community opportunities and relationships outside of family and school • Helps students develop skills to safely access transportation • Provides mentoring opportunities • Fosters community awareness and understanding of special education and students with disabilities *Suggested data types and sources* • District's I-13 and I-14 data from State Annual Performance Report • Number of community organizations and businesses involved with work exploration, job coaching mentorships, extended learning opportunities • Participation in national programs (e.g., Best Buddies, Special Olympics) • Memoranda of Understanding between school districts and adult services • Partner agencies' data: total students served and number served successfully	• Students have access to volunteer work, internships, employment, and recreation programs. • Students with disabilities are engaged in service learning/ community-based instruction that is linked to the general curriculum and classroom instruction. • The community is engaged in a substantive way that augments the school curriculum and supports.	• A program is in place for students to make connections with the community so as to extend their classroom learning, as well as to participate in community service and outreach. • Interagency collaboration among community agencies and schools is evident.	• Most services and job opportunities for students with an IEP are located within the school or on campus. • Community-based learning experiences are non-existent or very limited. • There is little or no collaboration among community agencies or between agencies and school.

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Program features	Examples from a program demonstrating the highest standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an acceptable standard	Examples from a program demonstrating an unacceptable standard
16. Adequate funding of special education programs *Connection to program quality* A program that is adequately funded: • Provides the necessary resources for a quality program: essential personnel, supports, services, co-curricular activities, and instructional resources *Suggested data types and sources* • Stakeholder surveys; feedback from focus groups • Postsecondary outcome data, including information about education, training, employment, independent living • Details of administrative process for determining budgetary priorities	• Administrative leadership is evident in a coordinated approach to funding special education services within the larger school program. • Staff have the resources necessary for effective instruction. • Community outreach and activities educate the public on school programs and student successes. • Community members have the information they need to understand the important role of schools as part of the community infrastructure.	• Funding for special education is understood to be a part of the whole of financing school programs. • Staff have the resources necessary for effective instruction. • Information on school programs and student activities is provided to the community.	• Special education is considered to be a separate and parallel financial burden that creates a hardship on general education programs. • Resources and materials are outdated and/or not developmentally appropriate. • The school is seen as separate from the community, a view that yields diminishing support for school budgets and capital projects.

Appendix B: Methodology for Developing Program Review Tool

Leading by Convening (LbC)[3] is a stakeholder engagement strategy developed by the IDEA Partnership, a project that was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, and housed at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Formed in 2001, the IDEA Partnership brought together 50 national organizations to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Its approach to doing so has been to engage stakeholders from multiple roles in collaborative work to develop and influence policy-informed practices and practice-informed policymaking.

In developing the program review tool, the Center on School Turnaround used the LbC strategy because it is an efficient means of engaging stakeholders with diverse perspectives and drawing on their expertise, including their knowledge of relevant research, to generate practical tools. With the intention of having representatives of as many roles as possible contributing to the tool's development, the Center on School Turnaround issued 33 invitations to organizations and agencies that participated regularly in IDEA Partnership activities. Ultimately, 21 individuals were engaged in the process, from 19 agencies or other organizations representing youth, families, school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, occupational therapists, special educators, school social workers, school psychologists, higher education, and state education agency and technical assistance center personnel. (See the acknowledgments below for individual participants and their affiliation.)

Participants were offered the choice of serving on the Lead Working Team or the Review Team, depending on their availability. Of those participating, 13 did so as members of the Lead Working Team and 8 as members of the Review Team.

Development Process

Members of the Lead Working Team were sent the following questions concerning essential features and quality indicators to consider in advance of their first meeting.

Essential Features

1. From your perspective, what are the essential features of a quality special education program?

2. In what ways does each essential feature contribute to a quality special education program?

3. What data source will provide information on the status of the feature?

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3   Cashman, J., Linehan, P., Purcell, L., Rosser, M., Schultz, S., & Skalski, S. (2014). *Leading by convening: A blueprint for authentic engagement.* Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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Quality Indicators

1. What would we see happening in a school where this essential feature is in place and could be described as meeting the highest standard?

2. What would we see happening in a school where this essential feature is in place and, although could not be described as meeting the highest standard, could be described as meeting an acceptable standard?

3. What would we see happening in a school where this essential feature is not in place and therefore meets an unacceptable standard?

Based on participants' responses to the questions, shared during a first teleconference, the facilitator developed a draft of a program quality rubric that was then reviewed and revised in an iterative feedback process that took place over the course of four weeks. During that period, members of the Lead Working Team participated in one 90-minute teleconference each week. At each convening, members provided feedback on the current draft rubric and contributed additional ideas for inclusion in the rubric. The meetings were facilitated by a staff member from the Center on School Turnaround.

The weekly teleconferences included a connection to GoToMeeting, which provided participants with a view of the facilitator's desktop and note-taking as the facilitator recorded contributions in real time. All contributions were considered of equal value and were included and/or modified by consensus.

After each teleconference, the facilitator edited the rubric for length and clarity and distributed the edited version to participants in advance of the next teleconference. After the fourth round, the draft document was sent to all members of both the Lead Working Team and the Review Team for review and final input. The final document was then edited for length and clarity by the project co-directors.

Drawing on their expertise and experiences, participating stakeholders identified 16 features that they considered essential to a high-quality special education program, articulated how each feature contributes to program quality, and provided examples of what each feature would look like in practice — at the highest standard, at an acceptable standard, and at an unacceptable standard.

The program review tool is not intended to duplicate or replace the compliance measures and mechanisms that determine whether or not a special education program meets federal or state requirements. Instead, it is intended to be a catalyst for conversation and planning for program improvement.

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Acknowledgments