Can Our Educational System Survive by Continuing to "Put the Cart Before the Horse?"

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This article discusses the growing misalignment between the roles teachers are expected to play in schools and their core instructional responsibilities. Drawing on evidence from the United States, Germany, and international exemplars such as Finland, Norway, Singapore, and Ontario, we argue that educational systems have increasingly placed non-academic demands on teachers, ranging from administrative tasks, behavior management, and the implementation of social-emotional learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks, at the expense of rigorous academic instruction. Grounded in the metaphor "putting the cart before the horse," we argue that this inversion of priorities has diluted the instructional mission of schooling and contributed to teacher burnout and declining student outcomes. While this issue affects all students, it is particularly detrimental for those with special educational needs, such as students with learning disabilities (SWLD). To restore instructional integrity, we present actionable recommendations to realign teacher preparation, instructional leadership, and accountability systems with what should be the main mission of schools: academic learning. Centering academic instruction is not only sound practice; it is an equity imperative for SWLD.

Keywords: academic instruction, special education, learning disabilities, teacher preparation, instructional integrity

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, teachers have been increasingly asked to fulfill an extensive set of responsibilities that stretch far beyond the boundaries of academic instruction. While schools were once envisioned as institutions dedicated primarily to cultivating literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, the role of the classroom teacher has expanded to include behavioral interventionist, mental health first responder, diversity trainer, bureaucratic data manager, and social services liaison (Valli et al., 2007; Skaalvik et al., 2018). These expectations, though well-intentioned, reflect a growing misalignment between educational ideals and institutional reality. The shift has been gradual but profound:

instruction, once the centerpiece of teaching, is now often treated as just one function among many.

As these non-instructional demands grow, they increasingly compete with, rather than complement, the core mission of academic learning. The prioritization of bureaucratic compliance, behavioral initiatives, and school climate reforms over foundational academic teaching tasks reflects a systemic shift in educational focus. This reversal of prioritization is aptly captured by the idiom "putting the cart before the horse," which refers to disrupting the natural or logical order of operations.

Nowhere is this inversion more pronounced or more consequential than in the education of students with learning disabilities (SWLD). Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Congress, 2004) mandates a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) grounded in academic access and progress, in practice, instructional quality is too often sidelined in favor of procedural fidelity (Bateman et al., 2017; Gilmour, 2018).

Special education teachers, once trained as experts in intensive instruction, have been increasingly diverted from this mission. Their roles are often absorbed by administrative tasks, behavior management, and the implementation of well-meaning but siloed initiatives such as social-emotional learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks (Billingsley et al., 2019; Kaff, 2004; Vannest et al., 2010). While these programs may support school climate and student wellbeing, they frequently operate in isolation from academic content and result in fragmented learning environments that fail to meet the instructional needs of SWLD, who rely on coherent, content-rich instruction to build foundational skills (Vaughn et al., 2022).

This disconnect persists despite a strong evidence base demonstrating that SWLD benefit most from explicit, systematic instruction and sustained academic interventions (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Calhoon et al., 2010; Calhoon et al., 2013; Fuchs et al., 2006; Swanson et al., 1998). Nevertheless, these practices are routinely undermined by staffing shortages, conflicting mandates, and the increased administrative burdens placed on teachers (Bettini et al., 2017). Further compounding the problem, many teacher preparation programs (TPPs) continue to emphasize theory and compliance over practical pedagogy, which leaves future educators ill-equipped to support struggling learners in inclusive settings. This gap in preparation disproportionately affects individuals with academic challenges, whose unique needs are often overlooked in generalized training models (Brownell et al., 2010).

If schools are to meet the legal and moral obligations of special education, this trend must be reversed. The academic core must be restored, not as one initiative among many, but as the foundation of equitable schooling.

This paper argues that realigning policy, leadership, and resources to prioritize academic instruction is not simply a technical fix but a civil rights imperative.

The Misalignment Undermining Academic Instruction

While the policy landscape has redefined educational priorities, the consequences are most clearly felt in classrooms, where academic instruction has been increasingly subordinated to a host of non-instructional demands. Teachers today are expected to manage trauma, lead equity initiatives, implement behavioral systems, and comply with expanding documentation requirements while ensuring student achievement in core subjects (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). The cumulative effect is a dilution of the instructional focus at the heart of effective teaching.

For SWLD, this shift is not just inconvenient; it is harmful. These learners depend on high-leverage practices like explicit instruction, modeling, and scaffolded feedback to succeed (Calhoon et al., 2010; Calhoon et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2017). For SWLD, these practices are not just beneficial; they are essential to accessing and mastering academic content. However, teachers report losing significant portions of instructional time to behavioral crises, compliance checks, and programmatic interruptions (Kraft et al., 2022). As instructional minutes disappear, so too does the opportunity for SWLD to engage meaningfully with their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals as well as grade-level content.

This erosion of instructional time is further compounded by a training gap seen in TPPs across many countries. Teacher education programs, at colleges and universities, often overemphasize and lean heavily on the teaching of theoretical frameworks and procedural knowledge while simultaneously underpreparing educators on evidence-based academic methods (Brownell et al., 2010; König et al., 2012). Consequently, many educators, particularly those in inclusive classrooms, struggle to provide the kind of structured, skill-based instruction SWLD require (Husadani et al., 2021). Unfortunately, professional development (PD) implemented in schools does little to make up for or bridge this divide. Although framed around equity and inclusion, much of today's professional development (PD) appears to mainly focus on relational topics, trauma-informed care, and culturally responsive pedagogy without adequately addressing academic interventions that drive learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; National Education Association [NEA], n.d.). Hence, teachers may leave these sessions more attuned to classroom culture but still unprepared to deliver rigorous, differentiated instruction.

Moreover, inclusion, while essential for educational equity, often exacerbates the problem when not supported by meaningful instructional planning. General educators face the challenge of balancing individualized

supports with whole-class instruction, while special educators are frequently consumed by compliance responsibilities (McLeskey et al., 2006; McLeskey et al., 2011). Administrative systems such as the IEP and Germany's *Förderpläne* require significant documentation, further detracting from instructional delivery (Burow et al., 2020; Grünke et al., 2024; Klemm, 2015;Spiel et al., 2022).

When these efforts and programs are divorced from disciplinary learning, they consume time and resources without producing measurable academic benefits (Gomolla, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). The result is a well-intentioned but misaligned system, one that values process over outcomes, climate over cognition, and visibility over results. To serve all students, especially SWLD, schools must correct and change this course.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recentering Academic Instruction

To restore education's primary purpose of rigorous academic teaching, we propose the following comprehensive policy reforms. While by no means comprehension, these recommendations are grounded in comparative research and structured for practical application. They directly address the instructional needs of all students while placing a spotlight on the unique implications for SWLD. Additionally, these reforms begin to outline how educational leaders can realign school systems to prioritize and protect instructional time, reduce teacher overload, and fulfill legal responsibilities under IDEA.

Reestablishing the Academic Role of Teachers

The professional identity of teachers has undergone a profound transformation over the last 3 decades. What was once a role centered on academic expertise in a specific content area has now expanded into a complex portfolio of responsibilities, including behavior management, mental health support, diversity facilitation, and compliance monitoring (Lavian, 2014; Tyack et al., 1995). Although these evolving responsibilities reflect real, pressing school needs, they have gradually displaced the academic instruction time.

This displacement of instructional focus is not incidental since it signals a broader redefinition of what schools, and by extension, teachers, are expected to achieve. Academic growth is now frequently overshadowed by metrics such as climate surveys, behavioral referrals, and wellness participation (Schuler et al., 2018; Ryberg et al., 2020). While these indicators offer insights into school climate and student wellbeing, they need to augment, not replace, the core mission of education: academic learning. For SWLD, quality instruction time is not optional or ancillary; it is the very mechanism for delivering equity and legal entitlements.

At the heart of this misalignment lies a contradiction between accountability and autonomy. Teachers are held responsible for standardized

testing outcomes, yet they are often denied the professional latitude required to implement responsive, differentiated instruction. This contradiction is especially acute in special education, where rigid accountability models fail to reflect the developmental variability and growth-oriented progress of SWLD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2013; Grosche & Grünke, 2008; Grünke, 2007). The result is a narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy that undermines equity and effectiveness (Au, 2011).

Exacerbating the problem is the implementation of well-intentioned DEI initiatives as standalone supplemental programs rather than integrated elements of rigorous academic instruction. Teachers frequently report difficulty balancing these initiatives with curricular demands, especially when training and resources are inadequate or disconnected from content-area teaching (Ligocki, 2024). For SWLD, this delivery format often means cultural responsiveness is delivered as moral messaging rather than through inclusive, content-rich pedagogy tailored to diverse learners (Utley et al., 2011; Cartledge et al., 2008).

To correct this drift, reestablishing the academic role of teachers must begin with rethinking educator preparation. Teacher training programs in general and special education remain weighed down by sociological theory and compliance-focused coursework, often at the expense of instructional expertise (Zabel et al., 2002; Sleeter, 2012). In contrast, high-performing systems like Finland and Singapore emphasize deep subject knowledge, pedagogical precision, and extensive clinical practice grounded in evidence-based methods for their teachers (Chew, 2016; Sahlberg, 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Pre- and in-service training must be equally rigorous for all educators. Special education teachers should be taught intensive training in structured literacy, data-based individualization, content-area interventions, and behavioral strategies for students with a wide range of needs. Such skills are especially critical when working with SWLD, who benefit from highly structured, sequential, and scaffolded instruction. General educators, too, must be equipped with knowledge of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), collaborative practices, and scaffolding techniques to effectively teach SWLD in inclusive classrooms (McLeskey et al., 2017). Clinicals, field experiences, and student teaching experiences should prioritize intervention delivery in alignment with academic standards through co-teaching models and lesson design.

However, even the best preparation is insufficient if working conditions continue to pull teachers away from instruction. In the United States, special educators spend an estimated 10 to 20 hours per week on IEP-related documentation, which significantly impacts their instructional time (Bullard, 2018). In Germany, the *Förderpläne* system similarly prioritizes compliance over instructional collaboration, which leads to increased administrative burdens for teachers (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020).

Both examples illustrate a broader failure to align policy and practice around instruction; in effect, compliance has replaced pedagogy.

Reversing this trend will require targeted, systemic changes. First, school systems should be provided the funding to adopt technology platforms that streamline documentation and reduce redundancy. Tools like EasyIEP have demonstrated success in increasing procedural efficiency while enhancing collaboration (Public Consulting Group, n.d.). Second, administrative responsibilities must be strategically distributed. Paraprofessionals, case managers, and instructional coaches can assist with progress tracking and parent communication to provide special educators time for direct teaching (Lane et al., 2023; Rusch et al., 2019). Third, policymakers at the state and federal levels must revise compliance frameworks to ensure they focus on instructional impact. Data collection must be purposeful, actionable, and limited to indicators that improve student outcomes (Datnow & Park, 2019).

Ultimately, reestablishing the academic role of teachers requires schools to redefine professional excellence in terms of academic and instructional effectiveness. It calls for leadership that values academic instruction, not as one responsibility among many, but as the core of the profession. Until this shift occurs, the students most reliant on expert, intentional instruction, SWLD, will continue to be shortchanged by systems that prioritize everything but academic learning.

Creating and Funding Non-Academic Support Teams

Today, special education teachers are increasingly tasked with responsibilities in the classroom that go far beyond traditional "instructional work." This overextension is not simply a matter of increased workload; it represents a structural issue that undermines the core purpose of education: academic teaching. The evidence is abundant that when special educators are tasked with too much, they experience burnout and leave their positions, which results in a decrease in student continuity and instruction quality for SWLD (Bettini et al., 2020; Brunsting et al., 2014). The breakdown is not the failure of individual educators to manage their duties; it is the consequence of a lack of investment in the structures that can support teachers and students.

A possible solution to the problem is the integration of non-academic support teams into school staffing models (Iachini et al., 2016). These professionals, comprised of school psychologists, counselors, social workers, behavior interventionists, and community liaisons, can address non-instructional issues that usually steal teachers' time. Such support services can help special educators reclaim their place as academic instructors, provide evidence-based instruction, track progress, and modify interventions more effectively.

For SWLD, this focused instruction time is often the only path toward overcoming persistent academic difficulties. This solution is not merely a logistical

fix; it is a pedagogical necessity. Research has demonstrated that when schools provide dedicated non-instructional staff, students have better attendance, fewer behavioral problems, and better academic performance (Maier et al., 2017). Furthermore, schools with non-academic staff within a coordinated system (e.g., Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) experience improved student behavior and teacher effectiveness and retention (Russell, 2022). These improvements are especially critical in special education, where the high intensity of instruction and responsiveness can mean the difference between stagnation and progress.

National and international models further validate this approach. Full-Service Community Schools in the United States, characterized by the co-location of mental health, family engagement, and wraparound services, have been shown to lead to better student engagement and achievement (Dryfoos, 1994; Maier et al., 2017). The *Stadtteilmütter* program in Germany recruits trained community members to work in schools to assist immigrant families in education systems, which results in better student performance and improved relationships between schools and communities (Jähn & Sülzle, 2019). These models are not mere add-ons; they are structural innovations that make inclusive education possible by ensuring that teachers teach with specialists' support.

Furthermore, the absence of such teams only serves to widen systemic inequalities. Schools in low-income communities and communities of color, which also have a higher number of SWLD, are usually the most under resourced in terms of support staff (The Commonwealth Institute, 2019). This gap translates into continued achievement gaps, as educators in these schools cannot address the intersecting needs of their students without assistance (Freeman et al., 2023). Hence, access to non-academic support is not just a resource issue; it is an issue of equity in education.

Research has also indicated that non-academic programming, much of which non-academic support staff deliver, positively impacts student achievement and motivation (Fredricks et al., 2006). When teachers can plan, assess, and differentiate their instruction, all students benefit, particularly SWLD. A classic case of "putting the cart before the horse" occurs when institutions expect academic success to emerge without providing essential structural conditions for effective teaching. Schools need to recognize non-academic support teams as essential components that form the basis of an inclusive educational system that delivers effective results and promotes equity.

Replacing High-Stakes Testing with Formative Instructional Assessment

As national debates about accountability and educational equity intensify, one of the most pressing yet overlooked issues is the disproportionate impact of high-stakes standardized testing on SWLD; revealing a systemic

misalignment between what schools measure and what matters most for student learning. U.S. schools' heavy use of standardized tests with high stakes creates multiple documented adverse effects, not only for all students, but especially for SWLD (Au, 2011; Valli et al., 2007). These assessments, created for the uniform measurement of student achievement, prove ineffective in showing how students with disabilities learn and demonstrate knowledge.

The consequence of this misalignment extends beyond academics. Research has shown that SWLD face higher dropout rates, grade retention, and emotional distress because of high-stakes testing (Rußmann et al., 2024). Students who experience pressure to succeed on standardized tests tend to experience increased anxiety levels, which results in learning disengagement that simultaneously damages their motivation and self-assurance. This practice of test preparation prevents students, especially those with learning disabilities, from benefiting from broader educational opportunities that promote deep understanding and conceptual learning

Instead of high-stakes testing, formative assessment represents a flexible, student-centered approach that works well in inclusive learning environments. Tools such as performance tasks, running records, journals, exit slips, and student reflections serve as integral components of daily instruction by providing immediate and actionable feedback, as noted by Black and Wiliam (2009) and Heritage (2010). The effective deployment of formative assessments enables teachers to create personalized instruction while using student strengths to bridge learning gaps before they expand (Brookhart, 2013).

The advantages of formative assessment surpass standard academic measurement results. Research has demonstrated that these assessment methods boost student engagement and motivation together with self-regulation, especially among those who struggle with traditional testing formats (Shute, 2008; Clark, 2012). Furthermore, formative assessment's progress-based approach has been shown to develop persistence skills in SWLD who face intricate learning barriers (Gradient Learning, 2023), by providing opportunities to demonstrate knowledge through varied, scaffolded, and low-pressure assessments.

The world's top-performing educational systems prioritize teacher-led evaluations over high-stakes testing. For instance, Finland no longer uses national standardized tests due to shifting to classroom-based evaluations aligned with an inclusive curriculum (Sahlberg, 2021). Moreover, New Zealand's education system promotes culturally responsive evaluations that offer teachers and students greater flexibility in the learning process (Absolum et al., 2009). These countries demonstrate that educational rigor and equity can complement each other and that effective evaluative methods can support both. Additionally, New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education has shown positive outcomes by replacing traditional standardized tests with performance-

based projects (Marion & Leather, 2015). As a result, students in participating districts have matched or surpassed their peers on national tests, while teachers have reported instruction becoming more meaningful and better aligned.

Indeed, leaders need to demonstrate courageous leadership to implement this transition on a large scale. Educational administrators should emphasize and protect classroom instructional time from standardized testing requirements (Klemm, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While state policymakers must transform current accountability measures to incorporate various student learning indicators. (Data Quality Campaign, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2017). Prioritizing a shift toward instructional formative assessments represents a fundamental obligation to provide all students, especially SWLD, with effective, personalized, and balanced learning opportunities.

Streamlining Teacher Preparation

Despite longstanding policy efforts to enhance educational equity, the preparation of general and special education teachers remains fragmented and overly theoretical (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Korthagen et al., 2006). The unequal distribution between theoretical instruction and practical training prevents novice teachers from delivering evidence-based instructional content to their students with diverse learning needs (Brownell et al., 2005; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). Because of this, teacher preparation program (TPP) curriculum needs to change its approach to center on developing instructional competence for its students. This approach requires integrating content-specific pedagogy (e.g., explicit literacy instruction) with inquiry-based science methods and structured math approaches throughout the coursework and clinical training. Educational institutions should base their TPPs on evidence-based instructional frameworks to achieve consistent instructional alignment between classrooms and grade levels (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Studies of international educational systems have demonstrated that this approach represents a crucial transformation. For instance, TPPs in Finland and Singapore emphasize academic rigor through mandatory clinical apprenticeships and integrated theoretical foundations to clinical experiences. Specifically, Finnish educational institutions enforce master's degrees for all teaching professionals who must study research methods and instructional design as well as diagnostic assessment throughout their academic and fieldwork periods (Sahlberg, 2021). Moreover, TPPs in Singapore adopt a rigorous academic approach through their requirement of detailed in-classroom mentoring and reflection activities supervised by experienced educators (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Undergraduate reading instruction coursework mandated by recent legislative policies has produced measurable early literacy improvements, as documented by Fletcher et al. (2019). The dispersal of numerous standards

in TPPs often leads to decreased opportunities for practice-based knowledge development. Hence, German policy leaders have implemented measures to redistribute training credits from abstract educational theory toward subject-specific pedagogy, which better reflects actual classroom needs (Klemm, 2019).

General education teachers need essential training in the UDL guidelines, along with differentiation and scaffolding approaches. Furthermore, special educators need in-depth training in structured literacy instruction, content-area intervention methods, data-based individualization techniques, and behavioral support strategies. The introduction of teaching competencies to general education teachers happens in isolation from standard instructional frameworks, which leaves them unprepared to implement these skills in inclusive classrooms (Brownell et al., 2005; McLeskey et al., 2017).

The quality of clinical training represents an essential factor for improvement. Student teaching clinical practice must include co-teaching, collaborative lesson design, and step-by-step academic instruction rehearsal. Intensive embedded practicum experiences, where candidates work directly with students under expert supervision in programs, lead to more effective teacher preparation for evidence-based practice implementation. The combination of field-based training models has demonstrated promising results in the Netherlands and Norway because university-school partnerships allow theoretical and practical development to happen simultaneously (Stokke, 2020).

The reflective mentorship approach helps teachers develop their ability to assess and enhance their classroom instruction during actual teaching situations. Through structured coaching cycles, preservice teachers evaluate student responses while identifying instructional breakdowns to adjust their teaching practices, which remains critical when working with SWLD. Empirical evidence has identified that TPPs combining explicit instructional training with feedback loops produce teachers who possess the necessary skills to demonstrate confidence in serving diverse student populations (Szocik et al., 2024; Massey et al., 2023).

Transforming TPPs demands philosophical changes and fundamental structural alterations. Educational institutions must reduce program complexity by merging standards and redesigning coursework to develop core instructional competencies. The implementation of these changes can help prepare teachers to provide individualized instruction that serves all students while creating better educational outcomes.

Investing in Teacher Growth and Autonomy

Teacher quality is the most significant in-school factor influencing student achievement (Hattie, 2009), yet PD often prioritizes compliance over instructional mastery. This issue is particularly concerning for SWLD, who

require highly skilled instruction tailored to their learning profiles. Teachers must be supported as lifelong learners and empowered as instructional leaders if they are to meet the needs of all students. In countries with high-performing education systems, such as Finland and Japan, ongoing professional learning is embedded into the workday through lesson study, peer observation, and content-rich learning communities (Sahlberg, 2021; Lewis & Hurd, 2011). These practices ensure that teachers remain engaged with evolving pedagogical knowledge that includes innovation in inclusive instruction and evidence-based interventions for students facing unique learning barriers.

In the United States, initiatives like National Board Certification and "master teacher" career pathways provide a model for recognizing instructional expertise. These frameworks can and must be expanded to include specialized certifications in inclusive practices, intensive intervention, and collaboration across general and special education settings to improve instruction and reduce attrition (Billingsley et al., 2019).

Autonomy is another critical factor. Teachers, including special educators, must be trusted to make decisions about instructional strategies, pacing, and content modifications that serve diverse learners. When these educators are micromanaged through scripts, pacing guides, and inflexible curricula, instruction becomes less responsive and more mechanistic, another case of "putting the cart before the horse" (Narayanan et al., 2023).

Leaders must protect professional learning time, create cultures of collaborative inquiry, and align evaluation systems to prioritize instructional growth over bureaucratic compliance. School administrators must ensure that special education teachers have access to high-quality content training and that general education teachers are well-equipped to support SWLD (Pugach et al., 2024). Equipping all teachers with the tools, trust, and time to grow professionally is essential to advancing equity and academic excellence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Redesigning the School Day for Learning

The structure of the school day profoundly impacts what and how students learn. However, in many systems, the day is fragmented by frequent transitions, short instructional blocks, and non-academic interruptions that disrupt learning continuity (Farbman, 2015; Silva, 2007). For students with diverse learning profiles, including those with learning disabilities, who often require more processing time, repetition, and structured support, these interruptions are especially detrimental. Instructional coherence is critical to the acquisition and generalization of academic skills, particularly when students receive specially designed instruction aligned with IEP goals (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Block scheduling models offering 70–90-minute class periods are associated with higher academic achievement and deeper content engagement, particularly in reading, writing, and science (Zepeda & Mayers, 2006). These extended periods support differentiated instruction, small-group work, and the use of high-leverage practices such as modeling, guided practice, and corrective feedback, all essential for students with specific learning needs (Blass, 2002; McLeskey et al., 2017).

International examples highlight how the thoughtful redesigning of the school day can benefit SWLD. Germany's *Ganztagsschule* (full-day school) reforms extend the length of the school day to facilitate deeper academic engagement and offer more time for individualized support. However, studies have emphasized that without deliberate structuring, this added time risks being consumed by non-instructional activities that may not benefit students with learning challenges (Steinmann & Strietholt, 2018). In Finland, the national commitment to inclusive education has driven reforms toward more flexible, student-centered schedules that emphasize collaborative planning and classroom-based support, especially from special education teachers (Takala et al., 2009).

In the United States, co-teaching models have increasingly been integrated into block schedules that allow general and special education teachers to jointly plan and deliver instruction. When implemented with fidelity, co-teaching enhances instructional responsiveness, ensures accommodations are delivered in real time, and supports the academic and social integration of SWLD (Friend et al., 2010).

Another approach, extended learning time (ELT), provides additional instructional hours for core academic content, which can be crucial for struggling learners. Extended learning time programs that align with IEP goals and emphasize high-quality instruction, not just more time, have produced academic improvement in reading and math (The Education Trust, 2021). Furthermore, school leaders need to reduce unnecessary pullouts and minimize non-instructional testing blocks that fracture the school day. Importantly, embedded time for collaborative planning should be a structural feature of the school schedule. When co-teaching teams have protected time to co-plan, review data, and design instruction, they are more likely to meet the complex and individualized needs of SWLD (McLeskey et al., 2017).

However, simply adding minutes to the day without redesigning the instructional framework again represents "putting the cart before the horse" and may allow other topics besides academic instruction to be allocated to these minutes. Redesigning the school day is not simply about adding time; it is about repurposing time to reflect instructional priorities. When time structures align with the goal of deep academic learning, schools move closer

to providing equitable, high-quality education for all students, including those with disabilities.

Establishing National Commissions on Academic Instruction

National commissions dedicated to academic instruction trace their origins back to significant education reform efforts in the United States. The National Commission on Excellence in Education published "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, which exposed U.S. educational decline while demanding strict academic standards and evaluation mechanisms. The report identified instructional time, curriculum alignment, and pedagogical integrity as essential elements for achieving educational excellence. Moreover, the 2002 report "A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families" by the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education supported the implementation of results-oriented education with general education integration for students with disabilities through coordinated instructional enhancement.

These commissions function as protective bodies against initiative overload and mission drift to guarantee that instructional time, curriculum alignment, and pedagogical integrity remain the central priorities in educational settings. Consisting of educators, special education experts, researchers, curriculum specialist, and policy makers, these commissions, evaluate educational reforms holistically to protect instruction while ensuring equity to maintain instruction as the fundamental element of school achievement.

Both general and special education institutions currently devote their attention to administrative compliance monitoring and behavioral management instead of student academic requirements. This misalignment results in a systematic change where educational duration and academic rigor suffer from tasks that fail to boost student learning achievements. Hence, the creation of these commissions across nations can unite various educational policies with a shared understanding of academic excellence.Through a national commission in Germany, the country can protect inclusive education reform, content mastery, and disability inclusion specifically for SWLD who need adapted academic programs (Kellems et al., 2024). Furthermore, a new commission in the U.S. can work alongside existing assessment frameworks like the National Assessment of Educational Progress and IDEA to evaluate instructional coherence alongside content alignment and student achievement progress (McLeskey et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, these commissions need the authority to evaluate how educational reforms affect classroom instructional practices. Indeed, equitable initiatives often diminish direct instruction periods and create additional bureaucratic difficulties. When educational systems shift their focus, instructional quality suffers, and IEP implementation becomes inconsistent. Therefore, students with learning and other disabilities receive less challenging educational content (Wang et al., 1992).

Additionally, these commissions can maintain educational systems responsible for supporting teachers alongside their students and determine which new initiatives really benefit academic progress versus those that merely shift the core instructional elements. Given authority, these commissions can enhance educator and family voices, particularly among learning disability advocates, to protect instructional time while educational systems focus on meaningful learning achievements (Oakes et al., 2017).

Multiple current programs demonstrate support for creating national bodies that concentrate on academic instruction. For example, the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social-Emotional and Academic Development released its final report in 2019 to promote the combination of social-emotional and academic development throughout schools (Aspen Institute, 2019). Additionally, the Education Commission of the States uses six policy priorities to guide state leaders, including developing instructional quality and coherence as essential elements (Education Commission of the States, 2025). Moreover, the Philippines established the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) in 2022 to assess its education sector by reviewing foundational learning deficiencies while performing systemwide reforms (EDCOM II, 2025). The National Education Policy 2020 of India presents another transformation strategy for education that includes foundational literacy and numeracy alongside the creation of a National Education Commission to direct policy changes (Government of India, 2020). Hence, these modern educational movements have demonstrated worldwide that distinct organizations must monitor academic instruction to ensure that reforms focus on instruction quality and student learning results, particularly for SWLD.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The policy recommendations outlined in this paper reflect the urgent need to restore academic instruction as the central mission of education, particularly for SWLD, who are disproportionately affected by fragmented systems and diluted instructional priorities. The expansion of non-instructional duties has undermined teachers' capacity to deliver intensive, evidence-based instruction critical for these learners (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

This issue is not merely procedural; it is philosophical. Instructional time, especially when required for individualized, high-leverage teaching, is too often sacrificed to administrative, behavioral, and compliance-driven tasks. Such misalignment places the system at odds with the very students it seeks to support, particularly SWLD (Swanson et al., 1998; Vaughn et al., 2021). The idiom of "putting the cart before the horse" aptly describes this dynamic, where

policy initiatives precede pedagogical capacity and sideline core instruction (Sailor et al., 2020).

To address this issue, reform efforts must scaffold academic instruction across all levels of the system. Teacher preparation must prioritize structured literacy, numeracy, and content-specific pedagogy aligned with practices such as data-based individualization (Gersten et al., 2009). School leaders must protect instructional time and ensure fidelity to high-quality teaching strategies (McLeskey et al., 2017). Accountability systems must shift from procedural compliance to outcomes that reflect access to and engagement with grade-level academic content.

Though barriers remain (e.g., funding constraints, competing initiatives, and bureaucratic inertia), coherent, equity-driven reform is possible. International exemplars like Finland and Ontario show that systems built on instructional integrity, rather than reactive mandates, can elevate teacher practice and student achievement (Sahlberg, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2006).

Conclusion

Academic instruction must be reclaimed as the core purpose of schooling, particularly for SWLD, for whom access to rigorous, evidence-based teaching is not optional but essential. Nevertheless, in general and special education, academic instruction has been subordinated to bureaucratic, behavioral, and administrative tasks. This systemic inversion has compromised learning outcomes, diluted teacher roles, and most severely impacted students who rely on intensive, individualized instruction to succeed, including those with learning disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2014; McLeskey et al., 2017). Hence, reforms must prioritize academic access and intensity, ensure teacher autonomy, and build school systems around the delivery of meaningful instruction (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021; Hattie, 2009).

Most importantly, all education stakeholders must reaffirm that academic learning is the main objective of schooling. It is the foundation on which all other goals, equity, engagement, and wellbeing are built. When systems remember that the horse (i.e., instruction) must lead the cart (i.e., everything else), the full promise of public education, including its commitments under IDEA, can finally be realized.

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