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# Foreword

## Our Goal

### Improving Special Education

Improved education is a shared goal of families and educators alike. We all want our children to be well educated. We also want our public schools to change instructional practices that are ineffective. Our shared goal is to improve current practice and deliver more effective educational programs and services in states and localities across the country.

This goal is especially strong for those of us responsible for educating children with disabilities. We have witnessed a sea change in the practice of special education over the past 30 years. In 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws that isolated certain students, including children with mental retardation or emotional disturbance or children who were blind or deaf. However, successive reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), beginning with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (Public Law 94-142) in 1975 and continuing through the 1997 Amendments to IDEA (Public Law 105-17), changed the national landscape. At the start of the new millennium, almost six million American children with physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional disabilities had access to a free appropriate public education.

Equality of access to education, however, is not enough. Children with disabilities need effective programs and services. Educational services for children with disabilities must be determined on an individual basis, according to the unique needs of the child, and must be provided in the least restrictive environment. Moreover, the focus of their instruction must be on teaching and learning approaches that should be individualized and should allow access to the general education curriculum in ways that support learning and high achievement for all.

Building on 30 years of progress in special education, we still need to deliver more effective instruction and to improve programs and services for all children, including children with disabilities and their nondisabled classmates. *Guiding Change in Special Education* explains how educators can guide and sustain improvements in the practice of special education.

## Federal Support for Change in Special Education

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education shares the concerns of families and educators in supporting continued improvement in special education. OSEP's investments have led to the development of a national infrastructure for practice improvement. This national network plays a significant role in identifying, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating information about effective instructional practices.

Many practices employed by our nation's best teachers originate in OSEP-sponsored research. Across the country, OSEP researchers are working with teachers, therapists, and other practitioners to discover new ways to provide special education and related services. Through these collaborations, we are finding new ways to diagnose and assess special needs, new ways to deliver special programs and services, new ways to facilitate learning, and new ways to organize instruction and curriculum to enhance the educational experience for all children.

Many streams of innovative OSEP-sponsored research, sustained over 30 years, represent a tremendous potential resource for today's practitioners. But there is a special challenge: How do we best use this collective knowledge resource to improve practice at all levels? Various OSEP investments in training and technical assistance are helping practitioners meet this challenge. For example, OSEP sponsors more than 40 national centers and clearinghouses that operate under the banner of the Special Education Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network. This network provides ongoing training and technical assistance so that practitioners responsible for educating children with disabilities can employ research-validated practices with confidence.

From 1997 to 2002, the American Institutes for Research's Elementary and Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center (EMSTAC) was an active member of OSEP's Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network. EMSTAC's charge was to establish a comprehensive resource for technical assistance in schools that can be used on a national level. EMSTAC partnered with school districts in more than 20 states to help improve the local delivery of special education for elementary and middle school students with disabilities.

Wise action for change requires a great deal of sorting out of information. Thus, EMSTAC helped local practitioners sort out their own needs and then helped them sort through the array of research-validated practices to find those most relevant to their own unique needs and circumstances. EMSTAC also helped practitioners determine which alternative practices work best and which are most likely to be acceptable and practical. In short, EMSTAC provided *human links* connecting local service providers to research along with a complex and remote nationwide network of training and technical assistance.

## Who Should Read This Book?

*Guiding Change* is written for anyone who wants to improve special education—any aspect of the special education environment; changes of any scope, large or small; and any content from social organization to curriculum to

technology. Consider the possibility that you might be in one or more of the following situations.

- You are a leader or a member of a team that has been asked to implement a new program.
- You are a special education teacher who is concerned about how to improve services to children with special needs in your school. You would like to make a real difference and are willing and ready to invest some extra energy and time in that effort.
- You are a supervisor or a senior staff member in an intermediate school district or service center with responsibility for special education programs. A major part of your job is implementing laws, regulations, and mandates from the state or the federal government.
- You are the parent of a child with special needs and have a personal interest in improving special education service delivery in your child's school.
- You are in the middle of a project that is meant to bring about a particular kind of change, but you are running into some problems. It is not working out as planned and hoped for, either because there is resistance or because the expected outcomes are not being realized.

In each of these cases, you are cast in the role of a change agent. In some cases, you are concerned only with a particular group of children or a classroom. In other cases, the focus of your concern is a particular school or school district. Nevertheless, in all situations, you are truly a change agent and can benefit from a solid understanding of the process of change. In each case, you also hope that your efforts will lead to real and lasting improvements in the way services are delivered to children with special needs.

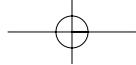
*Guiding Change* will not tell you what specific changes you should make. It does not advocate a particular change content, but it does advocate a process that optimizes participation, problem solving, and the intelligent use of the knowledge and experience of others.

### ***Guiding Change as an Instructional Tool***

Instructors in graduate-level and inservice courses should also find *Guiding Change* a useful introduction to the realities of school-level reform. The narrative history of an actual change effort is intended to provide the reader with the feel of being a linker in the field.

### **A Special Note to Graduate Students**

Planned change projects make ideal thesis topics. They can be designed as action research case studies, but with some special advantages: (1) They may actually do some good; (2) they will teach you a lot about the change process, helping organize your experience in a coherent and memorable form; and (3) they should allow you to collect data and report on your experiences in a focused way that can serve as a dissertation. You can try to validate change



theory and add to the knowledge of change process along the way. Many persons seeking advanced degrees have returned to the university from responsible positions in education or business. They have had experiences as progenitors, observers, or perhaps victims of other people's change efforts. A careful review of *Guiding Change* should provide many opportunities to match real-life experiences against the theory and wisdom of others as reflected herein.

*Guiding Change in Special Education* is an invitation for you to play a vital role in translating research into improved special education practice. Reading this book will get you started on learning about the change process and how to support meaningful, sustained innovation. Armed with this knowledge, regardless of your formal role in the larger system, you can provide hands-on assistance to local practitioners, helping them connect in a meaningful way to the world of research and development in special education.

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