



STRONGER INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Meaningful Access For Students with Disabilities



This is the first brief in a four-part series examining how districts can move toward high-quality instructional experiences for students with disabilities.

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If Endrew Ended the Era of De Minimis Expectations, Instructional Leaders Must End the Era of De Minimis Instructional Planning for Students with Disabilities

In [Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District \(2017\)](#), Chief Justice John Roberts, writing for a unanimous Supreme Court, rejected the notion that students with disabilities are entitled to merely a minimal educational benefit. The Court held that an Individualized Education Program must be "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances." In doing so, the Court rejected a de minimis standard and raised the bar for what schools owe students with disabilities.

For education leaders, Endrew presents a systemic challenge: If students with disabilities are entitled to meaningful progress, then districts' instructional systems must be designed to support meaningful progress for those students.

Over the last decade, districts have worked hard to strengthen inclusion and expand access to general education classrooms for students with disabilities. But Endrew raises the standard from access alone to meaningful participation in rigorous learning, requiring districts to think differently about how instruction is designed for students with disabilities.

At the same time, the broader instructional landscape has changed dramatically. Across the country, districts have moved toward high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), and a

more rigorous vision of teaching and learning for all students. Increasingly, the goal is that all students engage with grade-level content, complex tasks, rich discussion, and standards-aligned instruction.

These two developments are connected: As Endrew raised the standard for how schools must serve students with disabilities, the movement towards HQIM has raised the standard for students' instructional experiences. Together, they force education leaders to confront a central challenge: ensuring that students with disabilities do not simply have access to rigorous classrooms but can meaningfully engage in rigorous, grade-level instruction. In practical terms, how can we intentionally design the supports, scaffolds, and Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) that allow those students to succeed in an HQIM landscape?

Instruction for Students with Disabilities in an HQIM Environment: What Our Data Show

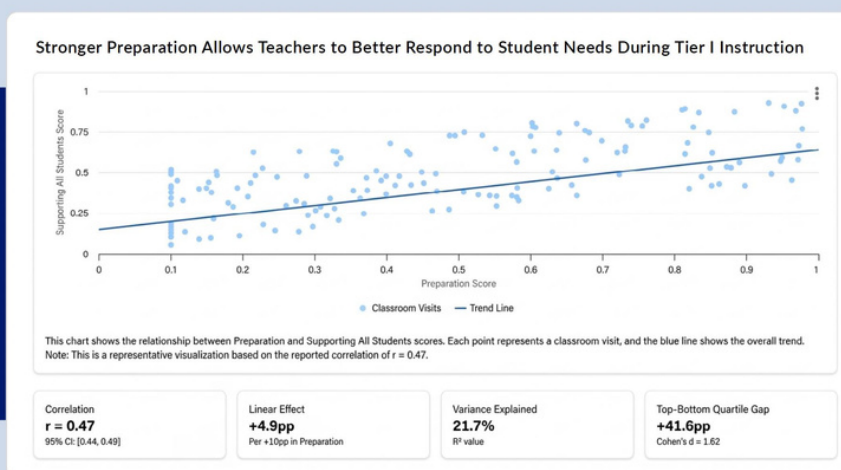
As districts have adopted high-quality instructional materials and expanded access to general education classrooms, an important question remains: are students with disabilities actually experiencing meaningful access to rigorous instruction?

EdBetter's most recent data suggest this remains a significant challenge.

What Our Data Show About Instructional Supports for Students with Disabilities

Across thousands of classroom observations, **"Supporting All Students"** emerged as the most persistent instructional challenge. At the same time, classrooms in the highest quartile for lesson and unit preparation significantly outperformed those in the lowest quartile on measures related to supporting diverse learners, suggesting that meaningful access to rigorous, curriculum-aligned instruction depends on the extent to which instructional materials have been carefully analyzed with students' needs in mind, and there is upfront planning for appropriate supports.

Across our pilot data, **higher levels of preparation are associated with stronger performance in Supporting All Students.**



This finding highlights a challenge embedded even in the best instructional models. Extensive structures exist to support planning for core instruction: curriculum materials, pacing guides, exemplar lessons, PLCs, and lesson internalization routines. However, systematic planning for how students with disabilities will access that same instruction often does not receive the same level of attention. The additional thinking required to anticipate barriers, preserve rigor, and design meaningful access is frequently treated as a downstream consideration rather than a core component of instructional design.

Designing for Meaningful Access for Students with Disabilities

We know that the overwhelming majority of students receiving special education services spend most of their instructional day in general education classrooms. And our data is clear that supporting strong instructional experiences for them is one of the most persistent instructional challenges. Can we then assume that access to these will emerge organically from strong core instruction alone?

In an HQIM environment, meaningful access for students with disabilities, and the mandate for **Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)**, are not about creating a separate curriculum or lowering expectations. Nor is it about expecting teachers to independently determine how every student will access every lesson.

Instead, it requires intentional examination of instructional materials to identify where students may encounter barriers and what supports will enable them to engage in the intended learning.

This should happen both during the HQIM adoption process, and even more importantly, post-adoption at a system-level. Instructional leaders must deliberately examine how students with disabilities will experience HQIM lessons:

- **Where are students likely to encounter barriers?**
- **What will teachers need to help students engage in the lesson's intended learning?**
- **Which evidence-based instructional practices should be incorporated?**
- **What accommodations, modifications, worked examples, visual supports, or manipulatives may be necessary?**
- **How will teachers monitor whether those supports are actually working?**

These considerations must begin well before the implementation discussions ever reach a PLC or collaborative planning meeting. To be clear, they **MUST** continue through the thread of PLCs, classroom observations and debrief, and DDI cycles to appropriately account for teachers' voice, their lived experiences, and continuously improve.

But the upstream work by system leaders is essential and comes first. And this is how collaborative planning and lesson internalization become far more effective. Teachers are no longer left to determine how students with disabilities will access instruction from scratch. Instead, they are equipped with a thoughtful instructional blueprint that anticipates barriers, provides concrete supports, and keeps students connected to the same rigorous learning as their peers.

If Endrew ended the era of de minimis expectations, education leaders must end the era of de minimis planning for meaningful access.

Chief Justice Roberts' standard, that schools must "enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances," requires more than placement in a general education classroom. It requires intentional systems improvement for how students with disabilities will access, engage in, and make progress through rigorous, grade-level learning.

Acknowledgements

This brief draws on findings from EdBetter's pilot data white paper. All data were collected during the 2025-26 school year across participating pilot districts and have been fully de-identified. Findings presented in this brief reflect patterns across pilot sites and are not attributable to any individual district.

Examples and discussion of Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) are informed by resources developed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), including the Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Field User Guide for Bluebonnet Learning K-5 Mathematics.

Sources

- EdBetter (2026). Instructional Improvement Through Curriculum-Aligned Classroom Observation: Pilot Data Findings White Paper.
- Texas Education Agency. Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Field User Guide for Bluebonnet Learning K-5 Mathematics.
- Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1, 580 U.S. 386 (2017).