



Meeting the needs of every single child, including those with disabilities, is an equity imperative. It is vital work and also complex work.

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CALL TO ACTION

Frederick Brown

TO SUPPORT ALL STUDENTS' NEEDS, TEACHERS MUST BE CONSTANTLY LEARNING

When parents send their children to school, they want them to be cared for and educated as the unique individuals they are, regardless of whether they have an intellectual or physical disability, are multilingual learners, are still struggling to recover from pandemic setbacks, want extra academic enrichment, or face any number of challenges. And they expect their children will be seen and valued, regardless of their cultural background, race, class, disabilities, or life experiences.

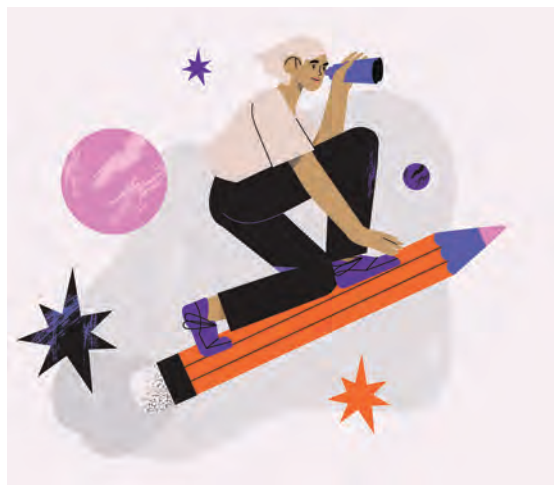
U.S. schools serve more than 7 million students with disabilities, making up about 15% of the total student population (Schaeffer, 2023). That percentage has nearly doubled since the National Center for Education Statistics began tracking it in 1976, after the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (NCES, 2023). The increase is surely due, in part, to improved identification and recognition that students have varied needs that all deserve support.

Meeting the needs of every single child, including those with disabilities, is an equity imperative. It is vital work and also complex work. I know this firsthand. My godson is a childhood cancer survivor, and his battle left him with a number of physical challenges that required a 504 plan. His mother and I noticed a stark difference among his teachers in how they adjusted their lessons and classroom practices to meet his specific needs. He thrived in classrooms where teachers understood the importance of focusing on his strengths. But not all teachers did.

To support all students' varied needs, teachers must be constantly learning — about the latest research on the brain and instruction, about each and every child's challenges and strengths, and how to make high-quality instruction accessible to all students using a range of tools and methods. This means that teachers' learning and growth matter because they are essential for students' learning and growth. I suspect that the teachers who helped my godson thrive had opportunities to learn about and continually improve their practices for and with students with disabilities. And I'll always believe that effective professional learning and leadership could have significantly benefited those teachers whose practices didn't support his needs.

A systemwide commitment to high-quality professional learning is the best route to ensure educational equity for students with disabilities and *all* students. Learning Forward defines equity as the outcome of educator practices that respect and nurture all aspects of each and every student's identity rather than treat them as barriers to learning. Equity means every student has what they need to succeed — pure and simple.

Fifty years ago, schools did not have IEPs (individualized education programs) or 504 plans to formalize plans to support students with disabilities. Systems and frameworks like Universal Design for Learning and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support have only come into existence in



the last three or four decades. The neuroscience of reading and reading disabilities has expanded greatly in the last 20 years, and states are still at varied stages of implementing early literacy screening. As developments like these have evolved, and as they continue to evolve into the future, one thing is constant: Educators need opportunities and resources to learn about them, implement them, and ensure that students are receiving the best we have to offer.

This is why professional learning is essential. It is a critical lever to achieve equity and success for all students. This connection between educator professional learning and student learning is vital but often doesn't get its due. That's why I make it a priority to be explicit about Learning Forward's work championing equitable professional learning. It's time for everyone to get on the same page about supporting teachers, instructional staff, and leaders so that every child learns, regardless of their unique needs.

Schools ensure success for every student when education leaders create, support, sustain, and advocate for coherent systems and programs that connect effective adult learning with equitable student outcomes. That includes, for example, making sure that every teacher is knowledgeable

about best practices for teaching reading and is able to implement the school's plan for learning recovery at all levels of students' mastery. It also includes making sure that every teacher is knowledgeable about supporting students with disabilities because most children with disabilities are served in general education settings, and research shows that students with disabilities show academic gains when they spend 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms (Cole et al., 2022).

To fulfill its potential and achieve equity, we believe that professional learning must be guided by key principles grounded in research and informed by best practices. We embody these principles through Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, which inform the entirety of our work. Our three equity standards emphasize the importance of building on students' assets; understanding the connection between students' selves, identities, and learning; seeing the connection among social, emotional, physical, and academic aspects of learning; recognizing the impacts of ableism and other -isms; and, in short, understanding and valuing students holistically (Learning Forward, 2022).

In the standards and elsewhere, we say that equity is at the heart of

our work. What that means is that we're here for each and every student, not for some or most, and we help educators put that commitment into action. It means we help them to see and honor every child's unique gifts, strengths, and backgrounds. It means we help them build schools that make space for everyone, where everyone learns and everyone succeeds. It means every educator has access to effective professional learning so they can be at their best for their students.

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