



CASE STUDY

2026

Building sustainable special education systems.

A DISTRICT-LEVEL PARTNERSHIP

How Burlington School District and The Ability Challenge worked together across four school years and three leadership transitions to build a special education program that runs on its own.

Burlington School District • Burlington, Vermont

THE STORY BEGINS

A district in transition meets a partner with institutional memory.

When Kellie Klasen arrived at Burlington School District in late 2023, she stepped into a special education department in transition. Leadership was changing, compliance monitoring was overdue, and IEP quality was inconsistent across the district — resulting in uneven experiences for students with disabilities. At the time, one person was overseeing special education for all schools.

Klasen soon assumed the role of Executive Director of Student Support Services, a newly elevated position reporting directly to the superintendent. Her charge was clear and complex: rebuild the district’s special education systems to ensure students received consistent, high-quality support, while also addressing compliance, engaging the school board, and advancing key strategic priorities.

Luckily, this work did not start from scratch. The Ability Challenge (ABC) had already launched a partnership with the district in SY 2021–22, beginning with a comprehensive needs assessment aligned to the **THRIVE Framework** — a research-based diagnostic spanning culture, instruction, mandates, systems, and family engagement. That foundation — data, shared language, and institutional memory — proved critical as leadership transitioned and the work moved into implementation.



AT A GLANCE

DISTRICT	Burlington School District
LOCATION	Burlington, Vermont
ENGAGEMENT	2021 – 2025
STAGE	Internal sustainability

FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

“At Burlington School District, transforming special education is a priority that requires both structural support and the right partners. Since 2021, The Ability Challenge has been with us every step of the way, helping us build the foundation our students deserve. We still have a road ahead of us to ensure every student is challenged, empowered and engaged, but I am proud of the progress we’ve made and the strong path we are on.”

TOM FLANNAGAN

Superintendent, Burlington School District

THE STARTING POINT

Vermont’s largest city. Ten schools. One person overseeing special education.

Burlington School District serves approximately 3,500 students across ten schools in Vermont’s largest city. Twenty-three percent of students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The district is notably diverse for northern New England, with 40% of students identifying as members of the global majority — Black, Indigenous, and other people of color — alongside 45 languages spoken, 17% of students receiving English Learner services, and more than half qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

When ABC first engaged with the district during the COVID-19 pandemic, several systemic challenges had compounded: a single director overseeing special education across all buildings, targeted monitoring by the state Agency of Education (AOE), IEPs that varied widely in quality, and no consistent district-level expectations for special education programming.

ABC’s needs assessment, aligned to the THRIVE Framework, identified three strategic shifts the district could make to improve outcomes for students with disabilities:

A SHIFT
Human Capital
 Culture of Inclusion · Equitable Systems

BEFORE
 A separate, siloed, and variable staff experience and culture.

THE MOVE TOWARD
 A cohesive, aligned culture where staff have clear roles, responsibilities, and shared expectations for special education.

B SHIFT
Programming
 Student-Centered Instruction · Special Ed Mandates

BEFORE
 Instructional supports and services that vary in quality and are driven primarily by adult needs.

THE MOVE TOWARD
 High-quality instruction and services aligned to student needs, delivered by staff with the necessary mindsets, skills, and knowledge.

C SHIFT
Experience of Students with Disabilities
 All THRIVE Elements

BEFORE
 Student experience highly dependent upon the quality of each case manager and the ability of the student’s family to advocate for services.

THE MOVE TOWARD
 Experience where all students feel safe, supported, appropriately challenged, and ready for post-secondary educational and/or career success.

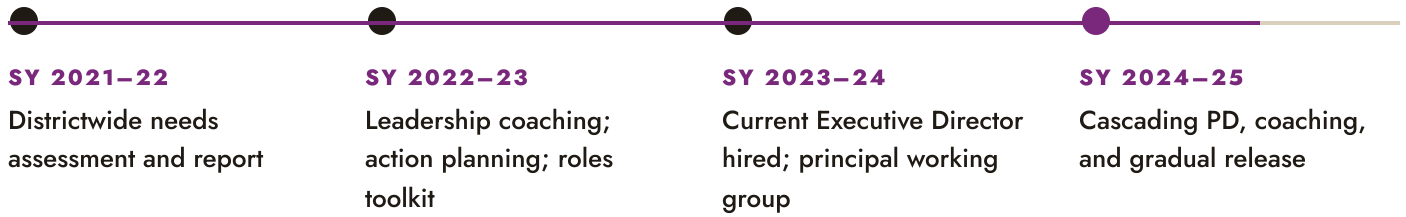
THE PARTNERSHIP

Four years. Three leadership transitions. One throughline.



Burlington partnered with ABC across four school years (2021–2025) and three leadership transitions. The engagement evolved from an initial diagnostic through increasingly embedded support — reflecting ABC’s approach of starting with assessment, building alongside the team, and releasing when the systems are strong enough to stand on their own. The current Executive Director, Kellie Klasen, started in SY 2023–24. That’s when the work shifted to implementation, with ABC serving three interconnected roles:

TIMELINE · 2021 → 2025



A SHARED VISION

Out of the diagnostic and the strategic shifts, district leaders, school staff, families, and ABC came together to articulate a shared vision for what special education in Burlington should look like. That vision became the north star for every decision that followed:

“ Burlington School District envisions a special education program that breaks down ableist and racist systems of inequity, creating instead a district that prepares all students, regardless of need, to be their most complete selves. We expect brilliance from all of our students and support them to get where they want to go. Our special education program is: differentiated, safe, accessible, inclusive, active, supportive, consistent, appropriately challenging, and engaging.

THREE ROLES ABC PLAYED

How a partner redesigns the system.

As Klasen rebuilt the special education department, ABC played three distinct but connected roles — shifting emphasis as the district's needs evolved from strategy to execution to sustained capacity.

01

Strategic Thought Partner

As the district restructured from a single director to an executive director supported by three associate directors, ABC helped Klasen think through problems, weigh options, and develop strategy.

“ABC helped me identify things that were strengths and weaknesses of the district. ABC was both a sounding board and a thought partner to just think things through.”

— KELLIE KLASEN

02

Capacity Builder

ABC worked shoulder-to-shoulder with Kellie and others to address the strategic shifts the district needed to make. A comprehensive action plan served as a unifying roadmap. ABC added capacity by providing ongoing coaching and support for special education leaders and principals. The creation of a roles and responsibilities toolkit clarified team structures. Professional learning communities (PLCs) for special educators and leaders strengthened collective knowledge of special education mandates. A principal working group developed a multi-year plan to strengthen the continuum of services within the district.

03

Extension of the Team

With a lean central office, Burlington needed a partner who could help carry the work forward. ABC filled critical capacity gaps by developing training content, synthesizing data, preparing presentations, and building tools that the district did not have the time or resources to create.

“ABC has the ability to do small, medium, or large-sized projects with data, technology, slides — all that kind of stuff that just takes time. They were an extension of me and us.”

— KELLIE KLASEN

WHAT CHANGED

From compliance-driven to systems-driven.

Over the course of the partnership, Burlington shifted from a reactive, compliance-oriented special education program to a proactive, systems-driven department with distributed leadership and growing capacity at every level.

STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Structural Transformation

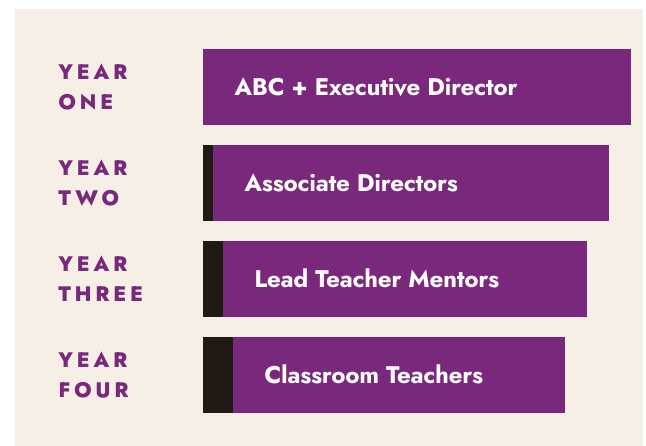
The district reorganized from a single director to an Executive Director with three Associate Directors covering primary, secondary, and health/wellness. After entering targeted monitoring with zeros across all AOE indicators, the team systematically resolved every compliance area. The adoption of EdDoc for IEP management gave the district real-time compliance visibility.

“When I first started, we had red dots everywhere. I don’t have them anymore, because people know we will address it. So now it doesn’t happen.”
 — KELLIE KLASSEN

A CASCADING MODEL

A Cascading Model for Change

The cultural shift was deliberate and sequential. ABC trained district leaders, who trained associate directors, who led PLCs for special education lead teacher mentors, who then supported classroom teachers. Each layer absorbed the work for roughly a year before passing it to the next.



EVIDENCE OF GENERALIZATION

The capacity is travelling.

The strongest indicator that systems change is taking root is when educators begin solving problems independently. At Burlington, this is happening across every level:

CLASSROOM INNOVATION

THRIVE Element 4 · Equitable Systems

The current Burlington High School principal is generating equity-driven innovations that the central office didn't anticipate. They launched a co-taught driver's education class with a dedicated vehicle for students with disabilities and multilingual learners who couldn't otherwise access the program. She also introduced a credit-bearing social communication class that meets IEP service minutes while providing structured, inclusive instruction, with an executive functioning course in development.

"They're starting to generalize their learning. I can tell from those examples that they're getting it." — **KELLIE KLASSEN**

CENTRAL OFFICE

THRIVE Element 3 · Special Education Mandates

Burlington's associate directors identified that "high-quality IEP" meant different things across the system. Using ABC's tools and frameworks, they aligned expectations through ongoing professional development, established common quality indicators, and embedded direct support within IEP meetings. The associate directors and school-based special education lead mentors have taken the support, made it their own, and are continuing to provide consistent feedback across all case managers.

SCHOOL CULTURE

THRIVE Element 1 · Culture of Inclusion

A school leader addressed persistent reading proficiency gaps by redesigning both student and staff structures. The team implemented a student advisory model to strengthen belonging and restructured PLC time to support meaningful collaboration among general educators, special educators, and ELL teachers. As a result, instruction is increasingly coordinated and responsive, with educators working together to remove barriers and expand access for all learners.

RESULTS

2% →
18%

ELA proficiency for students with disabilities, 2022–2025.

During the partnership, Burlington adopted ARC Core, a science of reading-aligned literacy curriculum. When a high-quality curriculum and systems-building happen in parallel, the impact compounds — teachers have both the instructional materials and the inclusive systems to deliver them effectively.

IEP QUALITY AUDIT

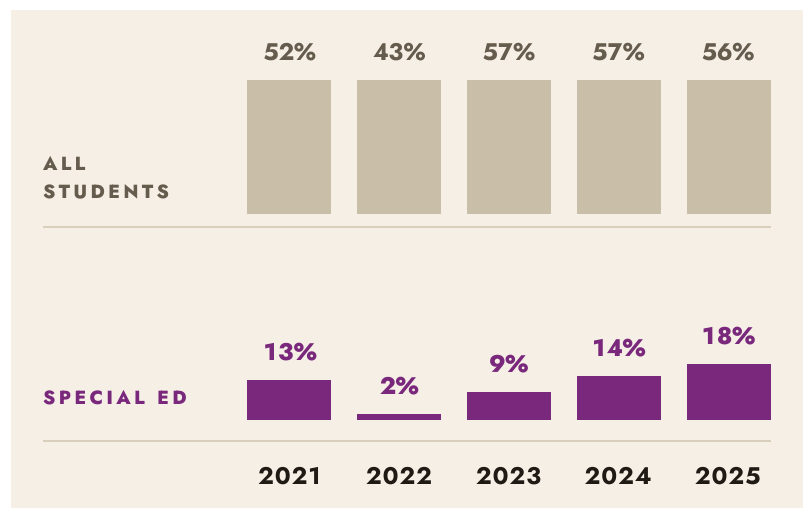
ABC’s IEP Quality Audit scored a sample of IEPs against eight quality indicators each year. Starting from a low baseline, scores improved across every metric over two years — with the largest gains in areas the district had targeted first.

Related Services	+143%
Support Services	+122%
Present Levels	+63%
Placement Decisions	+39%
Overall Quality	+67%

Relative improvement in average IEP scores from 2023 to 2025. Larger gains reflect a lower starting point.

STATE ASSESSMENT TRAJECTORY

ELA Proficiency · % at/above



Math Proficiency

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
All Students	40%	40%	48%	39%	39%
Special Ed	10%	6%	11%	5%	6%

Math proficiency for students with disabilities has hovered between 5–11%. A comparable math curriculum shift has not yet occurred — reinforcing that systems infrastructure produces the strongest student outcomes when paired with high-quality instructional materials.

KEY LESSONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

Three lessons that apply beyond Burlington.

1**Systems change requires a champion with authority.**

The elevation from director to executive director — with a seat at the superintendent’s table — was a critical structural decision. Combined with a leader who had the skills and experience to execute, this shift brought stability in staffing and expectations for the entire district.

“You need a leader with the ability to make the change. You can’t deliver systems change without that.”

— KELLIE KLASEN

2**Build systems, not just individual capacity.**

Burlington built durable structures — PLCs, compliance trackers, roles frameworks — that survive personnel changes. The systems ABC helped create are now run entirely by the district’s own team. When leaders take ABC’s frameworks, make them their own, and achieve measurable results — that’s the goal.

3**Cascade deliberately.**

Each organizational level absorbed the work before passing it on. This pacing created genuine competence — not just awareness — at every level. It’s slower than pushing information to everyone at once, but it’s the reason the work persists.

WHAT COMES NEXT FOR BURLINGTON

The systems are ready to carry the work forward.

The signs of sustainability are everywhere. Klasen is intentionally preparing the special education department to thrive without her, and the systems she and ABC built are now running on their own. Her associate directors lead professional learning sessions independently, designing and facilitating PD without ABC scaffolding or central-office prompting. Both are pursuing administrative certificates — building the leadership pipeline that will carry the work into Burlington’s next chapter.

Building leaders are generating their own solutions to school-level problems, no longer waiting for direction from the central office. The compliance infrastructure has matured to the point where real-time IEP visibility through EdDoc keeps the district ahead of state monitoring rather than reacting to it. The structures that once required ABC’s active partnership now operate as part of the district’s own operating system.

ABC’s role is shifting accordingly. After four years of strategic partnership through three superintendent transitions, the work has reached a stage where Burlington increasingly owns it — and that, rather than ongoing dependence, is the measure of a successful systems-change engagement.



“
 One day, I’m not going to be me anymore. Somebody else needs to be ready. We don’t want to be the keepers of all the information — we want to give as much opportunity and experience as possible, year to year.
 — KELLIE KLASEN
 Executive Director, Student Support Services



WHO WE ARE

ABC partners with schools and districts to build world-class special education.

The Ability Challenge (ABC) is a national nonprofit organization committed to transforming outcomes for students with disabilities. ABC works alongside school district leaders to build effective, inclusive learning communities — combining systems-level change with classroom-level impact.

Our approach is grounded in the THRIVE Framework, a research-based model that helps districts diagnose where they are, identify what to shift, and build the durable systems that outlast leadership transitions.

ABC exists to empower every student — especially the 1 in 5 with learning differences — to thrive.

OUR MISSION

To build effective, inclusive learning communities where every student — especially those with learning differences — can thrive.

HOW WE WORK

Diagnose with the THRIVE Framework. Build the systems leaders need. Step back as districts take ownership.

WHAT WE DO

Needs assessments, strategic planning, capacity building, IEP quality audits, and embedded coaching.

WHO WE SERVE

School districts, central-office leaders, building administrators, and special education teams nationwide.

WHY IT MATTERS

1 in 5 students has a learning difference. Every district has the potential to serve them well.

Ready to build sustainable special education systems in your district?

Let's talk about what's possible. Visit theabilitychallenge.org to start a conversation.

[THEABILITYCHALLENGE.ORG](https://theabilitychallenge.org) →

