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Beyond Compliance: Reframing Special Education

Dr. Heather Dague

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Beyond Compliance: Reframing Special Education

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Abstract

This action research study examined how PreK–12 special education case managers deliver supports and services to students with disabilities and their families, aiming to design and implement an initiative that goes beyond systemic compliance to support individuals with disabilities holistically. Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, special education services have expanded significantly; however, over the past 50 years, limited revisions have hindered the law's ability to keep pace with evolving societal needs and contemporary understandings of disability. The initial research cycle identified a need to engage and empower PreK–12 special education case managers with the knowledge and tools necessary to support students and families equitably and comprehensively beyond federally mandated compliance minimums. Central to this work was a paradigmatic shift from the medical model of disability, which frames disability as an individual deficit, to the social model of disability, which emphasizes systemic and environmental barriers to equity. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this action research study recognized the dynamic interactions among students, families, schools, and broader community contexts that shape educational experiences.

In Cycle 2, we implemented and evaluated collaboratively developed action steps, resulting in a Special Education Framework Toolkit that included an Employee Resource Guide, Monthly External Newsletters, and a 90-minute Framework Training rooted in the four pillars of the full service community school (FSCS) model. These tools were designed to strengthen provider practice and advance equitable, more holistic supports for students with disabilities and their families. Data sources included observational field notes, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, feedback forms, and participant surveys. Participants and collaborators provided critical feedback that informed both implementation and evaluation. The evaluation used a dual framework, combining Kirkpatrick's Levels 1–3 to assess participant reaction, learning, and behavior with Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method (SCM) to identify real-world examples of success and challenges in applying the Toolkit. This integrated approach allowed for iterative refinement of the Toolkit and professional development activities, ensuring resources were both actionable and responsive to the needs of staff and students across the district.

Findings indicated that special education case managers experienced greater success when training, communication, and information sharing were clear, consistent, and culturally responsive across the district. Implications for practice suggest that ongoing, structured communication systems and targeted professional learning opportunities can sustain provider engagement, strengthen family partnerships, and promote equitable educational outcomes for students with disabilities, while also addressing the tension between innovation and tradition within school systems.

Keywords: *special education, medical model of disability, social model of disability, full-service community school (FSCS), Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Special Education Framework Toolkit, Kirkpatrick Levels, Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method*

Note on Contributor

Heather Dague is an education leader with 14 years of experience across PreK–12 public education, including seven years as a special education classroom teacher and seven years as a special education

building- and district-level administrator in urban and suburban districts in the northeastern United States. She began her career as a New York City Teaching Fellow in Brooklyn and Manhattan in 2012, completed the NYC Department of Education Leaders in Education Apprentice Program (LEAP) in the Bronx in 2018, and is a Cornell-certified Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) Trainer (2016).

She currently serves as the District Special Education and Pupil Personnel Administrator in Westchester, New York, where she leads districtwide initiatives focused on family engagement, social-emotional learning, professional learning communities, and special education quality assurance, and provides expert consultation on complex and potentially litigious special education matters. Her work goes beyond compliance to advance equitable and inclusive educational systems, ensuring that all students, particularly those with disabilities, have access to meaningful learning experiences and the supports necessary to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Previously, Heather served as a building administrator with the Rockland Board of Cooperative Educational Services for five years and held multiple leadership roles with the New York City Department of Education, including Unit Coordinator and Instructional Coach. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and International Affairs and a Master of Public Administration from the University of Georgia, a Master of Science in Teaching from Pace University, and a Master of Education in Progressive Leadership from Bank Street College of Education. She recently completed a Doctor of Education in Transformative School Leadership at Northeastern University, where her research focused on reimagining special education practices to better support students with disabilities and their families through an ecological, full-service community school model.

Background and Context

Gaps in PreK–12 special education practices persist in U.S. public schools largely because of compliance-driven mindsets that prioritize procedural fidelity over holistic, student-centered supports that address academic, social, emotional, and family needs.

This action research study was conducted in a single PreK–12 suburban public school district in the northeastern United States. The district comprises five geographically separate schools, each serving distinct grade bands: one PreK school, one K–1 school, one 2–3 school, one 4–6 school, and one 7–12 school. Each building serves a unique student population and employs its own staff, which can limit cross-school collaboration and consistent communication.

According to state accountability data (2024), the district enrolls approximately 1,700 students; nearly half are Hispanic, roughly one-third are Black, and a smaller proportion are White. Over 50% of students are economically disadvantaged, and approximately 20% are identified as students with disabilities. Staff demographics reflect similar diversity.

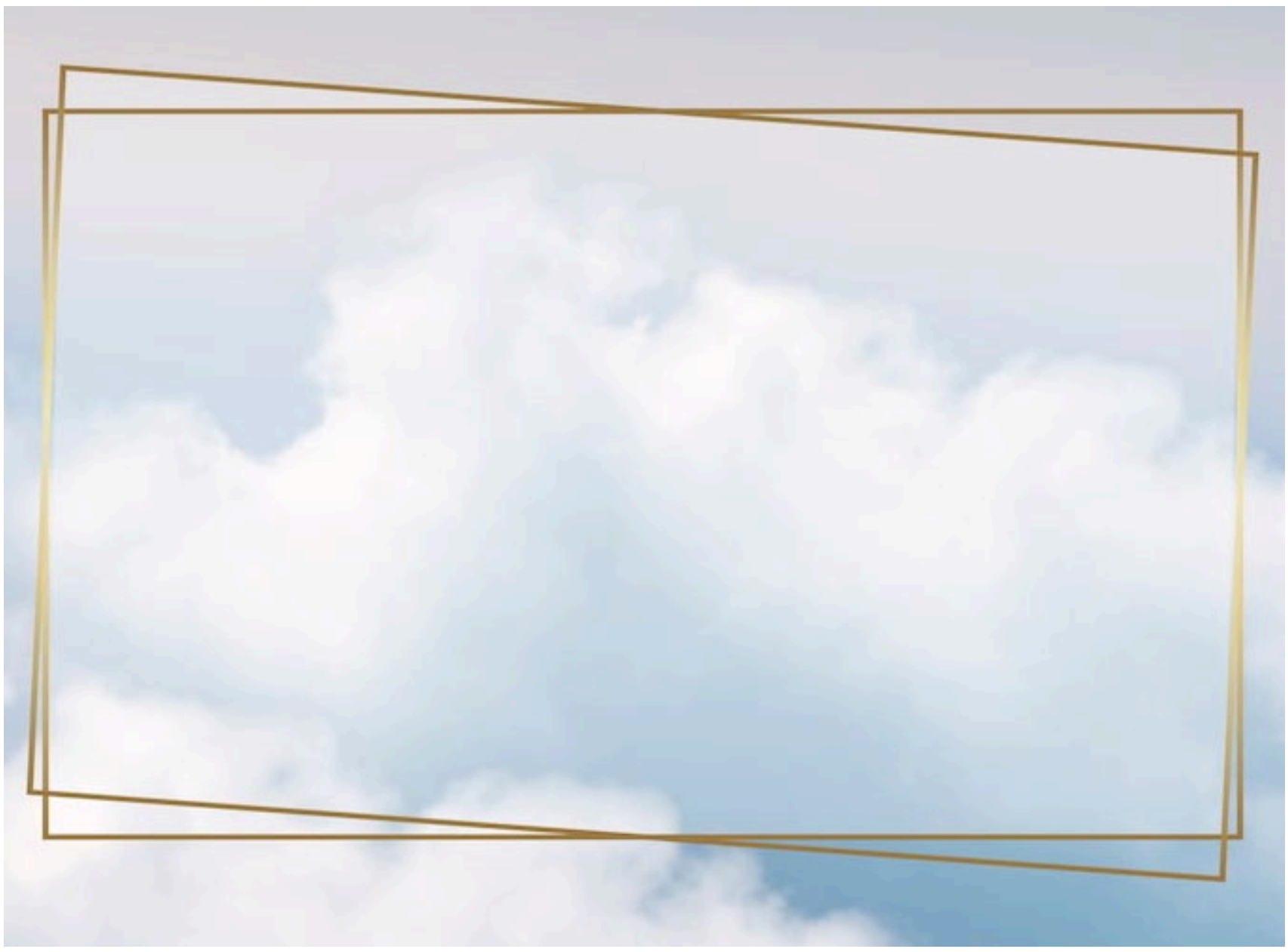
The district coordinates special education services, overseeing program delivery, staff training, and compliance with state and federal mandates. Each special education provider reports to the principal of their assigned building for day-to-day supervision, while students access a continuum of services ranging from special class settings to integrated co-teaching within general education classrooms. Less than 1% of students attend out-of-district programs. Despite strong compliance with federal and state regulations, the district faces challenges in moving beyond a procedural, mandate-driven model toward holistic, individualized supports that address students' academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and family contexts. Research demonstrates that procedural fidelity alone does not guarantee high-quality or equitable special education practice (Hardman, McDonnell, & Welch, 1997). Systems grounded in a medical model of disability often prioritize diagnosis, placement, and service minutes, resulting in fragmented, siloed interventions that inadequately meet students' complex ecological needs (Skrtic, 1995; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Adelman & Taylor, 2002).

To address these systemic challenges, this study draws on the Full-Service Community School (FSCS) model, which centers students within their broader ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Community schools prioritize equity by integrating supports that address students' academic, social, emotional, and health needs while leveraging partnerships with families, community organizations, and local agencies (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Coalition for Community Schools, 2020). The model is structured around four pillars: integrated student supports, expanded learning opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership practices (Quinn & Blank, 2020). By placing students at the center of interconnected support systems, community schools provide a framework for addressing inequities in PreK–12 education and offer a pathway to reimagine special education practices beyond compliance.

Research on integrated student supports, such as wraparound services, demonstrates positive effects on academic achievement, social-emotional development, and engagement, particularly for disadvantaged populations (Oakes et al., 2017; Lawson et al., 2024; Sparks, 2015). Extended learning opportunities, including after-school enrichment and extracurricular activities, have been shown to promote self-determination, peer relationships, and postsecondary success for students with disabilities (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Palmer, Elliott, & Cheatham, 2017). Family and community engagement further enhance student outcomes, with strong partnerships linked to higher attendance, achievement, and sense of belonging (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Summers et al., 2005). Finally, collaborative and distributed leadership approaches allow educators, families, and community partners to leverage collective expertise in developing inclusive and equitable practices (Jäppinen & Ciussi, 2015; Tudryn et al., 2016).

Within this district context, the study explored how special education case managers implement supports and services, emphasizing the interplay between district structures, building-level supervision, staff practices, and student needs. Cycle 1 identified gaps in staff preparation, communication, and knowledge of wraparound supports, reflecting broader literature on the need for holistic, systemic approaches to equity in special education. Cycle 2 implemented the Special Education Framework Toolkit initiative, informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the FSCS model. The Toolkit included an Employee Resource Guide, an External Monthly Newsletter, and an interactive 90-minute Framework Training designed to enhance collaboration, communication, and equitable, student-centered practices.

Together, the district context, existing literature, and action research findings underscore the importance of systemic, holistic, and equity-focused approaches in special education. By integrating community school principles, professional development, and accessible tools, districts can strengthen staff capacity, empower families, and provide inclusive supports that address students' full range of developmental needs.



Methodology

The problem of practice centers on how PreK–12 special education case managers collaboratively deliver supports and services to students with disabilities and their families. Gaps in practice often stem from compliance-driven approaches that prioritize procedural requirements over holistic, student-centered supports addressing academic, social, emotional, and family needs. A qualitative action research methodology was chosen to capture these professionals' lived experiences and the processes of co-creating and implementing interventions, generating actionable insights to inform equitable, student-centered practices (Miles et al., 2018). Evaluation followed Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method (SCM) and Kirkpatrick's Levels 1–3 to assess participant reaction, learning, and behavior in applying the Special Education Framework Toolkit.

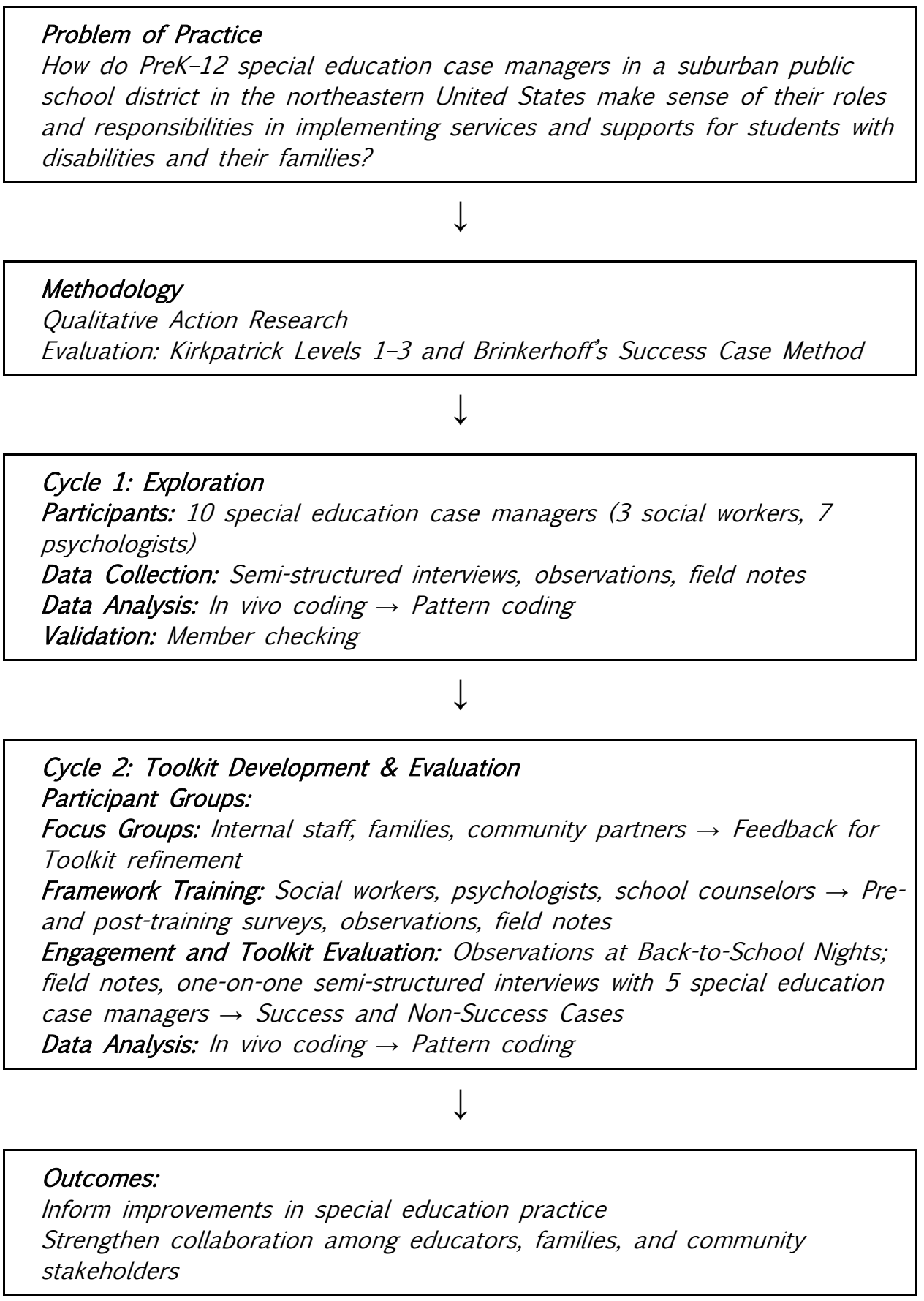
Action research involves a reflective cycle of research, action, and analysis, emphasizing developing and applying knowledge in real-world contexts to improve practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Stringer & Aragón, 2021). This methodology actively engages participants and stakeholders in identifying problems and designing solutions, guided by three principles: inquiry, reflection, and direct engagement with those affected.

This study included two cycles: Cycle 1, Exploration, used interviews with 10 case managers to identify gaps in supports, training, and communication; and Cycle 2, Toolkit Development and Implementation, co-created the Special Education Framework Toolkit with staff, families, and community partners. Data collection included focus groups, surveys, observations, and interviews, with iterative analysis using in vivo and pattern coding to refine practices and enhance collaboration.

Through this approach, the study remained grounded in participants' lived experiences, produced actionable knowledge, and supported the implementation of holistic, equity-focused practices to improve supports and services for students with disabilities and their families.

Action research principles, initiating inquiry, reflecting to inform action, and engaging those impacted by interventions, guided both cycles (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). This iterative process, shown in Figure 1, generated actionable knowledge to enhance special education services and foster collaboration among educators, families, and community stakeholders.

Figure B1: *Graphic Representation of Action Research Project*



Participants

This study engaged a variety of stakeholders within a single PreK–12 suburban public school district in the northeastern United States to understand gaps in special education supports and to co-create solutions through the Special Education Framework Toolkit. Cycle 1 participants included 10 special education case managers, three social workers, and seven school psychologists, representing diverse roles, grade levels, and career stages. This group contributed extensive professional knowledge, contextual understanding of the district, and insights into systemic challenges and potential solutions.

Cycle 2 participants expanded to include three primary groups: (1) internal school staff, families, and community partners who provided input for Toolkit design through focus groups and feedback forms; (2) district social workers, psychologists, and counselors who participated in training sessions to implement Toolkit strategies; and (3) families and staff attending Back-to-School Night events who observed and evaluated the practical application and impact of the Toolkit. In addition, five special education case managers participated in semi-structured interviews to evaluate both successful and unsuccessful Toolkit implementation cases, providing deeper insight into effectiveness, challenges, and areas for refinement. These participants engaged as collaborators, trainers, and evaluators, ensuring that diverse voices- practitioner, family, and community- were intentionally included throughout the research process.

Institutional collaborators included district administrators, building principals, and special education leadership staff who supported access, coordination, and feedback throughout both cycles. External stakeholders, such as community-based organizations and partner agencies, provided insight into resources, services, and family engagement strategies that informed Toolkit development and implementation. Together, these internal and external participants ensured the study reflected the lived experiences, professional expertise, and community context needed to design equitable and sustainable special education practices.

Procedures

This action research study aimed to design, improve, and strengthen practices and initiatives related to equitable, collaborative, and student-centered special education in a PreK–12 district. The goal of the action research was to demonstrate the Special Education Framework Toolkit's effectiveness in increasing staff awareness of available resources, enhancing equity-driven communication with caregivers, fostering collaboration across schools and community partners, and supporting inclusive, holistic practices for students with disabilities. Success with these action steps involved partnerships among school psychologists, social workers, teachers, administrators, families, and community organizations to develop and sustain professional learning and student-centered practices. This initiative applied four specific action steps: resource mapping, staff training, cross-school collaboration, and Toolkit implementation and evaluation.

Phase 1: Employee Resource Guide Creation (May–June 2025)

Phase 1 focused on creating the Employee Resource Guide, a living document providing staff, caregivers, and stakeholders with information on internal and external supports within the research site community. Structured around the four pillars of the FSCS model, the Employee Resource Guide covers topics such as legal assistance, assistive technology, case management, employment training, guardianship, lifelong planning, medical and mental health services, recreation, residential and respite care, transition planning, and transportation.

Participant input from focus groups with school personnel, special education staff, caregivers, and community-based organizations informed the development of the Employee Resource Guide, ensuring the resource is responsive to local needs, practical to apply, and aligned with a holistic, student-centered approach.

Phase 2: Material Development and Framework Training Preparation (June–July 2025)

Phase 2 emphasized co-creation and participatory design as central to the action research process. Building on the Employee Resource Guide created in Phase 1, focus group participants collaboratively refined and co-developed the Monthly External Newsletter and the Framework Training presentation. Rather than developing these materials alone, the researcher worked with school psychologists, school social workers, teachers, administrators, families, and community partners to shape them to reflect their lived experiences, priorities, and expertise.

Inspired by the FSCS model, the External Newsletter provides concise updates, highlights staff and student accomplishments, and showcases resources and best practices to support students and families. Participants reviewed draft versions, identified gaps, suggested language, and prioritized resources most relevant to families across grade levels and disability categories, ensuring the newsletter was practical, accessible, and equity-driven.



Both the Monthly Newsletter and the Employee Resource Guide include a clear communication protocol for families and essential contact information, co-designed by participants to establish shared expectations for how families would access supports and who would serve as points of contact across buildings. The Framework Training situates the Toolkit within a holistic, student-centered approach, aligned with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the four pillars of a FSCS, and was co-developed with participants to move beyond compliance toward proactive, relational, and integrated practices that directly address the themes of otherness, isolation, and gaps in preparation identified in Cycle 1.

Phase 3: Employee Resource Guide and Material Finalization (July–August 2025)

Following the draft development in Phases 1 and 2, internal stakeholders, including the Director of Special Education, Assistant Superintendent, principals, teachers, and support staff, engaged in a structured co-review process to finalize the Employee Resource Guide, Monthly External Newsletter, and Framework Training. External stakeholders, such as community-based organizations, served as content experts and partners, contributing additional resources, feedback, and context-specific insights to ensure the materials were practical, culturally responsive, and aligned with local needs. This collaborative finalization process operationalized the study's commitment to shared leadership and collective efficacy, ensuring the Toolkit reflected not a single perspective but a coordinated district and community response to the interconnected challenges identified in Cycle 1. The district marketing coordinator oversaw professional branding, formatting, and accessibility, ensuring that all materials were visually clear, user-friendly, and aligned with the holistic, student-centered approach established in Phases 1 and 2.

Phase 4: Staff Framework Training (August 2025, Superintendent's Conference Day)

A 90-minute Framework Training introduced staff to the Special Education Framework Toolkit, including the Employee Resource Guide and Monthly External Newsletters. Participants engaged in real-world scenarios, interactive activities, and reflective discussions to practice applying the Toolkit to authentic student and family needs, directly addressing the themes of otherness, isolation, and preparation gaps identified in Cycle 1. To ground the intervention in its theoretical and historical foundations, the training reviewed the evolution of special education and the ways the medical and social models of disability have shaped school structures, practices, and legal mandates. This framing helped staff critically examine how compliance-driven systems can unintentionally marginalize students with disabilities and reinforced the need for a more integrated, equity-driven approach. The training emphasized the Toolkit's student-centered, ecological framing, aligned with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the FSCS model. The team outlined leadership presence, structured follow-up, and ongoing support to ensure consistent implementation, alignment across buildings, and long-term sustainability.

Phase 5: Toolkit Implementation (September–October 2025)

Staff were encouraged to integrate the Employee Resource Guide and Monthly External Newsletter into daily practice immediately. The Employee Resource Guide was distributed internally to all special education case managers and served as a reference to support student-centered practices. The Monthly Newsletter, designed for both staff and families, was digitally shared with every student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan via the district's data management system, distributed in hard copy at Back-to-School Nights, and included a QR code each month for stakeholders wishing to join the distribution list.

The district also printed hard copies for classroom distribution, and all staff received the Monthly Newsletter via district email, creating multiple access points and reducing barriers to engagement. Ongoing follow-ups with special education case managers and building administrators monitored Toolkit use, provided coaching and support, gathered feedback, and identified areas for improvement. These feedback loops reinforced the intervention's interconnected nature, supporting continuous improvement, shared accountability, and sustained alignment with student-centered, ecological practice.

Data Collection

Data collection for Cycle 2 was completed in multiple phases using qualitative methods, including participant surveys, observations, field notes, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. There were three primary opportunities to collect data from key stakeholders, aligned with the action steps of this study:

- Focus groups to inform and refine the Special Education Framework Toolkit,
- Framework training sessions to assess staff learning and application, and
- Toolkit implementation and family/community engagement to evaluate practical use and impact.

One-on-one interviews, success and non-success cases

Effectively engaging participants in the Toolkit's design and implementation was an important component of this study. The first group of participants included special education case managers, families, and representatives from community-based organizations and social service agencies. They contributed to collaborative focus groups, shared insights into student and caregiver needs, and offered feedback on Toolkit materials. The team collected focus group transcripts, field notes, and participant feedback forms to document their perspectives and guide iterative improvements to the Toolkit.

The second group consisted of district social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors who participated in 90-minute Framework Training sessions. The team collected pre- and post-training surveys, observational notes, and feedback forms to assess knowledge gains, confidence in using the Toolkit, and engagement with the strategies presented. The training emphasized connecting students and families with school-based and community resources while promoting inclusive, student-centered practices grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the FSCS model.

The third group included select case managers and families who participated in Toolkit implementation activities and family/community engagement events, such as Back-to-School Night. The team collected semi-structured interviews, observations, and field notes to evaluate the Toolkit's practical application, usability, and impact in real-world settings. These participants actively used the Employee Resource Guide and Monthly Eternal Newsletter in their daily practice. They provided critical feedback on how the Toolkit supported equitable and collaborative approaches to special education.

Together, these three groups provided a comprehensive perspective on the design, implementation, and evaluation of the Special Education Framework Toolkit. Internal collaborators, including the district marketing coordinator, supported materials development and ensured alignment with district standards. Data collection and evaluation followed a combination of Kirkpatrick's Levels 1–3 and Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method, enabling assessment of participant reaction, learning, and behavior.

By centering participants' perspectives through iterative, reflective practices, the study ensured that the Toolkit remained responsive, practical, and aligned to foster holistic, student-centered supports for students with disabilities.



Results

This study revealed that implementing the Special Education Framework Toolkit, alongside targeted staff training and family engagement strategies, significantly enhanced clarity, efficiency, and context-driven practices in PreK–12 special education. Five themes emerged from the Cycle 2 action steps and evaluation, offering insights and guidance for fostering equitable, collaborative, and student-centered special education practices in school districts.

Theme 1: Clarity and Consistency Improved

A primary objective of this research study was to centralize information and resources in a single, accessible location to help special education case managers deliver equitable, holistic services for students with disabilities beyond compliance mandates. Table B1 summarizes special education case manager reflections collected through post-implementation interviews following the rollout of the Special Education Framework Toolkit, highlighting their perceptions of communication, resource accessibility, collaboration, and practical application in their work.

Table B1: *Staff Reflections Following Implementation of the Special Education Framework Toolkit*

Category	Staff Reflections
Communication	– Provides clarity and consistency across buildings – Centralizes contact information: whom to contact for what – Facilitates transparency in roles and responsibilities – Supports communication with families via protocols and chain of contact – Reduces misinformation or siloed practices – Needs administrative backing for accountability – Helps normalize communication practices across new and veteran staff
Resource Mapping and Accessibility	– One-stop digital access to forms, procedures, and community resources – Searchable and easily referenced in my day-to-day use – Helpful for staff new to the district or community – Supports equitable access to information across all buildings – Live/digital document allows updates as information changes – Gaps remain: specific district needed, program-level detail, external-facing parent resources

Collaboration	– Encourages team alignment on roles and responsibilities – Supports mentor/mentee relationships and onboarding – Useful in professional learning committees (PLCs) or faculty meetings to reinforce shared understanding – Facilitates cross-building awareness of programs and services – Promotes whole-child perspective rather than isolated IEP-focused approach – Some resistance due to existing culture/traditions
Practical Application in Work	– Guides my decision-making and problem-solving – Reduces time spent asking colleagues/searching for information – Helps me answer family questions accurately and efficiently – Can be used as a reference during meetings (IEPs, family conferences, PLCs) – Supports identification of gaps in services and inequities – Enables integration of community-specific resources for families – Aids staff in aligning their work with district expectations and protocols

Using Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method (SCM), the staff interviews highlighted instances in which the Special Education Framework Toolkit successfully improved clarity and consistency within the district, as well as areas for continued improvement. Across the interviews, staff consistently emphasized that the Toolkit enhanced accessibility and transparency of information. For example, one participant noted, "It is comprehensive and really helps to know whom to go to for what in the building and across the district" (Interview 4, L), while another highlighted the digital format, stating, "Everything is literally there … you just Control F and then you find every single thing you need" (Interview 5, S).

These examples represent success cases in which the Toolkit effectively reduced ambiguity about roles and responsibilities: "It clarifies expectations and helps staff understand their role in meetings and processes without having to ask others" (Interview 2, L) constantly. Staff also reported that the Toolkit facilitated consistency across buildings: "Before this, everyone was doing their own thing, siloed in their buildings … now there is a reference everyone can follow" (Interview 5, S).

Participants emphasized the value of predictable, transparent communication, noting that regular updates reduced uncertainty and built trust. One participant described the newsletter, stating, "It is nice to know this will come out every month; I can plan around it" (Interview 1, E). The clear layout and organized structure further enhanced accessibility and usability: "The layout makes it simple to find what I need right away…everything was literally there, especially in digital, copying so much easier" (Interview 5, S). Consistency in messaging ensured alignment across the district. One participant shared, "Everyone is getting the same information now" (Interview 2, W). Another participant noted that the Toolkit consolidated resources into a single source, minimizing fragmentation: "It consolidates it all into one…we go to this for answers" (Interview 1, E). Participants identified cross-building clarity and transparency as critical to fostering trust and buy-in among staff. A participant shared, "We can actually see what is happening across the department" (Interview 3, G), emphasizing that the toolkit helped create a shared understanding across schools and reduced conflicting recommendations. The inclusion of detailed, granular information further supported consistency and ensured resources and practices could be compiled and accessed effectively.

These reflections illustrate both the practical application and the mechanisms by which the Toolkit supports staff in achieving its intended outcomes: consolidating information, standardizing communication, and increasing transparency. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of ongoing administrative support and integration into daily routines to sustain these successes and promote equitable practices district-wide. Observational data collected during the implementation period, including at Back-to-School Night and through daily operations, revealed varied levels of administrative support at the building level.

These observations aligned with staff reports indicating that, while the Toolkit provided clarity and consistency, its effectiveness often depended on building-level administrators actively reinforcing protocols and encouraging routine use within their school building. For example, participants observed that when principals highlighted the Toolkit during building-level or community meetings, both staff and community awareness increased, leading more staff to seek support on broader issues or to direct families to them for assistance. Collectively, these findings indicate that predictable, well-organized, and consistently delivered communication, supported by administrative engagement, is essential for ensuring staff clarity, alignment, and trust across all district levels.



Theme 2: Streamlined Communication and Efficiency

Participants consistently valued the Special Education Framework Toolkit for centralizing critical information, improving efficiency and reducing confusion. One staff member noted, “This saves me from searching through old emails; all right there” (Interview 5, S). The Toolkit streamlined workflow by providing immediate access to policies, contacts, and resources: “It is efficient, one stop for what I need” and “I know exactly where to go if I need a resource” (Interview 2, W).

Practical functionality emerged as a salient benefit in daily operations. Staff described being able to respond promptly to parent inquiries and internal staff requests: “Parents were emailing me… I can flip to whatever page and give them what they need” (Interview 3, A). The Toolkit also reduced redundancy and inconsistency in communication: “Before, I would get different answers from different people. Now it is clearer” (Interview 4, L). Its centralized, one-stop-shop design was particularly beneficial for onboarding new staff, supporting continuity and procedural understanding: “A comprehensive one-stop shop where you can find the information…helps new staff know what to do” (Interview 1, L).

Observational data collected during the implementation period reinforced these findings. Integrating the district communication protocol into the Employee Resource Guide, along with a condensed version in the Monthly Newsletter, provided staff and families with structured guidance on communication channels, roles, and responsibilities. Consistently highlighting staff roles in both the Employee Resource Guide and Monthly Newsletters promoted transparency and continuity, ensuring expectations were explicit and accessible to all stakeholders. Field notes also indicated that communicating a single, unified message to all stakeholders minimized confusion, reinforced accountability for individual responsibilities, and highlighted gaps or inconsistencies requiring administrative attention.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the Toolkit’s centralized resources, standardized communication practices, and accessible design enhanced operational efficiency, reduced duplication of effort, and promoted alignment among staff and families. Observations highlight that such practices are most effective when paired with consistent reinforcement of protocols and clear delineation of responsibilities, supporting a district-wide culture of clarity, accountability, and streamlined communication.

Theme 3: Context-Driven Practices

Throughout Cycle 2, participants emphasized the Special Education Framework Toolkit as a context-specific resource intentionally designed to address the unique needs of the district’s students with disabilities and the families they serve. Participants shared that engagement with the Toolkit was most effective when resources were tailored to the district’s specific context, demographics, and student population.

Observational data and feedback forms indicated that participants felt confident navigating the Toolkit materials both for their own use and when supporting families. One participant emphasized that being able to recommend nearby, accessible resources was especially valuable, noting that resources staff locate independently are often not geographically convenient or practical for families.

Cross-building visibility encouraged participants to exchange practices and foster innovation, strengthening their understanding of how services are implemented across different schools. Participants shared, “Seeing what other schools are doing gives me ideas for my own building,” demonstrating how exposure to practices across buildings inspired new strategies (Interviews 1, E & Interview 2, W).

Humanizing elements, such as staff photos, school highlights, and concrete examples, enhanced relational connections and community identity. One participant reflected that the photos and staff spotlights “highlight staff members in like, a humanistic way” (Interview 4, L), emphasizing that these visual elements enhanced engagement and created a more personal connection to staff roles.

Culturally responsive practices were central to the Cycle 2 action steps. Focus group participants ensured materials were designed in both English and Spanish, reflecting the district's linguistic and cultural diversity. The External Monthly Newsletter and Employee Resource Guide incorporated clear practices and services specifically relevant to the district's student population, situating supports within students' ecological contexts, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's framework.

This approach increased participants' understanding of students' and families' needs, improved communication, and enhanced the ability to facilitate access to services. Importantly, the district centered students with disabilities and their needs while recognizing their unique cultural backgrounds, ensuring supports were both equitable and responsive.

Table B2 presents the district's student enrollment by ethnicity, highlighting the diversity within the student population. This demographic context underscores the importance of designing culturally responsive, linguistically accessible materials and practices to meet the needs of all students and families.

Table B2: *District Enrollment by Ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Enrollment	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	6	0%
Black or African American	466	30%
Hispanic or Latino	763	49%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	90	6%
White	196	12%

A recurring request during Phase 2 action steps and post-implementation interviews was to develop a family-facing resource guide. Participants acknowledged that time constraints, along with the need to create an equitably accessible guide in all required languages with a clear and appropriate tone, made this goal unattainable during the implementation period. Table B3 highlights the top five home languages spoken in the district, underscoring the importance of ensuring that any family-facing materials are linguistically accessible to meet the needs of the district's diverse families.

Table B3: *Top 5 Home Languages Spoken in the District*

Rank	Language
1	Spanish
2	English
3	Chinese
4	Albanian
5	Haitian-Creole

Overall, engagement with context-specific, culturally responsive resources allowed participants to translate Toolkit information into actionable strategies within their schools, increasing awareness of available services, strengthening understanding of district protocols, and supporting equitable access to supports for students with disabilities and their families. By centering students with disabilities and recognizing their cultural backgrounds, participants shared that they could provide supports that were both individualized and culturally responsive.



Theme 4: Dependent on Champions

Leadership, advocacy, and the presence of internal champions strongly influenced the successful adoption and use of the Special Education Framework Toolkit. Observational data, post-implementation interviews, and survey results collectively highlighted that building-level leadership played a central role in shaping engagement. Participants noted that administrative discussion during team meetings facilitated implementation and increased staff awareness of the Toolkit. Survey data supported this perception: 78% of respondents agreed that administrative endorsement affected their likelihood of using the Toolkit.

Applying Brinkerhoff's SCM revealed that buildings with high staff engagement with the Toolkit and shared success cases had common characteristics. These included visible leadership, active peer advocacy, and opportunities for staff to use the Toolkit while supporting students, families, and colleagues. One participant noted that the Toolkit served as a useful reference for discussing protocols but emphasized the need for administrative support to reinforce role expectations, stating, "when it says that that is your role, that is your role" (Interview 4, L). Observational notes documented that when special education case managers and leaders actively referenced and modeled the Toolkit integration into daily practice and reference, staff engagement and practical application increased. However, the SCM also illuminated reliance on individual champions and uneven advocacy. Buildings without dedicated advocates showed lower engagement, consistent with participants' observations: "Some buildings use it a lot more than others; it depends on who is pushing it" (Interview 4, L). Member check survey responses reinforced this finding, with staff indicating that school culture and existing leadership strongly shaped how schools adopted new tools and practices.

Analysis revealed that non-success cases were not caused by limitations of the Toolkit itself but by contextual factors within individual school buildings. The primary barrier was inconsistent leadership and a lack of accountability. Although staff generally supported the Toolkit, many felt it was outside their responsibility because leaders had not clearly defined their role or held them accountable. Consequentlyf the Toolkit depended on a few motivated champions rather than shared ownership, which limited consistent and sustained implementation across buildings. Time constraints and competing priorities were occasionally mentioned, but material resources were not the main obstacle. Subtle resistance, manifested as uneven commitment and reliance on individual champions, further constrained implementation. Overall, sustained adoption of the Toolkit requires both strong, distributed leadership and the intentional cultivation of internal champions to ensure consistent use across the district.

Theme 5: Uneven Implementation

Despite the Toolkit's positive reception, implementation varied across schools, reflecting differences in engagement and how fully it was incorporated into daily building-level practices. Interviews, field notes, and survey data revealed that some special education case manager participants actively used the Toolkit, while others were not routinely held accountable for doing so: "Some of us use it, others do not" (Interview 4, L). Observational data corroborated this variation, showing that in some buildings, building leadership regularly referenced the Employee Resource Guide during planning and meetings, whereas in others, it was used minimally. In many cases, staff fell back on old practices and habits, highlighting the broader challenge of changing systemic practices. Special education supports are often siloed, relying heavily on case managers to act as the primary bridge between general education and special education staff. Although pre- and post-training surveys indicated that 62.5% of participants recognized the Toolkit's value and could see themselves using it to support students and families, practical adoption across schools remained inconsistent, reflecting persistent structural and cultural barriers to fully integrating special education practices into broader school routines.

SCM analysis highlighted factors distinguishing success cases from non-success cases. Success cases often benefited from repeated reinforcement and integration of the Toolkit into existing structures. Observational notes confirmed that follow-up discussions enhanced staff confidence and clarity about how to use the Toolkit in practice. Conversely, barriers to adoption emerged in non-success cases. Staff reported challenges such as competing priorities, resistance to embracing holistic supports, and inconsistent building-level administrative support.

Participants noted that when special education case managers attempted to use the Toolkit or share the newsletter with building staff, some perceived it as outside their responsibility, limiting broader adoption and engagement. Field notes and post-implementation interviews also indicated that, without strong special education case managers or building-level advocates for holistic family supports, resistance to promoting the Toolkit was more pronounced. The uneven implementation observed highlights the critical need for intentional, ongoing, building-wide professional development, repeated reinforcement, and active leadership to sustain Toolkit integration across school practices.

Insights from the SCM identified systemic strategies for increasing adoption, such as establishing regular building-level follow-ups with all staff and integrating Toolkit use into routine meetings and collaborative planning. These strategies aim to ensure equitable, student-centered support across all district sites while reducing variability associated with reliance on individual champions. Table B4 summarizes the characteristics of success and non-success cases identified through Brinkerhoff's Success Case Model, highlighting distinguishing factors in implementation experiences, engagement levels, and outcomes within the study.

Table B4: *Brinkerhoff Success Case Model Characteristics of Success and Non-Success Cases within the Study*

Success Cases	Non-Success Cases
Active champions in the school building (principal, social worker, school guidance counselor, or psychologist)	No active champions or limited leadership advocacy in the school building
Leadership promotes awareness of Toolkit in staff meetings and school events	Toolkit awareness is low; materials often unused and not reinforced by leadership
Staff actively engaged in Toolkit development and follow-up meetings, contributing to an iterative process that ensures the document remains a living resource	Staff have limited involvement in Toolkit development and follow-up meetings, so the document evolves without their input.
Toolkit integrated into daily workflows (planning, meetings, family support)	Toolkit is used inconsistently and in limited situations
Toolkit components are accessed and applied with fidelity	Uneven implementation of Toolkit components

Recommendations

Findings from this action research study indicate that compliance-driven mindsets continue to constrain holistic special education practice in PreK–12 public schools, resulting in fragmented systems, role confusion, and inequitable access to supports for students with disabilities and their families. To address these gaps, the following recommendations are offered for districts, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to move beyond procedural compliance toward ecological, student-centered systems of support.

First, districts should implement a centralized, holistic special education framework that operationalizes equity and ecological systems theory across roles and schools. A districtwide toolkit that clarifies roles, communication pathways, and referral processes can reduce variability and ensure that families experience consistent, transparent, and coordinated support. Embedding culturally responsive, family-centered practices within this framework is essential to address systemic barriers and strengthen trust between schools and communities.

Second, professional learning should shift from episodic compliance training to sustained, job-embedded learning focused on reflective practice and contextual application. Findings suggest that practitioners require structured opportunities to apply holistic frameworks to real cases collaboratively, examine equity implications, and refine practice through coaching and peer learning. Districts should integrate improvement science and evaluation frameworks, such as Kirkpatrick's Levels and Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method, to assess reaction, learning, and behavior change and to inform iterative refinement of professional learning and implementation supports.

Third, sustainability requires distributed leadership and system-level ownership rather than reliance on individual champions. Districts should establish cross-role leadership teams and shared accountability structures to embed holistic special education practice across departments and school levels. Aligning policy, practice, and evaluation around shared equity goals strengthens coherence and reduces vulnerability to staff turnover.

Finally, districts should leverage community and interagency partnerships to fully operationalize Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the FSCS model. Formalized partnerships with mental health providers, social service agencies, and community-based organizations can extend district capacity to address barriers beyond the classroom and support coordinated, wraparound services for students with disabilities and their families. Collectively, these recommendations provide a pathway to move beyond compliance toward equitable, holistic special education systems that respond to student, family, and community contexts.

Conclusions

This study found that implementing the Special Education Framework Toolkit supports more equitable, student-centered practices by linking comprehensive resources with structured communication and culturally responsive approaches. The Toolkit addressed gaps in staff knowledge, clarified roles and responsibilities, and provided actionable strategies for supporting students with disabilities and their families. Findings demonstrated the importance of context-specific engagement, cross-building collaboration, and attention to cultural and linguistic diversity in fostering buy-in and effective practice.

At the same time, the study highlighted the critical role of internal champions and leadership in driving adoption, as well as the challenges posed by tensions between innovation and established routines. These results align with the literature on organizational change, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership, emphasizing that tools alone are insufficient without sustained advocacy, peer modeling, and systemic supports (Hord, 2004; Brinkerhoff, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2020; Spillane, 2005).

This study underscores that achieving equitable, effective, and culturally responsive special education practices requires both structural resources and relational strategies that actively engage staff, students, families, and the broader community.

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