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A Blueprint for Early Childhood Special Education

Solutions to Address the Administrative
Challenges PK-12 School Districts Face
Heading into 2025



*A report for executive leadership and special
education staff of PK-12 districts and State
Departments of Education*

A Blueprint for Early Childhood Special Education

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Introduction

To address increasing nationwide demand for preschool special education services and the backlogs of referrals, PK-12 Districts must bolster their capacity to serve preschool students by addressing the administrative aspects of staffing, workflows and data.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) refers to the services a school district provides to children diagnosed with a disability who are at least three years old, but not yet old enough to enroll in a kindergarten class. Districts may provide ECSE services within a district classroom. They may also do so within a private setting, such as a home, specialized school, or by sending a trained teacher (sometimes known as an itinerant teacher) to the child at a childcare center. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of districts have also offered virtual services by computer.

From a Central office point of view, ECSE is different from just about every other department in a District, especially in that:

It serves a younger population not historically part of the “K-12” system.

It is family-facing with respect to evaluations but has a need for administrative support like other departments.

Children newly qualify throughout the year, so enrollment is almost constantly increasing.

It spans both early childhood and special education, both of which have a myriad of its rules and regulations.

Under federal law, all school districts have a legal obligation to serve children with



disabilities beginning at three years of age. Districts are struggling to meet those obligations for children ages 3-5 residing within their attendance boundaries, however. Many students are not receiving the services legally due to them and others wait longer than the maximum period allowed under federal law to evaluate and determine their eligibility for services.



Related Terms

Community Outreach screenings. Screenings with students ages 2-4 aimed at identifying children who may have a disability. Students may be referred for an evaluation based on their screening results.

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE). Special education services that school districts provide students three and older who are not yet old enough to enroll in kindergarten.

Early Intervention (EI). Services and supports available to children with a disability or developmental delay before age 3, such as speech therapy, physical therapy, and family supports.

IDEA Part B, Section 619. The part of IDEA outlining schools' responsibilities for serving students with disabilities beginning at age 3.

IDEA Part C. A federal grant program that assists states in operating early intervention services for infants and toddlers younger than three.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A legally binding document outlining the services a school district must provide a child with a disability to meet their unique educational needs.

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Federal legislation that requires public schools to provide students with disabilities to meet their unique educational needs. It guarantees children a free and appropriate education, a comprehensive evaluation, and services to support their learning needs in the least restrictive environment.

Itinerant teacher. Special educators who work with children with disabilities outside of a district classroom. They travel to meet children where they are, and typically serve multiple children in different settings.

Faced with few options, families and their advocates around the country are bringing class-action lawsuits against school districts and their respective states to compel them to meet their obligations. Litigation is ongoing in various phases of Court proceedings around the country, such as in Colorado, New York, and Rhode Island. (There are, of course, many cases of similar litigation across K-12 nationally, as well.) Often, in the end, an agreement is reached between the Parties requiring the District to take specific actions, or "remedies," to solve the problems raised by the Plaintiffs.

In our experience, the inability to provide a child with timely services often stems from an administrative procedure that has broken down in the Central office. This often includes a lack of adequate resources to perform administrative functions. As a result, most administrative staff and evaluators are overwhelmed.

From a Central office point of view, ECSE is different from just about every other department in a District.

As this white paper describes, many of the processes and systems underlying ECSE hinder districts' efforts to serve its youngest students. To address the current backlog and keep up with demand for ECSE services, Districts must both attend to the children already in its pipeline and improve the efficiency of its systems and processes.



The Challenges of ECSE Administration

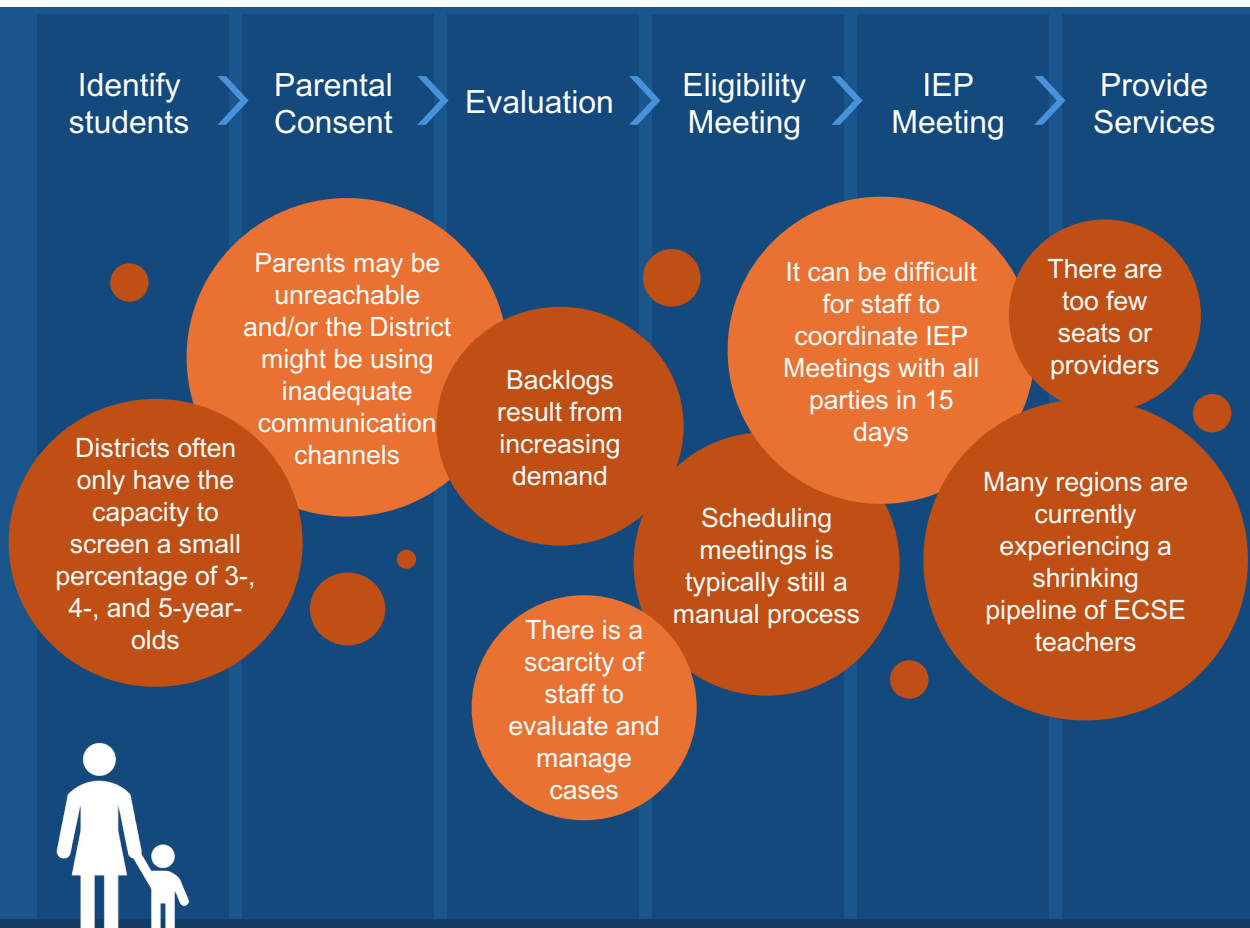
In our experience, Districts are quickly realizing their capacity and infrastructure to manage ECSE workflows is inadequate. Because of poor data, Districts rarely have a full picture of their ECSE population. And with inadequate staff, they lack the capacity to facilitate the necessary administrative workflows.

To receive services under IDEA Part B, students must be evaluated and found eligible. Those evaluations typically happen because a child received services through Early Intervention before age 3, because a screening tool identified that the child may have a learning disability, or because a

parent had concerns and requested an evaluation.

Under IDEA, Districts are mandated not to exceed (a) 60 days from the point of parental consent for evaluation to the time of eligibility and (b) 15 school days from the point a child is found eligible to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and begin providing services. (This is the same for K-12, as well.) Due to difficulties in collecting and storing data, overworked staff, and inadequate communications with families, Districts often struggle to meet these timeframes and are subsequently out of compliance.

Figure 1. Administrative challenges cause problems across ECSE functions



A Blueprint for ECSE

Once the District has committed to the changes necessary to build up ECSE operations, the question becomes *what problems do we need to focus on?*

Below is a reusable framework that can be used to illustrate the connection between multiple facets of the District's plan for ECSE going forward. The idea is to display an intentional logic to overcome the challenges and chart a course forward. District leaders and ECSE staff can use the Strategy Blueprint as a template for their own strategies to address and support ECSE.

A "strategy blueprint" is a succinct view of a District's approach to improving ECSE operations; such as, to facilitate:

- Alignment with other related strategic plans
- Assessments of work in progress
- Innovations and new strategies
- Communications with ECSE stakeholders and partners

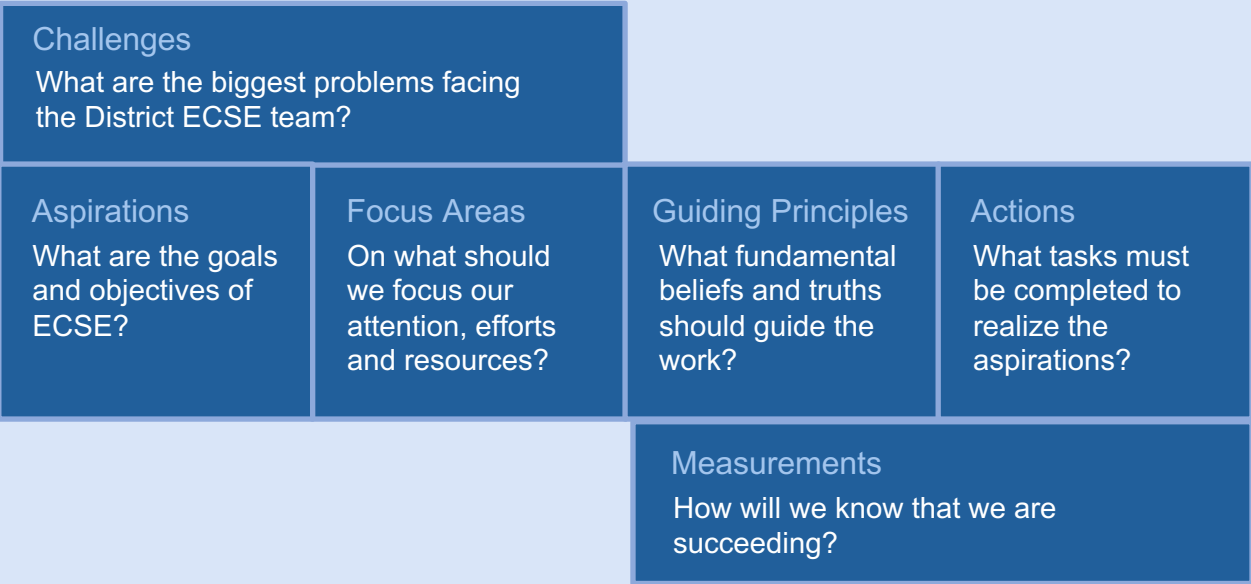
Accompanying this report is a blank template in MS PowerPoint which District staff can use in their planning activities and workshops.
[Click Here](#)

- Workshops and other ECSE project meetings
- Reference for new staff and partners

Begin with the challenges. Our research has shown three key areas that, if addressed, can streamline and build capacity for ECSE administrative work in the Central office: (1) staffing, (2) business processes, (3) data and systems. Staffing challenges include those that support evaluations, services, and administrative workflows in the Central office. Inefficiencies and poor data quality in District operations and administrative processes can also contribute to the key challenges.

Challenges are most often overcome when District leaders are involved in the design and socialization of the Strategy Blueprint.

Figure 2. Structure of a District's Strategy Blueprint for ECSE (with guiding questions)



The strategy blueprint can facilitate discussions around modernizing the District's approach to ECSE.

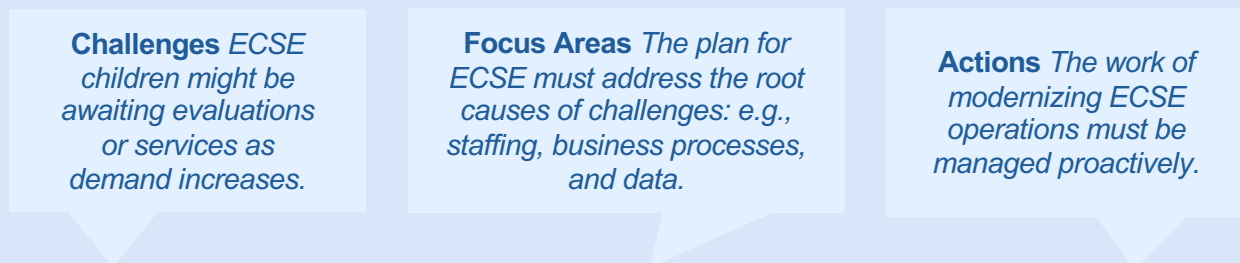
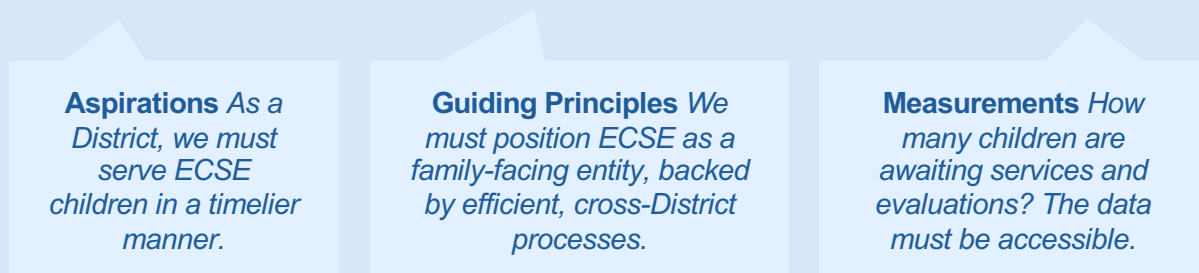
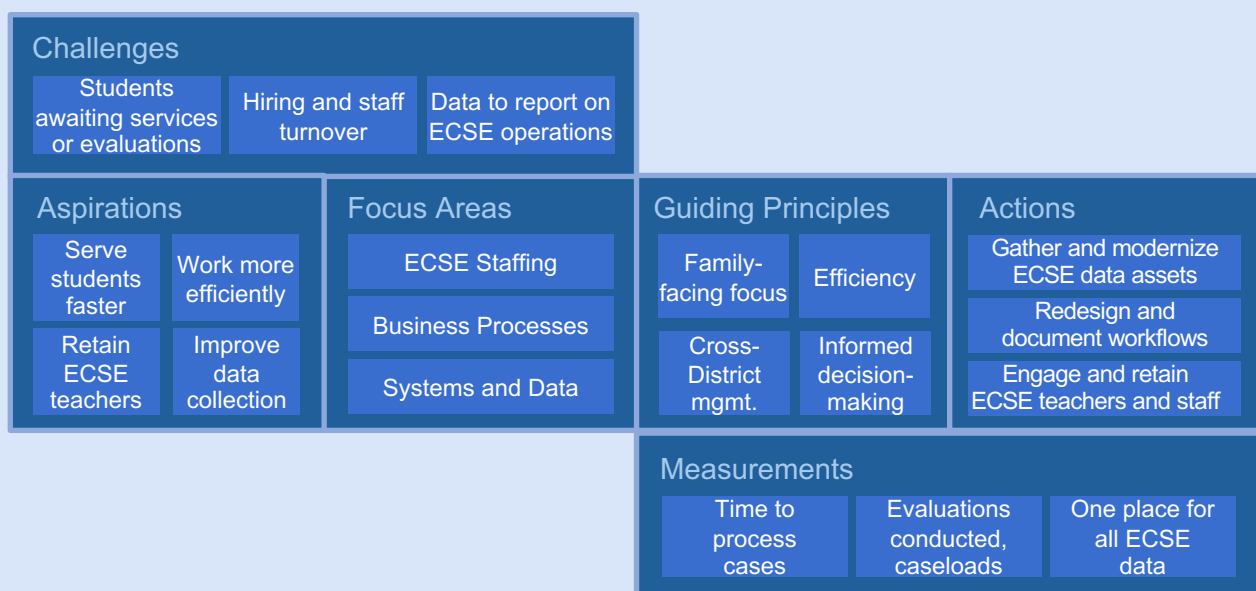


Figure 3. A Sample District's Strategy Blueprint for Early Childhood Special Education



Potential Strategies for District Leaders to Consider in Their Communities

Focus Area 1

ECSE Staffing

When it comes to compliance in early childhood special education, many districts simply don't have the staff necessary to do the work needed, both at the school level and at the Central level. Often, special education evaluations are not conducted in a timely manner because there is no 'evaluator' available, either internally or externally. Similarly, school staff may struggle to hold IEP meetings in a timely manner due to a lack of access to the right people at the right time. Even Central staff -- who process referrals, schedule evaluations, and conduct other key functions in the workflow of ECSE -- struggle with increasing workloads, especially where turnover has also increased.

There are two general approaches a District can take to address staffing challenges. Districts should consider both:

1

Recruit, retain, and "borrow" from the existing talent pool, both within and beyond the District. See tactics at right.

2

Intentionally build a more robust pipeline moving forward by addressing the barriers aspiring teachers face. This can be approached through strategies such as:

- Partnering with colleges of education,
- Creating a teacher residency program, and
- Developing a paraprofessional-to-teacher program.

Sample Recruiting and Hiring Tactics

To address the staffing crisis, Districts should consider:

- Offering higher pay
- Offering retention bonuses
- Recruiting retirees back into the classroom
- Offering more flexible schedules and co-teaching
- Employing contracted staff or providers
- Recruiting elementary teachers certified to teach special education
- Partnering with external vendors for marketing and recruitment support
- Offering tuition or education loan repayment



Potential Strategies for District Leaders to Consider in Their Communities

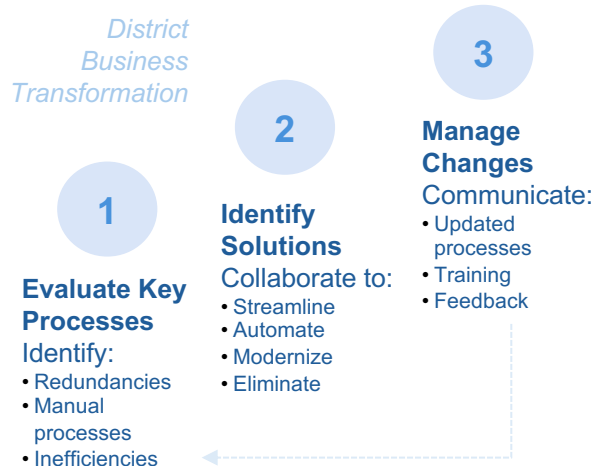
Focus Area 2

Business Processes

Often, the processes that impact ECSE are not clear or documented. Meanwhile, many of those processes that are in place are not as efficient as they could be due to redundancies, an over-reliance on manual steps, and/or other inefficiencies.

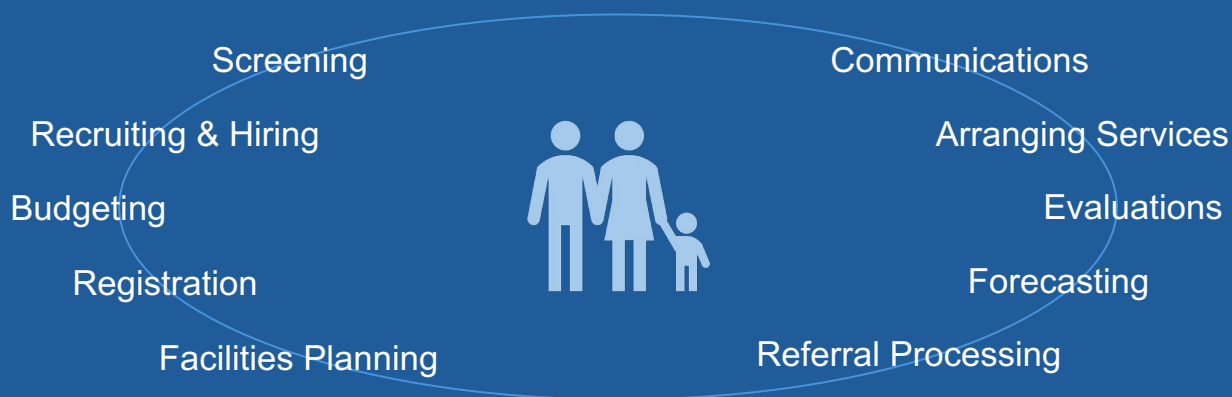
The “business” functions of the District office are the backbone of the school district, responsible for a multitude of crucial tasks – from student registration and enrollment to staffing and accounting; from grading and transcripts to customer support; and from special education administration to vendor invoicing.

Where processes, such as evaluations and registration, are on the critical path to serving the child, districts should evaluate them, looking for bottlenecks and pain points. While many of the efficiencies will be simple and straightforward – such as



utilizing information parents already provided, rather than asking them for the same information again – others may require new workflows, technology or other data, (see next page).

Figure 4. Sample Administrative ECSE Processes



Potential Strategies for District Leaders to Consider in Their Communities

Focus Area 3

Data and Systems

Timely, accurate data is critical to informing decisions made by District leadership. Districts must therefore have a single source of data tracking children as they move through the referral pipeline. Collecting and reviewing additional ECSE data points on a recurring basis, such as when a referral is received, can inform decision-making in key ECSE planning and budgeting activities.

As a first step, the central ECSE team should identify the questions it must answer to make informed decisions around staffing and administrative workflows -- such as, how many referrals the District typically receives and how many evaluations the current staff can reasonably process.

In the organizational sense of the word “systems,” Districts should assess where ECSE sits in the Central office. The goal would be to ensure the District’s ECSE team is positioned to work with multiple offices across the District and easily escalate issues.

1

Inventory Data Assets

Identify:

- Key questions; inventory
- Gaps in ECSE data; integrations needed
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

2

Integrate Student Data

Develop:

- Source systems mapping
- Systems integrations
- Data Stewards
- Reporting

3

Modernize Systems

Assess:

- Business needs
- Existing student information systems (SIS)
- Landscape of products
- Build / Buy / Rent

District To-Do's

- Hire a Data Manager for special education to gather, synthesize, analyze, answer questions, and report key metrics
- Identify key questions ECSE leadership needs to inform decision-making
- Identify key metrics to monitor performance and compliance (IDEA)
- Identify district-wide outcome metrics tied to ECSE to which District leadership will hold itself accountable
- Implement a new or revised data collection protocol to collect all key metrics (preferably in concert with current student information systems (SIS) vendors)
- Define needs and work with current systems vendors to identify solutions and integrate with other SISs
- Develop a forecasting model that identifies the driving factors of enrollment, draws on historical data, and helps predict funding needs



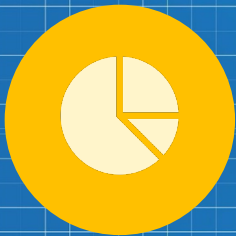
Recommended Near-Term Action Items for District Leaders



Recruit and convene an Advisory Board of ECSE teachers and staff to learn from their experiences and make recommendations to District leadership.



Assess business processes (e.g., referrals, registration) with a focus on inefficiencies and breakdowns. Define enhanced procedures and workflows.



Inventory the data assets the District already has access to, as well as gaps where information is needed. Assess District applications' (e.g., SIS) fit/gap.

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