Addressing Problems of Practice in Special Education

PUBLIC CONSULTING GROUP

BREAKING BARRIERS
2023
MEGA
CONFERENCE
BUILDING CONNECTIONS

ALABAMA Achieves
ALABAMA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Session Objectives
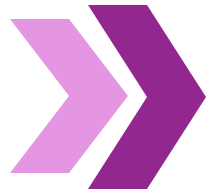
Identify current problems of practice that districts are facing in special education.

Understand how to create a theory of action and action plan.

Collaborate to generate ideas and solutions to resolve these challenges.

Agenda

- Framing Problems of Practice

- Problem of Practice: Collaborating with Paraprofessionals to Develop a System-Wide Process for Support

- Framing Your Own Problem of Practice

- Wrap-Up and Next Steps

Engagement Tools

Engagement Guide

Discussion

Poll

Framing Problems of Practice

Sometimes it is hard to see what is in front of us.

Developing Problem-Solving Skills

See beyond our current situation.

Increase our capacity to solve problems effectively.

Increase our capacity to support others around us.

Identify resources and next steps.

A problem of practice is a focus area of learning and teaching where the way forward is unknown. Leaders and teachers are aware that improvement is needed but are unclear about what is limiting progress. It's an important aspect that leaders and teachers are pondering over and have not come up with clear solutions.

What Makes a Good Problem of Practice?

Barbara Reynolds

"A problem of practice is an area that a school or school district identifies that focuses on the instructional core, is directly observable, is actionable, and connects to a broader strategy of improvement.

UC Davis School of Education

Framing Problems of Practice

Beginning → **End**

Think about your problem of practice.
Write about your problem of practice.
Draft a focus question.
Revise your focus question.

Think about your problem of practice.	
Write about your problem of practice.	
Draft a focus question.	
Revise your focus question.	

Description
Consider a situation that is difficult for you. Identify its context, resource, and supports.

Example Questions
▪ Is it bothering you enough that your thoughts regularly return to it? ▪ Is it something that is not already on its way to being resolved?

Think about your problem of practice.
Write about your problem of practice.
Draft a focus question.
Revise your focus question.

Description

Get your analysis out on paper. This draft can be rough; focus on thoroughly forming your thoughts.

Example Questions

- Why is this a dilemma for you? Why is this dilemma important to you?
- What (or where) is the tension in your dilemma?
- If you could take a snapshot of this dilemma, what would you/we see?

Think about your problem of practice.	
Write about your problem of practice.	
Draft a focus question.	
Revise your focus question.	

Description

Review your writing, thinking about what ideas are central to your analysis. Once you identify the primary theme of your writing, develop a question that will guide your problem-solving.

Example Questions

- What is the root cause of my problem?
- Where do my time and energy need to focus most?

Think about your problem of practice.	
Write about your problem of practice.	
Draft a focus question.	
Revise your focus question.	

Description

Ensure your focus question is relevant and meaningful to your context. Check whether it is broad enough to allow for action and results.

Example Questions

- Is this question important to my practice?
- Is this question important to student learning?

Poll: What problems are you facing in your district?

In just a few words, list topics that are current concerns. Examples may include the following:

Teacher

Shortages

Math

Scores

Student

Behavior
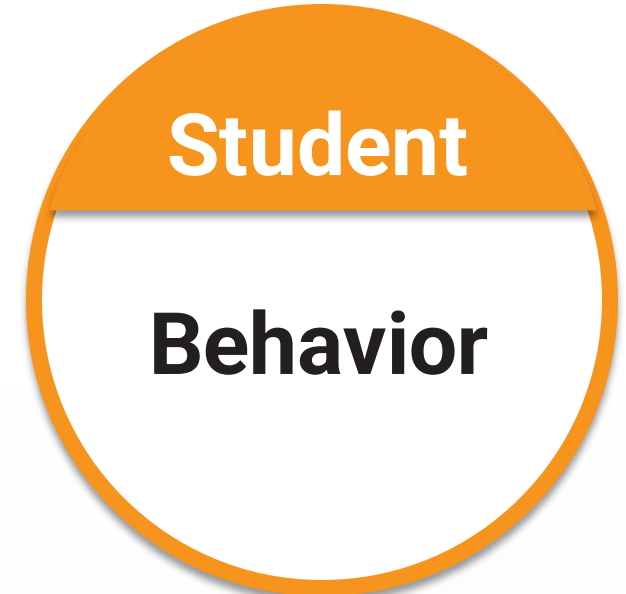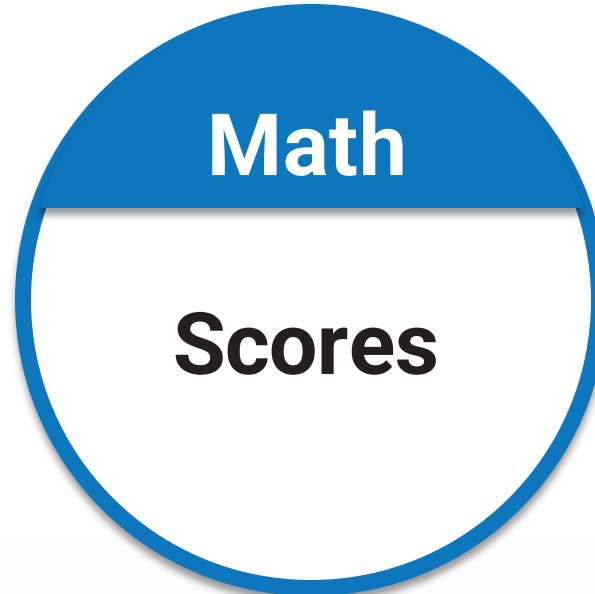
MEGA: Problems of Practice

Scenario: Collaborating with Paraprofessionals to Develop a System-Wide Process for Support

Meet Valley School District

A large school district has a student population of 9,200 students.

The district has 16 schools and 1,746 employees.

The District's Student Body

9,200 students

589 of the students enrolled are English Learners.

1,463 of the students enrolled in the district receive special education services.

Pie chart:
- African American: 2%
- White Hispanic: 11%
- Hispanic: 4%
- Asian: 2%
- Native American: 1%
- Two or more races: 80%
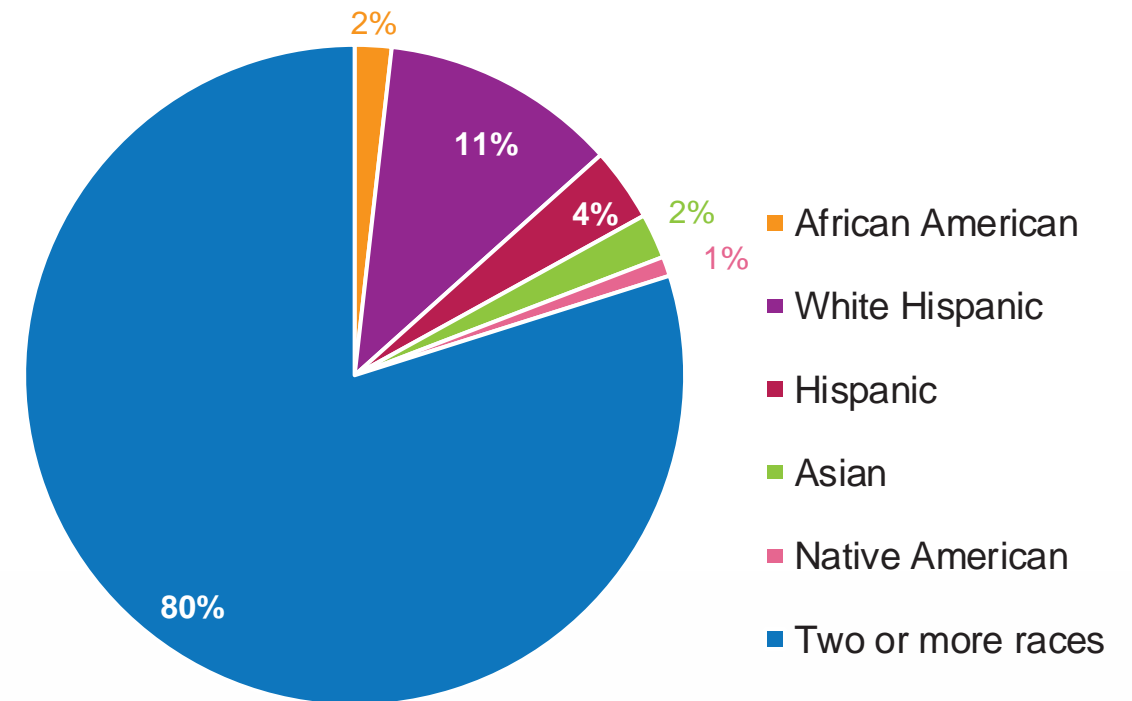
Paraprofessional Key Points

The district has approximately 260 paraprofessional positions and 753 teachers.

About 57 paraprofessional vacancies exist to start the 2023–2024 school year.

Paraprofessionals can have one of the following titles:

- Behavioral Support Paraprofessionals.
- Inclusive Support Paraprofessionals.
- Transition Support Educator.

District Wide Supports

- Onboarding
- Training and TA
- Compliance Officer
- Access to District Special Education Office and HR
- Updated Processes
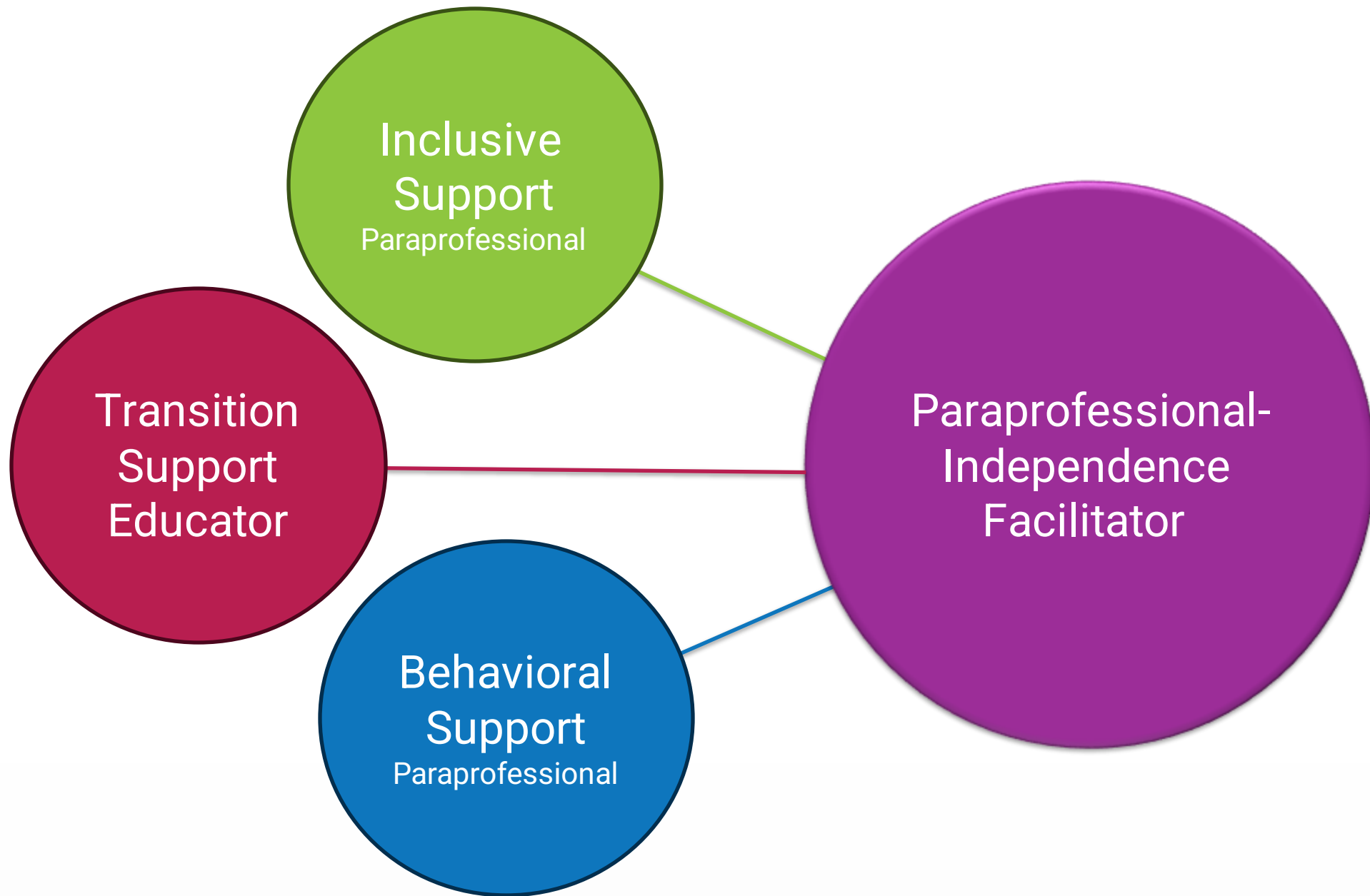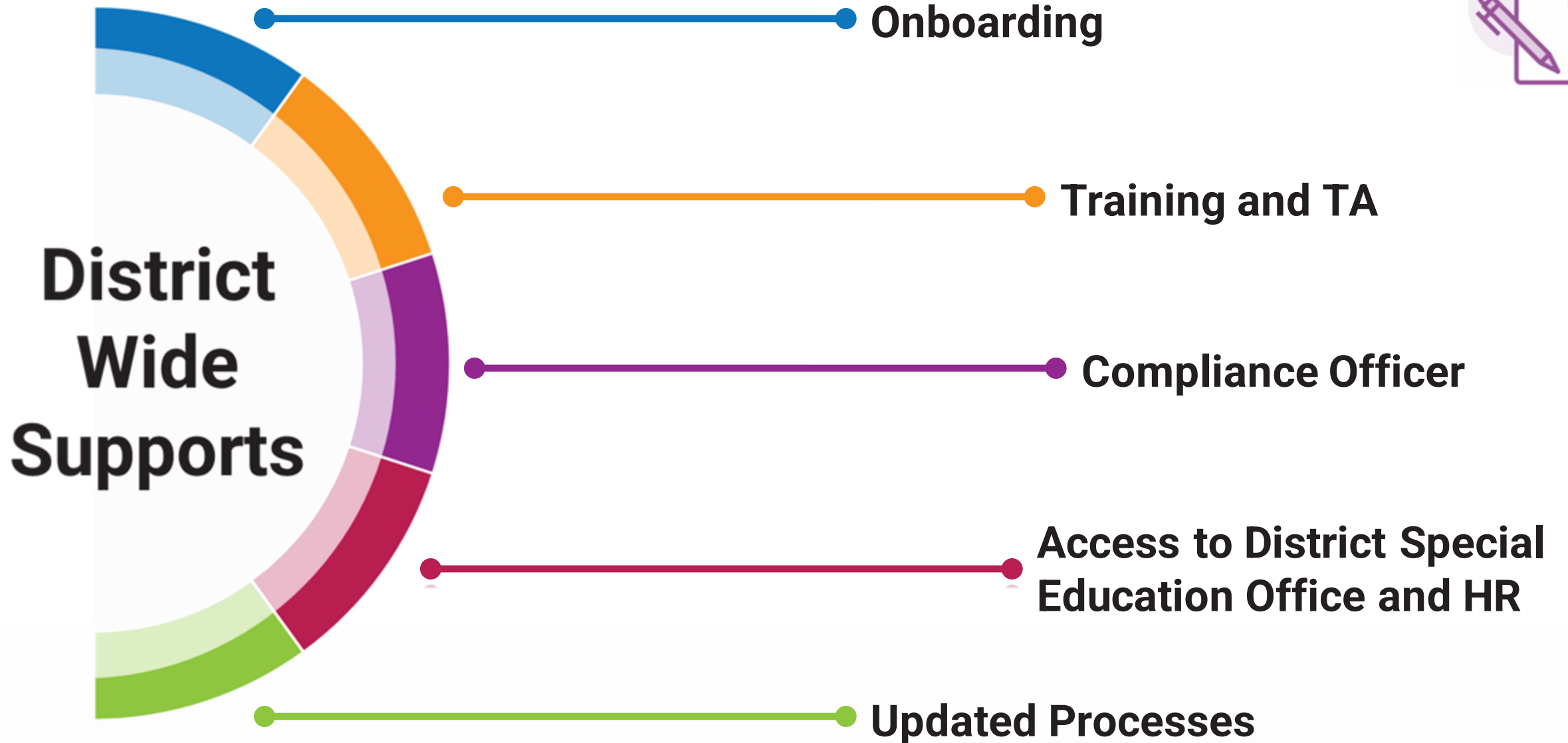
Dilemma

Although our data indicate that the **number of students receiving special education services** each year **remains static (about 15%),** our **enrollment is down**, and we continue to have **ongoing requests from schools for more paraprofessional** allocations each year. On average, over the past two years, we have been **adding 10–15 paraprofessionals per year** to support our students and schools, and it still seems not enough.

This **overreliance on paraprofessionals** to serve students is a **systemic issue** that we have yet to solve. Despite **ongoing training around co-teaching, strategic scheduling, and messaging** from our district team around student and staff collective ownership for all students, we continue to see **increased requests for paraprofessionals**. Once **given paraprofessional allocations**, we continue to **see challenges with paraprofessionals not believing they can serve all students and feeling unprepared to deliver and support specialized instruction**. Furthermore, our **current vacancies** indicate that **we cannot fill our current openings** with qualified staff, so allocating **additional support is not feasible**.

Practice: Framing Problems of Practice
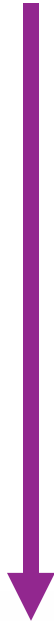
Beginning

Think about your problem of practice.

Write about your problem of practice.

Draft a focus question.

Revise your focus question.

End

Problem of Practice

- How do we effectively build universal support systems in our schools so that when students are included in the general education environment, there is no belief that increased paraprofessional support is the only way to meet the needs of students receiving special education services?

- Once paraprofessional support is given, how are we ensuring they are engaging in the teaching and learning process in a way that meaningfully impacts students?

Share Out!

- What were the key points noted during the discussion?
- How can the process be applied to other problems of practice?

Action Learning Groups

10-Minute Break

Problems of Practice

- Behavior: Extreme Behaviors/Mental Health
- Behavior: Discipline
- Teacher Shortages: Recruitment
- Teacher Shortages: Retention
- Advocates/Lawyers/Family Relationships
- Instructional Practices
- Referrals
- Training: Paras
- Training: Teachers
- Accessing Data
- Using Data

Action Learning Groups

Participants self select a topic and work collaboratively to achieve the following:

1. Define a problem of practice.

2. Analyze the problem of practice.

3. Develop a theory of action.

4. Draft an action plan.

1. Define the Problem of Practice

In your action learning group, discuss the following questions, and draft a problem of practice.

Why is the topic a problem?

What is the impact on student learning?

What evidence or data supports the impact?

Share Problems of Practice

- **Are they clearly tied to student learning?**

- **Are they observable?**

- **If addressed, will they positively impact students, school, and district?**

2. Analyze the Problem of Practice

In your action learning group, discuss the following:

- Who are the stakeholders? What are the perspectives of each stakeholder?

- After considering the evidence and stakeholder perspectives, what data or research do you need to understand the current reality and best practices?

- Imagine what a positive outcome would be for the school and district. What is the impact on student outcomes?

  (additional questions on next slide)

2. Analyze the Problem of Practice (cont'd)

In your action learning group, discuss the following:

- What challenges and roadblocks might get in the way of developing a solution? Will they look different for each stakeholder group? List challenges and roadblocks that must be considered during the planning process.

- What short-term, immediate actions should be taken to help resolve the issues facing the various stakeholders? Brainstorm the actions.

- What longer-term policy and practice changes and adjustments must be made? Brainstorm the policy and practice changes.

3. Develop a Theory of Action

List barriers and assumptions.

Brainstorm inputs and outputs.

Draft short- and long-term goals.

Focus on impact.

Theory of Action Template

- **Problem of Practice (PoP):** Clear problem of practice that is grounded in evidence-based data and dialogue.
- **Inputs:** Resources (funding, staffing, equipment, curriculum materials, etc.) and the required activities. State activities using verbs (market, provide, facilitate, deliver, etc.).
- **Outputs:** Tangible products that will be the result of the inputs.
- **Short-term outcomes:** Short-term behavioral or physical changes resulting from the outputs.
- **Long-term outcomes:** Long-term behavioral or physical changes resulting from the outputs.
- **Barriers:** Potential impacts of the inputs or outputs that may undermine outcomes.
- **Assumptions:** Necessary conditions for change.
- **Impact:** Long-term changes are the results that derive from an accumulation of outcomes.

Theory of Action Example

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE (PoP) THEORY OF ACTION

Teachers in the school have conflicting ideas of how or if inclusion should be implemented within their classrooms leaving parents with questions of how inclusion benefits all students. Therefore, the Problem of Practice should focus on the following question:

How can we collaboratively define and implement inclusionary practices that supports teachers in gaining a better understanding of its role in creating equitable instructional practices for all students through the implementation of evidenced best practices, leaving parents with a clear idea of how inclusion provides an equitable education for all their children?

Clear problem of practice that is grounded in evidence based on data and dialogue

INPUTS (All actions and resources needed to address PoP)

Define inclusion and inclusive classrooms and adopt a vision for inclusion that aligns with the district.	Form a school inclusion committee to lead the changes and implementations which include multiple stakeholders such as teachers, parents, administrators, and central office.	Create an action plan through a data analysis process that includes timelines to achieve the school's vision for inclusion.	Construct a budget for the project which includes and funding sources that can be assigned to the project.	Internal and external communication plan is developed	Provide time within the school day for peer observation to ensure teachers can view evidence best teaching practices within their school.

Resources (funding, staffing, equipment, curriculum materials, etc.) and the activities that are required. State activities using verbs (market, provide, facilitate, deliver, etc.).

OUTPUTS (All activities conducted to address PoP)

School Inclusion Committee communicates vision and action plan with the stakeholder groups (i.e., teachers, parents, employees)	School Inclusion Committee meets monthly or bi-monthly to implement action plan and ensure timelines are being met	Training for both general education and special education teachers are scheduled for the school.	Professional learning communities are formed focused on inclusion	Parent forums, information sessions, and workshops are conducted in partnership with the parent group	Inclusion Committee will collect and analyze data to monitor and track progress of implementation.

Tangible products that will be the result of the inputs.

Short-term behavioral or physical changes that will result from the outputs.

Long-term behavioral or physical changes that will result from the outputs.

Potential impacts of the inputs or outputs that may undermine outcomes.

POTE... BARR...

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Teachers will adopt a similar inclusion model in all classrooms and use PLCs to refine practices based on data.	Equitable instructional practices for all students will become a priority	Parents will understand the benefits of inclusion for all students.

Stakeholder... not buy-in to... of practices.

Staff turnover... teachers and administrator...

Funding is no... for stakehold...

Communicati... adequate lea... confusion an... understandin...

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The vision of inclusion for the school is fully in place.	All students have similar equitable practices to meet their instructional needs	Inclusionary practices are part of the school culture rather than implemented by the beliefs of individual staff members	Parents are supportive of the inclusion model.	The School Inclusion Committee continues to meet focused on continuous improvement and refinement of the model based on data.	All student assessment scores rise and any gaps between general ed and special ed students decrease

IMPACT FROM ADDRESSING PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

- Improved equitable instruction will occur for all students in every classroom
- Collaborative culture for teachers and leaders
- Parental support leading to higher enrollment
- Higher student assessment scores for all students, closing any gaps between subgroups

ASSUMPTIONS

District will provide support to the school both financially and with staff as needed

Teachers will attend all trainings and implement new practices that support inclusion

Colleagues will use a problem-solving approach to the implementation

Long-term changes that are the results that derive from an accumulation of outcomes.

Necessary conditions for change.

4. Create an Action Plan

What evidence-based strategies support the implementation of the theory of action?

Who will support action steps?

What resources are needed?

What is the timeline for the implementation of each strategy?

How will you know if the strategy is working?

Action Plan Template

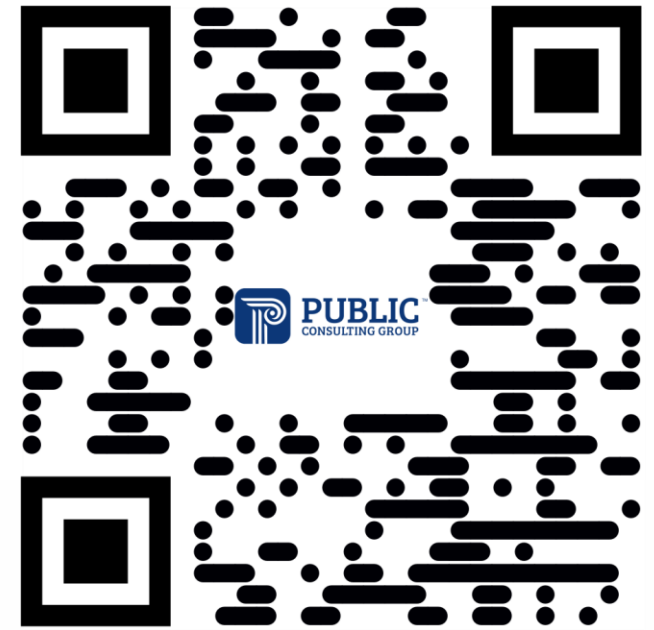| Short Term Outcome:						
Action Steps	Success Criteria	Status	Targeted Completion Date	Person(s) Responsible	Resources Needed/ General Notes	Updates

Wrap-Up and Next Steps

Exit Slip

Thank you for attending today's session! We value your feedback, please complete the following:

- MEGA Conference Evaluation, and
- Today's Exit Slip.

Thank You, Alabama!