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Improve Special Education Services Delivery with FastBridge

California's South Bay Union School District and the Kodiak Island Borough School District in Alaska are using high-quality assessment tools and reliable data to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of goal-setting while working to close learning gaps in their special education populations.

T he Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires U.S. school systems to provide specially-designed instruction and related support services tailored to the needs of students who qualify for special education services. More than 7 million students nationwide—or nearly 14 percent—receive special education services under IDEA, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

For K-12 teachers and administrators, it can be challenging to document students' present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), set appropriate goals, and monitor progress to ensure that special education students are benefiting from the special education services they receive. This has become even more difficult with the learning disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. FastBridge, a universal screening and progress monitoring solution from Illuminate Education, can help educators meet these challenges more effectively.

FastBridge uses valid and reliable computer-adaptive tests and curriculum-based measures to support universal screening and progress monitoring. The system helps educators identify students' academic and social-emotional behavior (SEB) skills gaps and plan instruction to close these gaps. FastBridge also suggests research-based academic interventions that target each student's specific skill needs, and it helps teachers evaluate whether these interventions are working quickly enough.

School districts throughout the nation are using FastBridge to guide both general and special education instruction. For instance, California's South Bay Union School District (SBUSD) and the Kodiak Island Borough School District in Alaska are using FastBridge to develop more meaningful IEPs and support goal setting and progress monitoring for their special education populations.

Having easy access to reliable information through FastBridge is transforming the conversations that special education teams are having about individual students. This, in turn, is narrowing achievement gaps and helping students receiving special education services that meet ambitious learning goals.

Setting Appropriate Goals

IDEA requires schools to set annual learning goals for each child receiving special education services, report on the progress made toward these goals, and collect data at regular intervals to demonstrate this progress. FastBridge can assist with all of these tasks.

Special education teams can use the data from FastBridge assessments in conjunction with other sources to create new IEP goals each year and to demonstrate progress in IEP meetings with parents throughout the year. The process begins by using the data from FastBridge universal screening tools in the fall to identify the skill areas to target specially-designed instruction and to identify appropriate progress monitoring measures. These data are included in the PLAAFP section of each student's IEP, usually discussed just before setting goals for the upcoming year.

There are multiple challenges for educators: setting attainable, yet ambitious goals that push students to achieve at high levels; using tools that measure small changes in progress while aligning to standards; and setting goals that are reasonable to measure from a time away from instruction perspective. "We need to be setting goals that are reasonably calculated to enable that child to benefit from the general curriculum," says Dr. Sarah Brown, Executive Director of Professional Learning for Illuminate Education.

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FastBridge includes tools that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the goal-setting process. For instance, the system recommends personalized goals for each student, based on their starting score and Growth Norms. Educators can adjust this expected weekly gain to match the intensity of the instruction provided in order to set goals that are more realistic or more ambitious as desired.

At SBUSD, which serves 6,800 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, more than 1,000 of whom are on IEPs, FastBridge has transformed the goal-setting process.

"Before, our goal setting was not as concrete," says Special Education Director Bruce Cochrane. "It left a lot up to the case manager's thoughts. Now, it's really numeric and tied to data—but we can also adjust it. FastBridge has taken a lot of the ambiguity out of the goal-setting process for us."

Monitoring Progress Toward Learning Goals

Goals are only meaningful if school systems are monitoring students' progress toward meeting them. "We know that regular progress monitoring has a big effect on student learning," Brown says.

School districts can use FastBridge to collect progress monitoring data for students receiving special education services according to a regular schedule. The system also helps educators review the data to plan instruction and interventions, as well as share information with families during IEP meetings.

FastBridge includes a number of brief, research-based assessments to measure students' progress toward reading and math learning goals. For instance, earlyReading measures developing reading skills, COMPefficiency measures reading comprehension, and earlyMath measures early numeracy skills with numbers, relations, and operations.

Every progress monitoring tool within FastBridge automatically graphs the data to make it simple to visualize. Educators can easily see the trajectory for each child and whether they're on track to meet their learning goals. This helps educators quickly adjust an intervention as needed, such as by choosing a new strategy or increasing the intensity of the intervention, to ensure that special education students are making adequate progress.

A key advantage of using FastBridge for progress monitoring is the system's FAST Projection™ line, the only tool to provide an accurate prediction of future growth using just

six data points instead of the usual 12 or more. This allows educators to make accurate decisions about interventions without spending additional weeks or months waiting to improve instruction.

"By using curriculum-based measures, FastBridge helps teachers do highly efficient progress monitoring in a way that doesn't take much time away from instruction," Brown says. "Additionally, because we can project a student's trajectory out into the future based on just six data points, instructional decisions can be made more quickly."

Choosing Effective Interventions

What's more, FastBridge helps teachers identify which interventions are most appropriate for students in reading and math, with specific recommendations based on each child's individual needs. This takes the guesswork out of planning supplemental instruction for special education students.

In Kodiak, Alaska, School Psychologist Kate Korrow serves 800 students, about 10 percent of whom receive special education services. "The access we get through FastBridge to recommended instruction and intervention is critical to our provision of these services," she observes.

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SBUSD uses FastBridge data to create a cycle of instruction and intervention for special-needs students. Every four to six weeks, Cochrane holds Special Education Academic Meetings (SEAMs) with teams from each of the district's 12 schools to discuss student

progress toward learning goals. These teams consist of special education teachers, school psychologists, speech therapists, and principals. The FastBridge data helps these site-based teams understand which instructional strategies are proving to be effective and which strategies they should adjust if students aren't making adequate progress.

"In the past, our teachers were planning interventions to address student needs for themselves, and that was taxing on them," Cochrane says. "It was wearing them out." Now, teachers are able to use targeted interventions suggested by FastBridge. "With FastBridge," he adds, "we can have accurate progress monitoring that is not labor intensive."

Working Together to Support Each Child

Another advantage of using FastBridge to support the delivery of special education services is that it allows for effective collaboration between team members and gives educators easy visibility into student data.

"In the FastBridge system, every teacher who works with a student can view data on that child, which is really important," Brown says. "All teachers need to be working together to understand the overall effect of a student's instructional package. FastBridge allows everyone to be able to see those data, regardless of whether they are the person who has collected it."

Students with special education services often receive general instruction from one teacher and then more targeted instruction from an interventionist. "Educators need to see how this entire instructional package is working together," Brown explains.

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FastBridge supports a "whole-team" approach to special education, Cochrane agrees, noting: "It brings us together in ongoing conversations, so we're doing what is appropriate for our special education students."

In Kodiak, FastBridge has become an indispensable tool in the delivery of special education services. "It helps us talk to parents about progress," Korrow says. "It helps to rationalize the need for services. It helps us advocate for students. It helps us talk to students about their own growth and goals."

She adds: "I appreciate that FastBridge was developed with teachers in mind for implementation, and with a lens geared toward families and other stakeholders with powerful reporting options."

Special education can often feel procedural in nature, Brown says, but the goal is to help learners make progress within the general education curriculum. "That's a noble effort," she concludes. "In my experience, the way we do this is by having the right tools to support educators as they implement great instruction for the students who need it most. This is where FastBridge can really help."

To learn more about FastBridge, **request a demo**.