

**Yes
We
Can**

**General
and Special
Educators
Collaborating
in a
Professional
Learning
Community**

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Acknowledgments

I have the distinct privilege of working with extraordinary educators, administrators, board members, parents, and, most importantly, students in Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96. Each day, I am awed and inspired by my colleagues' work ethic, knowledge base, innovation, commitment to PLC practices, and passion for making sure *all* learners in our system find success. I learn from them daily and feel lucky to be part of such an amazing school district. On a personal note, I thank my husband, Shaun, and my children, Katie, Braden, and Taylor, for being my constant inspiration and my light in life. You each make me a better person, and I love you more than you'll ever know. Last, to my parents, I thank you for always believing in me and making sure that I grew up to view challenges as opportunities.

—Heather

Becoming a school district superintendent was not something I ever aspired to . . . until I joined the Kildeer District 96 family. I, as most do, feel very passionate about and dedicated to the amazing, ongoing PLC work that we have worked so hard to deeply embed. It is this work and the incredibly talented people at all levels of the organization that changed my mind and my heart. The teachers, support staff, administrators, and board of education members I am privileged to know and serve remind me every day that *all* students can succeed at high levels when the adults in their environment believe they can and provide the supports necessary for them to excel. I am thankful to have parents who believe deeply in public education and who still tell me that they are proud of me every opportunity they get! But no one knows the depth of my commitment to this work better than my husband, Rob, and my daughter, Lily, both of whom I love with all my heart. Their willingness to share me, combined with their unwavering love, support, and patience, make me a better educator, wife, mom, and person.

—Julie

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amount of support and scaffolding were worth it. Thank you, Amy, for the experience that shaped me as an educator and started the journey that led to this book.

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—Jeanne

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INTRODUCTION

Improving Outcomes for *All* Students

*If a child cannot learn in the way we teach, we must teach in
a way the child can learn.*

—Unknown

In working with schools and districts across the United States on improving outcomes for all students through the implementation of professional learning community (PLC) practices, we have been struck by the lack of clear definitions and expectations for the role and place of special education in the PLC process.

Given the clear and pervasive gap in achievement between general education and special education students, the purpose of *Yes We Can!* is to examine the collaborative partnership between general and special education in maximizing learning for all students. As the United States and all school systems move to adopt more rigorous standards, this book will focus on applying PLC practices to fully include special education and special educators in the planning and delivery of standards-aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These aims will be explored through the lens of the key PLC tenets, with specific strategies and methods outlined so that the reader can put to use the contents as well as demonstrate an increased understanding of how special education fits within a PLC.

PLC experts Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas W. Many (2010) define a PLC as:

an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. (p. 11)

Further, they note that the work of PLCs is guided by three big ideas (a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation) and four critical questions.

1. What is it we expect our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we respond when some students already know it?

Going forward, we will refer to these tenets of PLCs as the *three big ideas* and the *four critical questions*.

We believe there are not clear expectations for including special education in the work of a PLC and, more important, about what needs to be done in order to impact learning outcomes for our most at-risk students. Too often, we find that special education is neither part of collaborative processes nor addressed in the work of answering the four critical questions. We also recognize that including special education in all parts of the PLC process requires significant shifts in belief systems as well as structures. We address these shifts in thinking as well as outline key action steps for changing structures to match the mindset that *all* students can learn.

How This Book Is Structured

Yes We Can! is presented in two parts: (1) “Closing the Gap Through Collaboration” and (2) “Closing the Gap Through a Focus on Learning and Results”. Each part presents vital information that teams within a PLC need to know to foster an environment of learning for *all* students. In both parts, all chapters conclude with keys to moving forward in the collective endeavor to close the gap for students with special needs.

Part I, which includes chapters 1–3, focuses on the history behind the divide between general and special education, and the ways PLCs can shift mindsets to establish a culture of shared responsibility for all students’ learning. Chapter 1 surveys the history of special education in the United States to help readers understand the legislation, policies, and changes that have influenced special education. Chapter 2 proposes an alternative to the divide between general and special education by illustrating how powerful collaboration between general and special educators can close the gap for even the neediest students, those who are the most discrepant learners because they are at risk or significantly impaired. It explains several forms teams at the elementary and secondary levels may take to ensure that general and special educators work together to improve learning outcomes for all students. Chapter 3 guides educators to commit to a shared responsibility to ensure that all students learn and outlines three action steps that teachers can take to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all students.

Part II, covering chapters 4–8, shows collaborative teams within PLCs how to close the achievement gap by focusing on learning and on results. Grounded in the three

big ideas and four critical questions of a PLC, part II teaches general and special educators how to tailor instruction, plan assessments, create goals, and monitor progress to ensure that all students receive the support they need to learn. Chapter 4 examines the roles of general and special educators in determining what they want students to know and be able to do. To help educators come to a common agreement in answering this critical question, this chapter provides a tool to assist teams in unpacking standards to guide expectations for learning outcomes. Chapter 5 builds on the learning targets identified in the unpacking process by offering strategies for designing standards-aligned instruction for all learners and for tailoring instruction when needed for students with special needs. Chapter 6 demonstrates how collaborative teams can align standards-based instruction and assessment for all learners. In chapter 7, protocols assist collaborative teams in using assessment data to plan and refine goals and to monitor progress. Chapter 8 outlines response to intervention (RTI) structures and practices to show teams how to respond when students don't learn.

Yes We Can! concludes with two appendices. Appendix A features reproducible versions of the many tools and templates mentioned throughout the chapters. Appendix B is a glossary of terms commonly used when discussing PLCs, RTI, students with special needs, and related topics. If we know anything, we know that the use of terms and acronyms is particularly prevalent in the world of special education. So, too, is it widespread in the world of teaching and learning. Please note that throughout this text, we choose to use the term *students with special needs*.

Getting the Most Out of This Book

Yes We Can! is intended for general education teachers, special education teachers, related-services providers, principals, and central office administrators. Whether the reader is working to embed PLC tenets to positively impact student learning or is strictly focused on closing the achievement gap, the content will be meaningful and relevant. Through this framework, neither special educators nor administrators will be able to contend that the work does not apply to them or even that special education is helpless to embed PLC practices in systems that do not currently work as PLCs. To be clear, the strategies we discuss throughout this text apply to *all* learners; however, our focus in this book is to examine practices that support students with special needs. Only after we begin to make strides toward shifting mindsets, reconsidering structures, and truly collaborating at high levels focused on the learning of all students will we begin to see steady and sustainable progress toward closing the gaps.



CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY AND REALITY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Although it is true that special education has created a base of civil rights and legal protections, children with special needs remain those most at risk of being left behind. The facts create a sense of urgency for reform that few can deny.

—President’s Commission on Excellence in Special
Education

The sense of urgency in the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) report has not dissipated for our most at-risk students. In fact, progress toward closing this gap made under old standards and less rigorous accountability assessments has all but vanished. Schools and school districts across the United States are feverishly working toward the implementation of new, more rigorous learning standards for *all* students. This new, higher level of accountability has challenged schools that have stalled in improvement efforts as well as those that have been deemed high-performing. As the bar is raised, closing the gap feels further and further out of reach for our most disadvantaged students. But without sufficient support for the implementation of more rigorous learning standards, schools are in danger of letting students, especially those with special needs, fall through the cracks, setting them up for a cycle of low expectations, struggle, and failure. As educators, we know that for students who have historically struggled in school, an adult life full of financial and societal challenges likely awaits, so it is crucial schools ensure that learning for all includes students served through special education.

Historically, students with special needs “drop out of high school at twice the rate of their peers,” and the enrollment rate for special needs students in higher education “is nearly 50 percent lower than enrollment among the general population” (President’s Commission, 2002, p. 3). While some progress has been made with the “overall percentage of students with a learning disability who drop out declining from 35 percent in 2002 to 19 percent in 2011” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014), the dropout rate for all students has declined from 10.5 percent to 7.1 percent during that same time frame (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). But little attention has been paid over the years by federal accountability systems to whether those students are advancing in core subjects or acquiring the skills necessary for making special education and accommodations no longer necessary (Lyon et al., 2001). Special education administrators report that despite the overly burdensome compliance issues attached to special education, they have never been asked to report how many students no longer qualify for services in a given year. In fact, a very small percentage of those who qualify for special education actually ever move out of the services. Some researchers indicate that “students who enter special education with reading levels that are two or more years below those of their age mates can be expected to maintain that disparity, or fall further behind” (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003, p. 203). So while schools across the United States have struggled to provide students with the most intensive help available, the achievement gap has continued to grow. Over a thirty-year span, achievement gaps in reading and mathematics between general and special education students, as measured by accountability assessments nationally, have reached 40 percent and 50 percent, even in some high-performing areas (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Sadly, minority students have been disproportionately identified in some categories of special education, and the number of all special education students identified as having a specific learning disability has grown more than 300 percent from the passage of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through 2006 with some pattern of trending downward since the passage of response to intervention legislation (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; President’s Commission, 2002).

Who Are Students With Special Needs?

Before we address the need to ensure high levels of learning for all students, let’s examine who our students with special needs are. Table 1.1 illustrates the distribution of students served under each eligibility category the U.S. Department of Education’s (n.d.) Office of Special Education database reports through 2011.

Table 1.1 illustrates that most of these students by definition do not have a significant cognitive disability (McNulty & Gloeckler, 2011). To be more specific, 80 to 85 percent of identified students have no cognitive impairment (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Unfortunately, the results of a 2012 survey conducted by the National Center

for Learning Disabilities (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014) indicate that 43 percent of the general public wrongly believe that learning disabilities are correlated with IQ or intelligence. The survey's results lead us to wonder about past and current mindsets about the learning potential of students identified as having a learning disability. Misconceptions about students with disabilities make our mission two-pronged: we must shift our practices to ensure high levels of learning and make significant cultural shifts.

Table 1.1: Distribution of Students With Special Needs in the United States

Disability	Percentage
Learning disabilities	42 percent
Speech or language impairments	19 percent
Other health impairments	13 percent
Intellectual disabilities	8 percent
Autism	7 percent
Emotional disturbance	6 percent
All others	5 percent

Sources: McNulty & Gloeckler, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.

The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education

Although we have a long way to go, steps toward shifting educators' practices to ensure high levels of learning and establishing the culture to support that aim began many years ago. On October 2, 2001, President George W. Bush created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, and in July 2002, the commission released its findings and recommendations in its report, *A New Area: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families*. The historical context of special education is important to understanding the reasons behind our recommendations, and it is from the commission's report that some of the most compelling catalysts for change have originated.

The commission's findings include that, often, qualifying for special education becomes an endpoint and not a gateway to more effective instruction and targeted, specific intervention. The report reiterates that cases of students qualifying for special education services, moving into the special education system, and receiving the

intensive services needed to close the gap and no longer necessitate specialized instruction and supports, are few and far between (President's Commission, 2002).

The report also indicates that the system is “wait to fail” instead of a model based on prevention and intervention. This finding speaks to the long-known flaws in identifying learning disabilities and the use of the antiquated discrepancy model. For years, educators have seen students entering first grade who struggled with preliteracy and literacy development. By mid–first grade, the discrepancy became pronounced between what these struggling students learned and what standards other students were mastering. In our collective experience as authors, facilitators, and practitioners, we would see these students historically referred to the traditional prereferral intervention team that would decide who would be evaluated for special education eligibility and when they would be evaluated. If the evidence was compelling, the educational team *may* have proceeded with a full case study evaluation. However, in a discrepancy model, the likelihood of detecting a statistically significant difference between first graders' IQ scores and their scores on any given subtest on an achievement battery are slim. For years, teams have heard the results of such evaluations include statements like, “If he is still not making adequate progress by the middle of second grade, we'll reconsider his case.” Essentially, the results indicated that the gap between him and his peers was not yet statistically significant enough in order to qualify for more help. Therefore, the team would have to wait another school year so that the gap got wider and we could make the student eligible for the services that he or she needed. This not only sounds illogical, but the strategy stands in stark contrast to research surrounding the importance of early intervention, as synthesized by Karen E. Diamond, Laura M. Justice, Robert S. Siegler, and Patricia A. Snyder (2013). However, if there was nothing available in a school or a system other than the strategies individual teachers used in isolation or the special education system, our choice was special education. In the past, it was the best and only option to provide access to more time for learning and more intensive instruction. All teachers who see students failing to develop the skills they need want the most intensive help available to those students in the system.

Unfortunately, by the time the discrepancy model detects the statistically significant difference necessary for eligibility, students are much more than one year behind. In fact, the commission's findings indicate that many identification methods lack validity and thousands of students are misidentified each year. This speaks not only to the flaws in the discrepancy model but to the widely varying and often subjective eligibility criteria applied across the United States. With the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, states are no longer required to use the discrepancy model to identify students who qualify for special education services. Reactions to this update vary, ranging from no change in practice to states banning the use of the discrepancy model.

Another concern the commission reports is that educators and policymakers alike think about special education and general education as two systems, when in fact,