

SIDECAR COMPANION: PREPARING SCHOOL LEADERS TO EFFECTIVELY SERVE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



A Companion Tool for Implementers of the Principal Registered Apprenticeship Program

The following workbook is designed to help implementers of the Principal Registered Apprenticeship ensure that special education leadership—required for principal licensure in every state—is fully embedded across all elements of program design, delivery, and assessment. Because principals have legal, instructional, and operational responsibility for the quality of special education services, Registered Apprenticeship programs (RAPs) must intentionally integrate competencies aligned to IDEA, Section 504, ADA, state regulations, and inclusive instructional leadership expectations.

Effective preparation of school leaders to serve students with disabilities requires meaningful engagement from special education experts and practitioners throughout the design and implementation process. States, districts, and preparation providers should intentionally involve special education directors, State Education Agency (SEA) offices of special education, regional service centers, special education coordinators, and other relevant experts from the earliest stages of planning through implementation and continuous improvement. Their expertise can help ensure that principal apprentices develop the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to lead inclusive schools, support students with disabilities, navigate compliance requirements, and foster positive outcomes for all learners.

This workbook supports implementers—including State Departments of Labor, State Education Agencies, Educator Preparation Programs, Local Education Agencies, and intermediary partners—in examining and strengthening how special education leadership is reflected in the Principal Registered Apprenticeship:

- Work Process Schedule
- On-the-Job Learning (OJL) experience design
- Related technical instruction (RTI) coursework
- Placement requirements and school selection
- Mentor principal preparation and expectations
- Competency assessment and evidence requirements
- Quality assurance and continuous improvement systems

Workbook Structure

The workbook is organized into three integrated tables, each serving a distinct purpose in the design and diagnostic process:

Foundational Program Design Questions

A systems-level readiness check that helps implementers assess whether the RAP has clearly articulated expectations, structures, and partnerships that guarantee meaningful apprentice learning in special education leadership.

Retrospective Analysis Scenario Analysis

A set of realistic “failure point” scenarios that allow implementers to stress-test the RAP model. This section helps partners identify gaps that could emerge during implementation and adjust program design to prevent inequitable or incomplete apprentice preparation.

Evidence, Look-Fors, and Documentation Requirements

A licensure-aligned set of observable indicators and acceptable artifacts that apprentice principals should produce. This section helps implementers ensure that special education leadership competencies are not left to chance and that apprentices can demonstrate readiness through authentic, practice-based evidence.

Together, these tables form a flexible but comprehensive tool that Principal Registered Apprenticeship implementers can use during design, approval, launch, and continuous improvement. The goal is to ensure that every apprentice principal graduates fully prepared to legally, ethically, and instructionally lead special education programs and to uphold the rights and learning of students with disabilities on day one.

Special Education Integration Check: Foundational Program Design Questions

The following foundational questions are designed as a systems-level readiness check for implementers building or refining a Principal Registered Apprenticeship program. Special education leadership is a legal, instructional, and operational responsibility of every principal—and a core component of virtually all state licensure standards. Because of this, RAPs must ensure that special education is not treated as an “add-on,” an elective module, or something learned incidentally through school placement. Instead, RAP design must intentionally integrate special education competencies across visioning, placement decisions, mentor expectations, competency frameworks, related instruction, and assessment systems.

This table supports implementers in conducting an honest audit of whether their RAP design guarantees that apprentices will encounter, practice, and be evaluated on the full range of special education leadership responsibilities required for licensure. These questions help partners examine whether the program creates coherent conditions for apprentices to understand IDEA and Section 504 requirements, lead inclusive instructional systems, manage special education resources and staffing, engage families effectively, and ensure equitable access to high-quality instruction for students with disabilities.

Implementers can use this integration check during early design, prior to submitting a program to the Department of Labor, or as part of continuous improvement cycles. The goal is to surface blind spots, strengthen cross-agency coordination, and ensure that apprentices complete the Principal Registered Apprenticeship and are able to legally and effectively lead special education in any school setting.

Program Design Area	Guiding Questions for Principal Registered Apprenticeship Implementers	Notes
Vision & Program Purpose	• Does the apprenticeship explicitly state that principals are responsible for ensuring high-quality special education services and legal compliance? • Is the apprenticeship framed to prepare principals to lead inclusive schools and uphold IDEA, Section 504, and ADA requirements? • Does the program articulate how special education leadership is a core licensure competency? • Does the apprenticeship intentionally support leaders in collaboratively developing an inclusive mission and vision that ensures the success of all students, including those with disabilities?	
Placement and OJL Structure	• Are apprentices placed in schools/settings that provide exposure to special education service delivery across disability categories and instructional models? • Does the program ensure apprentices observe and participate in IEP planning and meetings, manifestation determinations, MTSS meetings, and compliance monitoring? • Knowing that specialized self-contained programs are often clustered in specific schools, what concrete 'cross-rotation' or virtual/field-study contingencies can we build into the On-the-Job Learning (OJL) framework from the start? Specifically, if an apprentice is placed at a campus without a full range of disability types, how can we structurally ensure they still gain exposure to the operational, instructional, and legal complexities of managing district-wide cluster programs?	

Program Design Area	Guiding Questions for Principal Registered Apprenticeship Implementers	Notes
Placement and OJL Structure	• Are apprentices paired with mentor principals who demonstrate expertise in special education leadership? • How will the apprenticeship structure ensure that aspiring principals spend dedicated time observing and collaborating with special education directors, school psychologists, and specialized service providers (like speech-language pathologists)? • Given that special education compliance, resource allocation, and instructional support are critical levers for student human flourishing, how can we co-construct the On-the-Job Learning (OJL) to build deep operational competence in these specific areas?	
Competency Alignment	• Do program competencies explicitly address special education legal compliance, inclusive instructional leadership, scheduling, staffing, and equity? • Do the competencies align with state principal licensure standards related to special education? • Are special education leadership skills embedded across all PSEL-aligned competencies? (See this resource for a detailed crosswalk from the CEEDAR center)	

Program Design Area	Guiding Questions for Principal Registered Apprenticeship Implementers	Notes
Related Instruction (RTI)	• Does the EPP provide coursework aligned with IDEA, Section 504, the ADA, the Assistive Technology Act, state rules, inclusive practices, MTSS, and inclusion practices such as UDL? • Does the RTI include monitoring and assessment systems, SDI, accommodations, co-teaching, and behavior support content required for licensure? • Does the EPP provide apprentices with experience in understanding and using state and local data related to special education? • Are apprentices required to submit evidence that demonstrates application of this knowledge?	
Mentor Principal Development	• Do mentor principals receive orientation to their role in supporting apprentices' special education leadership learning? • Are there tools or rubrics mentors can use to evaluate apprentice progress toward special education competencies? • Are mentors aware of required licensure-aligned competencies? • What other staff with special education expertise can support mentor principal development?	
Assessment & Quality Assurance	• Does the apprenticeship include assessment tools that explicitly evaluate special education leadership competencies? • Are compliance and instructional indicators both included? • Does the program regularly review evidence of apprentice capability in supervising special education?	

Retrospective Analysis Design Exercise

Implementers can use the following scenarios as a retrospective analysis diagnostic exercise to stress-test the special education components of the Registered Apprenticeship design. Each scenario represents a realistic failure point that may often emerge once a RAP is underway—gaps in placement, insufficient exposure to special education responsibilities, inconsistent mentor support, or misalignment with state licensure expectations.

By conducting a structured “post-mortem” on these scenarios before program launch, Principal Registered Apprenticeship partners can identify weaknesses in OJL planning, related instruction, competency expectations, mentor principal preparation, and quality assurance systems.

The goal of this exercise is not to assign blame but to ensure that apprentices—upon completion of the program—can legally, ethically, and instructionally lead special education in a manner consistent with IDEA, Section 504, ADA, and state principal licensure requirements.

Use these prompts to ask:

- If this happened in our program, what would it reveal about our design?
- What systems or requirements would need to be strengthened?
- How do we build safeguards so this scenario does not occur during implementation?
- How do we ensure licensure-aligned special education competencies are guaranteed—not left to chance?

This “post-mortem” framing helps implementers refine the Principal Registered Apprenticeship design proactively, reducing downstream issues and ensuring all apprentices graduate fully prepared to lead special education effectively on day one.

Scenario for Program Designers	Program-Level Questions to Assess Readiness	Notes
1. An apprentice has never facilitated an IEP meeting during OJL.	• What structures failed to provide adequate exposure? • Does the program guarantee IEP participation as part of OJL? • How can expectations be written more explicitly?	
2. An apprentice's placement school has very few students with disabilities.	• Does the RAP require exposure to multiple contexts or supplemental experiences? • What safeguards ensure breadth of experience? • How will the mentor principal provide practice opportunities?	
3. Related instruction covers school law but not IDEA or 504.	• What licensure requirements are not yet met? • Does the state have additional leadership, special education, or endorsement requirements that should be incorporated into the apprenticeship design? • Is the EPP prepared to embed special education content across leadership courses? • Should additional coursework be required? • How will apprentices develop knowledge of IDEA, Section 504, inclusive leadership practices, and legal responsibilities related to students with disabilities?	

Scenario for Program Designers	Program-Level Questions to Assess Readiness	Notes
4. Mentor principals vary widely in special education knowledge.	• What mentor orientation or calibration is needed? • Should implementers provide mentor training on special education leadership expectations? • Can the OJL or RTI programs identify other staff/faculty knowledgeable in special education as another support? • Are there common rubrics mentors can use?	
5. The Principal Registered Apprenticeship emphasizes instructional leadership but not inclusive instructional leadership.	• Does the RAP require exposure to multiple contexts or supplemental experiences? • What safeguards ensure breadth of experience? • How will the mentor principal provide practice opportunities?	

Evidence, Look-Fors, and Documentation Requirements

The following table provides licensure-aligned special education leadership competencies, paired with observable indicators and examples of evidence that apprentices should produce over the course of the Principal Registered Apprenticeship. This table supports Principal Registered Apprenticeship implementers in designing clear expectations for what apprentices must demonstrate—not merely learn or be exposed to—to ensure they are fully prepared to lead special education programs in accordance with IDEA, Section 504, ADA, and state principal licensure requirements.

Because Principal Registered Apprenticeship rely heavily on on-the-job learning, it is essential that implementers identify the specific artifacts, observations, and practice-based demonstrations that will serve as proof points of apprentice readiness. Without explicit evidence of expectations, apprentices' exposure to special education leadership can vary widely based on placement, mentor expertise, or local school structures. This table helps sponsors, EPPs, and state partners calibrate expectations, build shared evaluation tools, and create equitable assessment conditions across programs.

Principal Registered Apprenticeship implementers can use these look-fors and artifacts to:

- Align competency assessments to licensure requirements
- Provide mentor principals with concrete guidance for evaluating apprentices
- Ensure apprentices receive practice opportunities in legally essential tasks
- Build a coherent evidence portfolio model across partner LEAs and EPPs

The goal of this section is to support Principal Registered Apprenticeship programs in making special education leadership **observable, documentable, and assessable**—so that every apprentice graduate is ready to uphold the rights of students with disabilities and lead inclusive, high-quality special education systems and schools on day one.

Licensure-Aligned Special Education Competency Area	What Principal Registered Apprenticeship Implementers Should Look For in OJL and Evidence	Examples of Acceptable Apprentice Evidence
Legal Knowledge & Compliance	• Understanding of IDEA, 504, ADA • Correct IEP documentation • Timelines and procedural safeguards followed • Accurate service logs	• Redacted compliance file review • IEP timeline audit • Reflection on procedural safeguards
IEP Facilitation & Family Engagement	• Apprentice participates in and eventually leads an IEP meeting • Family engagement is respectful, accessible, and culturally responsive	• Redacted IEP agenda • Meeting facilitation reflection • Family communication artifacts
Inclusive Instructional Leadership	• Observations of specially designed instruction (SDI) • Monitoring of accommodations and modifications • Co-teaching and inclusive practices	• Observation notes using SDI rubric • Co-planning templates • Data analysis reflection
MTSS Implementation	• Integration of special education within MTSS • Use of data for intervention decisions • Collaboration with general educators	• MTSS meeting notes • Intervention tracking sheet • Data-based decision-making plan
Staffing, Scheduling, and Resource Allocation	• Case management systems • Master schedules that protect instructional access • Allocation of related service minute	• Revised master schedule • Caseload analysis • Service-delivery model audit
Data Analysis & Student Outcomes	• Identification of inequitable patterns in identification, placement, discipline • Implementation of corrective actions	• Disproportionality analysis • Progress reports, data review presentations, or reflective analyses of implemented strategies.
Collaboration & Interdisciplinary Practice	• Systems for co-planning, co-teaching, and shared responsibilities • Strong relationships between general and special educators	• Agendas for collaborative meetings • Team norms for inclusive practice

Resources & Supports

Lead IDEA Center

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), the Lead IDEA Center supports Early Intervention and PreK–12 leaders in implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Center provides resources, professional learning, and technical assistance that help leaders create effective, individualized educational opportunities for children eligible for early intervention and special education services. By partnering with state and local leaders, the Center strengthens their capacity to improve environments, uphold the intent of IDEA, and enhance outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

Lead IDEA provides a number of free resources that can support the development and ongoing learning of principals who are strong special education leaders. For example, they offer free, self-directed learning [courses](#) and related resources to build school leader knowledge in creating educational opportunities tailored to the individual needs of children eligible for early intervention and special education services.

CEEDAR Center

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), CEEDAR stands for "Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform." CEEDAR's mission is to support students with disabilities in achieving college- and career-ready standards by building the capacity of state personnel preparation systems to prepare teachers and leaders to implement evidence-based practices within multi-tiered systems of support.

CEEDAR Center provides a number of free [resources focused on school leaders](#) that can support the development and ongoing learning of principals who are strong special education leaders. For example, they offer free tools such as the [Effective Principal Leadership Innovation Configuration](#) (find overview matrix on page 71-81), which helps principal preparation programs and professional development providers identify strengths and gaps in ensuring principals develop the knowledge, skills, and practices needed to lead inclusive schools.

Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports

The Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS Center) helps states, districts, and schools implement MTSS—a proactive framework that uses data and tiered supports to improve academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for all students. It provides training, coaching, and practical resources to strengthen educator capacity in key MTSS components, including screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention, and data-based decision making.

MTSS Center website provides visitors with background knowledge on [essential components of MTSS](#) as well as numerous free [implementation resources](#) that will help school leaders and their teams engage in ongoing planning, continuous improvement, and sustaining and expanding their efforts.

PROGRESS Center

The PROGRESS Center supports educators and school leaders in developing and implementing high-quality IEPs and instructional programs for students with disabilities from kindergarten through transition age. The Center offers resources on the development and implementation of [IEPs](#), [specially designed instruction](#) (SDI), and more.

National Center on Intensive Intervention

The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) supports schools, districts, and educators in implementing intensive intervention—a structured, data-driven approach known as Data-Based Individualization (DBI)—to address the needs of students with severe and persistent academic or behavioral challenges. NCII, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provides tools, training, and technical assistance to strengthen educators’ capacity to deliver effective reading, math, and behavior interventions. Key offerings include evidence-based tools charts, progress monitoring resources, DBI training modules, and guidance tailored for [state and local leaders](#), [educators](#), [trainers/coaches](#), and [higher education faculty](#).