

A Frequently Ignored Truth: Pull-Out Is the Distraction



Pull-out is often treated as the go-to solution when a student is distracted or because adults feel the student is pulling others off task. This handout explains why pull-out can actually create distraction, and what leaders should expect teams to try first to protect access to instruction.

TRANSITIONS ARE “COGNITIVELY” EXPENSIVE

For students with attention, executive functioning, or regulation challenges, pull-out requires:

- Stopping instruction mid-lesson
- Packing up
- Moving locations
- Re-orienting and re-engaging

The transition itself can be more distracting than staying in class.

And the cost isn't just time. Every transition requires students to restart their cognitive work: remembering what they were doing, shifting attention, managing uncertainty, and re-entering instruction already in motion.

RESOURCE ROOMS ARE OFTEN HIGH-DISTRACTION ENVIRONMENTS

Contrary to common belief, resource rooms aren't “quiet rooms.” They often include frequent movement, overlapping instruction, and constant redirection, conditions that can increase distraction for many students.

- Students coming and going on different schedules
- Multiple groups working on different goals at the same time
- Frequent interruptions (staff, students, transitions)
- High levels of adult talk, prompting, and redirection

THE “QUIET ROOM” ASSUMPTION IS OFTEN A MYTH

Separate settings are often justified as “distraction-free,” but that belief is frequently based on intention—not reality.

- Separate classrooms were not consistently calmer, quieter, or more structured
- Students were sometimes placed in environments with limited structure, limited meaningful instruction, and frequent disruptions
- Adults often relied heavily on management strategies to keep students compliant rather than engaged in instruction

So the question for leaders becomes:

If the student is distractible, why would we move them into a setting that may include more interruptions, less predictable instruction, and fewer natural learning cues?

SEPARATE SETTINGS CAN INCREASE ADULT MANAGEMENT (NOT STUDENT REGULATION)

In separate environments, “regulation” can look improved—but may actually reflect:

- closer adult control
- fewer academic expectations
- reduced peer interaction demands
- compliance-based behavior management

The same article documents that some self-contained classrooms relied on intensive behavior management approaches, including threats of time-out and restraint, and the use of seclusion/restraint practices in ways that raise serious concerns.

This matters because **adult-managed calm is not the same as student self-regulation**—and it rarely transfers back to general education settings.

INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY IS NOT GUARANTEED

Another frequently ignored reality: separate settings do not automatically provide stronger instruction.

In self-contained settings instruction is often disconnected from grade-level curriculum and lacks meaningful, standards-aligned learning opportunities. Even more concerning, specialized instruction is not consistently delivered by highly trained staff—and in some settings, paraprofessionals provide much of the instruction without adequate preparation.

So removal does not guarantee:

- better teaching
- better pacing
- better curriculum access
- better outcomes

WHAT MUST BE TRIED BEFORE PULL-OUT IS CONSIDERED

Administrators should expect teams to document attempts such as:

- Instructional redesign (task length, clarity, relevance)
- Environmental supports (seating, visual boundaries, noise management)
- Explicit instruction in attention and regulation strategies
- Adult proximity, co-teaching, or coaching support
- Peer-mediated strategies
- Brief, in-class regulation supports that return students to learning

If these have not been explored, placement discussions are premature.

GROUNDING IN WHY WE ARE NOT PULLING OUT

1. Clarifying

- *“When we say ‘too distracted,’ let’s be specific about what’s happening and when — because distraction alone isn’t a reason to remove a student from instruction.”*
- *“Let’s define what we mean by ‘distracted’—what does it look like, how often is it happening, and during which parts of instruction? That information should drive supports, not removal.”*

2. Generalization

- *“If the skill needs to show up in the classroom, removing the student from that setting actually works against the goal.”*
- *“If we want the student to succeed in the general education setting, then we have to build the skill in that setting—with supports—rather than practicing it somewhere else.”*

3. Access

- *“Before we talk about pull-out, we need to be clear about what supports we’ve already implemented to maintain access in general education.”*
- *“Our first responsibility is protecting access to instruction. Before we consider pull-out, we need to confirm we’ve used in-class supports that allow the student to stay engaged with peers and grade-level learning.”*

4. Design

- *“Disengagement usually points to an instructional or environmental mismatch — not a need to leave the classroom.”*
- *“When a student disengages, it’s usually feedback about the task, the environment, or the support—not proof they need a different placement.”*

5. Instructional Integrity

- *“If the task is unclear, too long, or mismatched, pulling the student out doesn’t fix the problem — it avoids it.”*
- *“Pull-out doesn’t solve unclear instruction or mismatched expectations. We need to strengthen the lesson design and supports first—then evaluate the student’s response.”*

IS YOUR CLASSROOM FILLED WITH STUDENTS WHO FLEE, FREEZE, OR JUST CAN'T FOCUS? WHAT IF THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO LEAVE THE ROOM TO RESET?

GET THE TOOL BOX

take a break from taking breaks.

