Inclusive schools ensure students have access to the same educational opportunities and resources, regardless of their individual abilities or differences. This Spotlight will help you learn about negative treatment that LGBTQ+ students experience in school; discover how unified sports can help all students feel valued and supported; examine how districts can create more inclusive environments for immigrant students and their families; and more.

**EDITOR’S NOTE**

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Inclusive Teachers Must Be ‘Asset-Based Believers’

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Student-teacher Olivia Vazquez, left, speaks with a student at the Eliza B. Kirkbride School in Philadelphia on Oct. 20. Vazquez hopes to make sure immigrant students arriving in the city have a more supportive experience in school than she did growing up.
During the pandemic, school remained a hostile place for LGBTQ students. Rates of bullying and harassment stayed consistent from previous years, but supports such as gay-straight alliances, inclusive curriculum, policies, and supportive educators dwindled.

That’s according to the National School Climate Survey by the research and advocacy group GLSEN, released earlier this month. The biennial survey was administered online to more than 22,000 LGBTQ students across the country during the 2020-21 school year.

Over the past decade, there was a steady decline in homophobic remarks, harassment, and bullying of LGBTQ students for their gender identities, their sexual orientation, or other characteristics, according to past survey results. This year, that decline stagnated, according to Joseph Kosciw, the director of research for GLSEN.

An unusual consequence of hybrid education in the pandemic was that online learning made attending school safer for LGBTQ students who did not have to face in-person harassment in hallways, bathrooms, and locker rooms. But the survey respondents also said they lost out on peer support, which is an important element to fostering a sense of community, Kosciw said.

Here are some of the numbers and key findings about school safety, verbal and physical harassment, and support in schools based on the 2020-21 report.

### School safety, verbal and physical harassment

More than 68 percent of LGBTQ students said they felt unsafe in school because of hostility to at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics, for example, their gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation.

Seventy-six percent were verbally harassed because of their identity; 31 percent were physically harassed, for example, by being pushed or shoved. More than 12 percent were physically assaulted, for example, punched, kicked or injured with a weapon.

And more than half of students experienced sexual harassment, such as unwanted touching or sexual remarks made by other students.

Homophobic slurs also remained common in school, and contributed to the distress LGBTQ students felt around their peers. Nearly all LGBTQ students—97 percent—heard “gay” used in a negative way at school. Almost 90 percent heard other types of homophobic slurs. Almost 93 percent heard negative comments about their gender expression, such as people stating that they didn’t act “masculine enough” or “feminine enough,” and 83 percent heard insults against trans people.

Because of the bullying and harassment, 40 percent of LGBTQ students said they avoided school bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education or gym classes. Almost 79 percent avoided school functions or extracurricular activities because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. Finally, 32 percent of LGBTQ students who responded to the survey said they had missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

Adult staff also contributed to this hostile environment, the survey found. Fifty-eight percent of LGBTQ students said they had heard homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff members.

“Fifty-eight percent of LGBTQ students said they had heard homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff members.”

### What School Is Like for LGBTQ Students by the Numbers

Eesha Pendharkar
when they heard other students verbally hara
rassing LGBTQ students.

Lack of supports

More than a third of LGBTQ students—almost 35 percent—said that their school had an active GSA or similarly supportive student club in the 2020–2021 academic year. Students in in-school-only learning environments were less likely to have a GSA available than those in online-only or hybrid learning environments, the report found.

Those figures represent a significant drop from previous years, when more than half of LGBTQ students had reported having a GSA at school.

Inclusive lessons on LGBTQ topics were also not common. More than 71 percent of survey respondents said their classes did not include any LGBTQ topics.

The number of supportive school personnel was also lower in 2021 compared to the period between 2013 and 2019.

While 96 percent of LGBTQ students could identify at least one supportive staff member at their school, only 23.7 percent reported that their school administration was “somewhat or very supportive” of LGBTQ students.

Anti-bullying policies, another tool of support, lacked specificity to protect students based on their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Only 12 percent of students reported that their school had a comprehensive policy that specifically prevents bullying based on both sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, and only 8.2 percent of LGBTQ students reported that their school or district had official policies or guidelines to support transgender or nonbinary students.

The report also found that having any of these supports in place was linked to decreased verbal harassment.

Additional Resource

To view the charts that accompany this article, click here.

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School Safety and LGBTQ Students

Percentage of students that felt unsafe, avoided activities and changed schools over the past decade, according to GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey.

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<tr>
<td>Students that avoided bathrooms or locker rooms</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<td>Students that avoided Extracurriculars</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td>Students that changed schools because of safety concerns</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>Students that felt unsafe because of their gender expression</td>
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<td>Students that felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students that missed at least one day because they felt unsafe</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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SOURCE: GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey
Data visualization by Eesha Pendharkar
Why a Trans Student and Her Mom Are Fighting Their District's Anti-LGBTQ Policies

By Eesha Pendharkar

When Lily Freeman was in 5th grade in the Central Bucks School District in Pennsylvania, she was revealing her gender identity to her family. When her parents told her teacher about Lily’s struggle, the teacher suggested Alex Gino’s book Melissa (previously called George), an award-winning novel about a trans 4th grader, as a resource for Lily and her family.

The gesture and the visibility the book provided was valuable to the family, said Lily’s mom, Mindy Freeman. Two years later, Lily’s social studies teacher offered books about LGBTQ people on his classroom shelves, making it easier for Lily’s classmates to learn about her experience and that of her community, Mindy Freeman said.

“We were working with the school district to help them understand trans identities, and the difference between orientation and gender identity, because Lily was bullied in elementary school, before she had socially transitioned,” she said. “So she wanted to help the younger generation of kids, so that they didn’t have to go through what she went through. The school wasn’t perfect, but before the pandemic, more people were listening.”

However, this year, after parents complained against commonly banned books about LGBTQ characters or people of color, such as Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison, Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe, and The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, and new school board members were elected, the school environment became much worse for LGBTQ and specifically trans students, including Lily, who is now 16.

In the last few months, Bucks County passed two vaguely worded policies about library books and instructional materials banning “sexual content.” The policies were passed in response to parents complaints’ about books like Gender Queer and The Bluest Eye.

That’s just one part of what the American Civil Liberties Union describes as a “hostile environment” for LGBTQ students in the Central Bucks school district according to a lawsuit filed last week that alleges the district has violated Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The district has issued directives to remove Pride flags from classrooms, according to the lawsuit. Some school administrators have directed their staff to only use students’ names and pronouns as they appear in the school databases and to reach out to parents if students ask to be identified differently and have punished employees who have supported LGBTQ students and spoken out against the anti-LGBTQ environment the district is creating, according to the lawsuit.

District disputes allegations

The Central Bucks district issued a statement on its website saying its library policy is not designed to remove books from libraries, should not be construed as a book ban, and that all books containing sexual content will not automatically be removed.

“It’s important to emphasize at the outset that the board, alongside administration, faculty, and staff, begins its work in all cases with the premise that every single student in Central Bucks Schools deserves to be seen, heard, cared for, included, accepted, respected, loved and, most especially, educated,” the statement by Superintendent Abram Lucabaugh and Board of Directors President Dana Hunter says.

“Our students also deserve access to the great diversity of ideas that are part of the human experience,” the statement goes on. “That is a tremendous responsibility—one that we deeply embrace and share with the parents of the district, and one that extends to our school libraries.”

Hunter also addressed the ACLU lawsuit at the Oct. 11 board meeting, calling on the organization to release the redacted names of the teachers, students, and parents who shared their stories about Bucks County in the lawsuit, saying the anonymity “makes it impossible for our administrators, school counselors, and teachers to do the critical work of connecting with these unnamed individuals to intervene and address any possible bullying
or problematic situations, to activate support and resources, and to implement corrective actions with the goal of bringing about positive change.”

But because of these policies, teachers have been self-censoring and removing books from their classroom libraries preemptively to avoid punitive action, Lily said. The ACLU lawsuit also describes several instances of teachers being told to or deciding on their own to remove classroom library materials after the policies were passed.

As these policies have been unveiled at school board meetings, Lily has been speaking out at press conferences and meetings against book bans and other anti-trans measures for months, but she doesn’t feel like her voice is being heard by the district anymore.

“Students have been speaking at school board meetings for so long now, being against this policy” Lily said. “And still they have put it into effect and are continuing to put scary policies into effect.”

Lily has started an Instagram page called Project Uncensored, where she argues that these books bring positivity to LGBTQ students’ lives. Through the account, she shares videos and stories from other students who are also advocating against censorship in school libraries.

“These books are mirrors, [LGBTQ students] can see themselves and they can find comfort, but also for other people, they can be windows into and other people’s lives and experiences,” Lily said. “And I really think that education is so key, because if you’re not educated about this stuff, then that leads to hate.”

She also wrote an op-ed for the Philadelphia Inquirer, explaining she feels less safe at school in light of these policies and bemoans the lack of student allyship.

LGBTQ students elsewhere take a stand

“She shouldn’t have to be focusing her time fending off these bigoted attacks on her right to see herself in a book in her school library,” said Michael Rady, senior education programs manager of GLSEN, a national advocacy group.

“When students’ existence is challenged in schools, many students will take it upon themselves,” he said, “to defend their own rights and to share their own stories.”

LGBTQ students in particular have become more involved in activism as states and districts have passed policies prohibiting them from using their chosen pronouns and restrooms aligned with their gender identity, having access to books about LGBTQ characters, and participating on school sports teams matched to their gender identities, Rady said.

In states that have passed laws or taken other statewide action against LGBTQ students, such as what opponents have termed Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law and Virginia’s anti-trans model policy, students have staged walkouts, led protests, and spoken at board meetings in opposition.

Student involvement and testimony often do have an impact on reversing book bans and walking back bans on Gay-Straight Alliances in schools, Rady said. But the simplest solution would be to avoid “taking up these toxic policies that marginalize, exclude and isolate students, especially BIPOC and trans students,” he said.

Meanwhile, parent groups and associations such as the American Library Association; PEN America, a free speech advocacy group; and Red Wine and Blue, a group of suburban parents, are tracking the scope of book bans and organizing to fight against them. Their success is variable, but Mindy Freeman said it’s important to keep fighting.

“It’s up to the allies to take the burden off,” she said. “The fight is personal because if you can’t read about different people, if they’re taking away that knowledge, this education, then it’s just going to increase the bullying.”

Mindy Freeman testified at a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee hearing against book banning in April, telling her family’s story to show why books about LGBTQ people are essential for students like her daughter. She’s also involved in parent groups fighting against discrimination in Bucks County, and hopes more student allies get involved just as parents have.

“We’re not getting enough kids that are allies to stand up,” she said. “Lily could use that, and other kids like her could use that.”
Unified Sports Level the Playing Field for Students With Disabilities

By Sarah D. Sparks

It was a test of their ability, but also like a learning experience for everyone,” said Belanger. “You have students with disabilities and their partners who are students without disabilities working together on teams, so it’s unique in creating opportunities for inclusion for our students,” Gentile said.

Unified Physical Education Programs pair stable ratios—often roughly equal numbers—of students with intellectual disabilities, such as Down syndrome or autism, with general education peers on teams or in classes. The programs are led by coaches trained in both athletics and universal access for special education. The approach differs from adapted sports, which are geared toward athletes with physical disabilities. Students with and without disabilities are on equal footing in unified sports, rather than having general education athletes mentor those with disabilities. And unified teams follow normal competitive interscholastic regulations for their sports.

“We’re not talking about cutthroat and win-at-all-cost. What we’re talking about is following the rules of the sport, and whether two teams have high-functioning student athletes that are participating, or even teams with low-functioning student athletes, they can still have a competitive game and get all the same benefits ... of working together for a common goal and overcoming adversity,” said Todd Nelson, the assistant director for the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, who has been running unified interscholastic sports in the state for a decade.

“Unfortunately there’s some mindset that stu-
Inclusion

Most Popular Unified Sports

Participation across unified sports has risen nearly tenfold since 2018-19, with softball and basketball particularly popular. Seven sports now include more than a thousand unified team players.

![Most Popular Unified Sports](image)

SOURCE: National Federation of State High School Associations

Inclusive Sports Programs Expand

The National Federation of State High School Associations found that the number of states with unified sports programs doubled since the pandemic. Hover over a state to see which sports its unified programs include.

![Inclusive Sports Programs Expand](image)

‘It’s just a positive vibe’

“As a high school principal, I’ve seen that athletics can be the best at times, and it can be the worst at times. And unfortunately, a lot of the bad times come out in athletics, whether it’s parents screaming at officials or kids screaming at kids,” said Nate Work, the principal of Pembroke Junior and Senior High Schools in Penbroke Central Schools in New York. “All that goes out the window with unified sports. When kids from both teams score, everybody, everybody claps and cheers. Nobody’s screaming at the officials. It’s just such a positive vibe.”

Participation dropped in the Empire State’s unified sports early in the pandemic, Nelson said, in part because some student athletes were more likely to have medical conditions that put them at higher risk if they contracted COVID-19. Audra diBacco, the school social worker and unified basketball coach at Co-
lumbia High School, said during virtual instruction in the pandemic, the school created a virtual classroom specifically for students in the unified sports program, where coaches could send weekly practice activities and other messages to keep students engaged. The student-athletes on the unified basketball team eventually created a video of themselves showing off dribbling moves and “passing” the ball to each other virtually.

While slower to rebuild than varsity teams, unified sports in New York have been “exploding across the state” this year, Nelson said, both in the numbers of programs and the students participating in them. For example, he said, while a typical basketball team includes 12-15 players, unified basketball teams at many New York schools this year have ranged from 25-30.

To build a successful unified sports program, Nelson recommended district leaders bring together athletic directors, special education teachers, and parents to identify the sports likely to be the best fit for students, as well as recruit special and general education athletes.

At Saratoga Springs, Nicastro plays varsity field hockey, but joined the school’s unified bowling team as a partner last year. “The relationships that I’ve built through these programs have—it might seem cheesy to say—but they’ve been life-changing,” Nicastro said. She has found students more likely to root for and make friends with students from other school teams at unified matches, and students tend to be more supportive of each other when learning unfamiliar sports.

"It’s not only a learning experience for some people, but it’s kind of for everyone," Nicastro said. “Like, I’m terrible at bowling. I sometimes don’t even score over 100 or make it halfway there sometimes. And, the best part about it is that, say you score 25, everyone’s still clapping and cheering you on.

“I was kind of introduced into a community where there was such inclusion,” she added. “I had wanted that, but I didn’t know that there was [one] until I found it.”
The 53 million K–12 students in U.S. schools today are more diverse than ever before. We now understand that the way each student learns and communicates is diverse too. It’s a challenge. In any given classroom today, there are:

- Students with both identified and unidentified learning needs
- Students from diverse cultures and economic backgrounds
- Students who are English Language Learners
- Students who meet grade expectations and those who fall short
- Students with varying learning and classroom support needs
- Students with sight, hearing, or mobility disabilities

Making sure that all students have the tools they need to understand and to be understood is critical.

UDL is an approach to learning that is based on the understanding that every student learns differently.

The current educational landscape is showing us the need for inclusive learning. We have the opportunity to break down barriers to education for all learners with the help of EdTech. The pandemic brought to light issues of access and equity, and the importance of recognizing the unique learning needs of all students. Making sure that all students have the tools they need to learn is critical to the future of education. This is the premise of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

UDL evolved from the concept of Universal Design in architecture. It's based on the idea that the design of products and environments should be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible - without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

A "universally designed" building is accessible to everyone. Disability access is always well considered as part of the building design phase — not retrofitted. Yet, when you think about who can benefit from a wheelchair ramp installed at a hotel entrance, it is not only people in wheelchairs, but also travellers with luggage, delivery people with carts, families with strollers, and others.

UDL means designing learning experiences and content in the same way. If you design an e-book with built-in literacy support tools, you will certainly help kids with dyslexia. You'll also help students who do not have a disability, are not making grade level or are English Language Learners.
When UDL is applied, the barriers to learning disappear.

It begins with the idea that every learner is different with strengths and weaknesses.

Brain science shows just how unique each brain is. Students will show different strengths and weaknesses depending on the task, the environment, the resources and tools available. Educators know students will vary - we can anticipate this and plan for it from the start.

It aims to change the design of the environment and curriculum rather than change the learner. By thinking about how students learn in different ways and removing the barriers to learning, UDL empowers all learners to engage with their teachers and learn independently.

These guidelines can be applied to all areas of the curriculum. All learners can access and join engaging, meaningful, and challenging learning opportunities. UDL aims to remove barriers to learning, not make exceptions.

It provides phenomenal opportunities to remove barriers and make the learning experience more accessible to every learner. So although it's not required, technology is a huge asset, especially when it ensures that learning opportunities are equal for every learner, regardless of age or ability.

Thoughtful inclusive design makes the world easier for everyone. UDL minimizes barriers and maximizes learning for all students.
UDL does not rely on technology.

However, UDL applied with technology does create a richer and more inclusive experience.

Technology can help students with different learning preferences by supporting, and in some cases accelerating, their learning by providing reinforcement where required. Software can support students in checking their work for spelling and grammar. It can help them to understand the editing process, as well as encourage them to expand their vocabulary.

Tools built with UDL in mind from the start, offer benefits to all students. For example, ‘speech to text’ software can help to express words while learning online. Using ‘text to speech’ tools can aid comprehension. It can also give alternative ways to study, revise, and learn. These digital learning tools can be used to scaffold and support all learners, both at school and at home.

Edtech tools that are built using UDL help make sure that students can succeed academically. They empower, encourage and enhance the learning experience.

Schools need to prioritize inclusive learning. It is vital that these kinds of tools are provided to everyone, not just those with identified learning differences. Embedding the use of these tools into the culture of learning will optimize the learning experience for everyone.

There are 50 million students in public schools in the United States.

12% are enrolled in special education, equaling about 6 million students.

Another 5 million who are English Language Learners.

Add to this, all of the students who have fallen behind in the past two years and that is millions more.

Yet 70% of K-12 public school students are without district-wide provision of assistive tools.
Technology can never replace teachers, but it can remove friction from teaching and learning.

As we look to the future, we have the opportunity to tackle the challenges of change head on. We can not only meet the demands of our time, but we can also advance learning and understanding in new ways. We can use what we’ve learned over the last few years to create an updated and improved way of delivering education. One that supports both educators and students. We can unlock the power of technology to transform education and create a level playing field that meets the needs of all learners.

Technology can help to create more inclusive learning environments. It can create independent learners, giving them the tools they need to succeed and achieve their full potential.

Now is a good time for all of us to look back at the last few years, learn from them, and design a better tomorrow. The best way to get comfortable with shaping our future is to get involved with designing and delivering the change that is required.

At Texthelp, we want to help shape that future with our digital learning tools. It’s our collective goal to positively impact the literacy of 1 billion people by 2030. But we need you too. We can’t do it alone.

Schools should prioritize accessibility not just physically, but also digitally. The classroom of the future should be an inclusive classroom, supporting all of the different types of disabilities, both visible and invisible. Using the guiding principles of UDL, we can help transform learning for all students.

More equitable, inclusive access to education needs to be our shared goal. The right tools can help us get there, supporting new generations of successful learners.

Learn more at: text.help/InclusiveFuture
When the U.S. Supreme Court heard nearly five hours of arguments about the consideration of race in higher education on Oct. 31, much of the focus was understandably about the details of undergraduate admissions at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina. They are the two institutions whose practices are being challenged by opponents of affirmative action in the cases.

But in a handful of briefs filed with the court, and in some of the comments during the lengthy arguments, there were reminders that racial diversity among student enrollments remains a delicately pursued but often elusive goal in K-12 schools as well.

“If you’re Black, you’re more likely to be in an underresourced [K-12] school,” Justice Sonia Sotomayor said to a lawyer challenging race-conscious admissions at the University of North Carolina. “You’re more likely to be taught by teachers who are not as qualified as others. You’re more likely to be viewed as having less academic potential.”

Sotomayor’s observation may have been influenced by a friend-of-the-court brief filed in the college cases by the Council of the Great City Schools, the coalition of the nation’s 76 largest urban school districts. The brief focused on telling the court that racial segregation and inequality persist in elementary and secondary schools, nearly 70 years after Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka held that racially segregated schools were inherently unequal.

“Despite the best efforts of school districts like the council’s members to create more diverse schools, racial segregation has increased over the last two decades,” the council’s brief says. “As a result, educational inequities persist.”

The council’s brief was principally written by John W. Borkowski, a veteran education lawyer who has worked in the trenches helping school districts strive for racial diversity and equity.

Borkowski, now with the Chicago law firm Husch Blackwell LLP, was on the briefs and at the lawyer’s table in the Supreme Court in 2007 helping the Seattle school district defend its race-conscious student assignment plan. The court struck down the plan in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District and greatly curtailed the ways K-12 schools may use race in assigning students to schools.

With the council’s brief in the college admissions cases, Borkowski said he felt it important to present some of the diversity challenges K-12 schools face.

“If you believe public education is a public good and builds on a promise of opportunity, then you believe in the need for racial diversity,” he said in an interview.

Reports document resegregation of the nation’s schools

Borkowski marshaled research evidence for the Great City Schools brief’s assertion that racial segregation in the nation’s schools persists and has been getting worse.

The brief cites a 2019 report from the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, which concluded that at the 65th anniversary of the Brown decision, “intense levels of segregation ... are on the rise again.”

Black students, who accounted for 15 percent of public school enrollment at the time of the report, attended schools where Black students made up an average of 47 percent of enrollment, said the CRP report.

Students of Asian background were attending schools where 24 percent of students were fellow Asian Americans. Meanwhile, white and Latino students were the most segregated groups, the CRP report said.

White students, on average, attended a school in which 69 percent of the students were white, while Latino students attended a school in which 55 percent of the students were Latino.

Black students attended schools with a combined Black and Latino enrollment averaging 67 percent, and Latino students attended schools with a combined Black and Latino enrollment averaging 66 percent.

“The data in this report shows a disconcerting increase of Black segregation in all parts of the country,” says the report. “This is true even though African Americans are a slowly declining share of the total student population, and many now live in suburban areas.”

The CRP report indicates that the proportion of “intensely segregated minority schools,” defined as those with an enrollment
of 90 percent or more of non-white students, increased from 14.8 percent of schools in 2003 to 18.2 percent in 2016.

Borkowski also turned to a more recent assessment of K-12 diversity—a 2022 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

That report found that more than one-third of U.S. public school students (about 18.5 million) attended a predominantly same-race/ethnicity school, defined as one where 75 percent or more of the student population is of a single race/ethnicity. The report, based on the GAO’s analysis of U.S. Department of Education data for the 2020-21 school year, also found that 14 percent of students attended schools where 90 percent or more of the students were of a single race/ethnicity.

The GAO report did suggest some good news for diversity: The 38 percent proportion of K-12 public school students attending a predominantly same-race/ethnicity school had declined slightly from a proportion of 42 percent in the 2014-15 school year. But still, nearly half of white students attended schools predominantly with students of their own race/ethnicity compared to nearly a third of Hispanic students and nearly a quarter of Black students in 2020-21, the GAO found.

Borkowski’s brief cites further studies for the proposition that the persistence of segregation in schools contributes to a racial gap in academic achievement. While the brief cites 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress data, such disparities have been confirmed by more national achievement data released just weeks ago.

According to the latest results, which tracked the first time students took the NAEP test since the start of the pandemic, average reading scores for 4th grade Black, Hispanic, white, and Native American students fell from 2019 to 2022, while Asian students’ average scores improved, widening the white-Asian performance gap from 7 points in 2019 to 12 points in 2022. (Reading scores for 8th grade Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native students did not fall, as they did for white students of that age.)

Borkowski sought to tie these statistics to an argument in the college admissions cases that there continues to be a need for elementary and secondary schools to employ narrowly tailored race-conscious measures for assigning their students to schools.

The brief reminds the court that while the 2007 Parents Involved decision struck down systems of assigning students by race in the Seattle and Jefferson County, Ky., school districts, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy’s controlling concurrence in the case said “school boards may pursue the goal of bringing together students of diverse backgrounds and races through other means.”

Those means, Kennedy said, include strategic selection of sites for new schools; attendance boundaries drawn with “general recognition of the demographics of neighborhoods”; allocation of “resources for special programs”; “targeted” recruiting of students and faculty; and “tracking enrollments, performance, and other statistics by race.”

“Due to the resurgence of segregation and the persistence of racial and ethnic achievement gaps, school districts … must retain their limited authority under [Parents Involved] to take race into account in a narrowly tailored way,” Borkowski said.

Challenges to magnet school admissions take different view on racial diversity

Not everyone is on the same page as Borkowski and other advocates of diversity and the use of race in education decisions. In the college admissions cases, there is also a K-12-focused brief by several advocacy groups who oppose or are challenging race-conscious student assignments, particularly in selective magnet schools.

The Pacific Legal Foundation, based in Sacramento, Calif., filed a brief along with other groups telling the court that “racial balancing under the guise of diversity has infected K-12 education, where it denies students opportunities because of their race.”

The foundation is behind an ongoing legal challenge to the admissions program at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a highly acclaimed magnet school in the Fairfax County school system in suburban Washington, D.C. The suit, on behalf of a parents’ group called the Coalition for TJ, asserts that changes in admissions in 2020 to allocate a certain number of slots to the top 1.5 percent of students from each feeder school were enacted with a racially discriminatory purpose. They argue it had the effect of discriminating against Asian American applicants, whose numbers dropped significantly under the new system.

The brief discusses the Thomas Jefferson case as well as similar criteria at selective magnet schools in Montgomery County, Md.; Hartford, Conn.; and New York City.

“The admissions policies at issue in these cases were driven by an interest in increasing racial diversity at the schools,” says the Pacific Legal Foundation brief. “But they were implemented at the expense of other, highly deserving applicants—all because they are members of a disfavored racial group.”

Wencong Fa, a senior attorney with PLF, said in an interview that the American public school system should shift its focus from racial diversity goals to improving the education of all children.

“Just because a school does not consider its students racially diverse, that doesn’t mean it’s segregated,” he said. “The government use of race has a really sordid history. I think this [debate] is a distraction from the real problem, which is getting students the opportunities they need to succeed and thrive.”

WENCONG FA
Senior Attorney,
Pacific Legal Foundation

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MATT BOROWSKI
Senior Attorney,
Pacific Legal Foundation
Immigrant Students Are Under Pressure. Four Ways Districts Can Support Them

By Ileana Najarro

Immigrant students—whether they are refugees, unaccompanied minors, or migrants—are becoming increasingly visible in K-12 schools across the country as immigration topics dominate headlines.

In recent weeks, for instance, Republican governors of Texas and Florida have bused or flown migrants from Texas to more-Democratic communities such as Washington, D.C., and Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts. They’ve cited the latest wave of undocumented immigrants entering through the country’s southern border, even as others accuse the governors of using vulnerable people for political stunts, and the immigrant families have filed at least one lawsuit in response.

Whether a school district is new to welcoming immigrant students or has been doing so for years, district leaders agree on some best practices to ensure these students and their families get the support they need. Here are four best practices:

Tap into federal and other funding for immigrant students

When Elena Garcia became the executive director of English-language learners for the Hillsborough County school district in Tampa, Fla., one of her first goals was to evaluate her department’s data on immigrant students and apply for immigrant grant funding through Title III, the federal program that broadly supports academic programs for multilingual students.

She realized the district qualified for the grant and was able to hire a bilingual social worker, a bilingual school counselor, and an additional interpreter to expand the district’s preexisting staffing.

Though the district was eligible for the grant before and hadn’t applied, Garcia said there have always been ways to fund programming for immigrant students if it’s a true district priority.

“Hillsborough County Public Schools has been and continues to be committed to serving immigrant families regardless of the external funding that we received,” she said.

ELENA GARCIA
Executive Director, Tampa, Fla.

Hillsborough County Public Schools has been and continues to be committed to serving immigrant families regardless of the external funding that we received.”

Make decisions based on data and feedback

Once funding is secured through Title III grants or other means, plans to spend it need to be driven by data and feedback from the immigrant families themselves.

The San Juan district, for instance, saw a growth in refugee families enrolling from Afghanistan and Iran several years ago. It adapted by hiring staff that reflected the community and spoke their languages, said Raj Rai, director of communication for the district.

“That really sets the stage of setting that welcoming environment,” Rai said.

In the Hillsborough district—where a majority of immigrant students come from Honduras, Cuba, and Venezuela—Garcia looks at what families need today, how those needs have shifted, and what the district needs to do to help. She gathers direct feedback from families at in-person welcome events.

Schools also need to take time to assess students’ needs when placing them in the right grade level and program, said Viridiana Carrizales, co-founder and CEO of ImmSchools, a nonprofit that works with K-12 schools to support undocumented students and their families.

And they should be careful not to jump to conclusions: Carrizales has found cases where immigrant students are classified as having a learning disability when really there’s a language barrier involved.

Invest in training for all staff

Districts can have staff dedicated to immigrant student services, but all district staff must be adequately trained to support these students and their families, Carrizales argues.

That includes knowing how to use trauma-informed practices to better account for some students’ traumatic experiences coming to the United States, and familiarity with different cultural norms.

Educators also need a basic understanding of how the U.S. immigration system works, why these families are now here, and what rights students have, especially if they or their parents are undocumented.
As a high schooler, Carrizales was undocumented, as were her parents, who feared filling out school forms that required ID cards. And Carrizales experienced an incident in which a well-meaning school counselor wanted to call immigration to figure out how to get her a Social Security card for college admissions forms—something that could have jeopardized her and her family, she said.

In the San Juan district, training goes both ways: It offers presentations for staff to learn more about countries students are coming from and their cultural backgrounds and courses for immigrant families on how to navigate the district, how it works, and what services are available.

**Partner with community organizations to help the whole child**

The San Juan district organizes student cultural clubs and sports teams to help immigrant students better connect with all their peers, Safay in California said. But when a district is new to working with these populations or is tight in funding, third-party partners can be a life-saver to provide these kinds of services.

Districts can partner with community organizations such as food banks to more directly lend a hand to families outside of the school day.

And local resettlement agencies know the most about the students’ unique needs and can alert districts in advance as to who’s coming, how many families to expect, where exactly families will be relocating to, and more, said Garcia in Florida.

Organizations like ImmSchools can work with districts to evaluate their resources, and where they have room to grow.
 **Inclusive Teachers Must Be ‘Asset-Based Believers’**

By Larry Ferlazzo

How can we best support students in “special education” programs in their return to “normal” classroom instruction?

‘Me Profiles’

Savanna Flakes is CEO and chief education consultant of Inclusion For a Better Future and provides professional development and school coaching to support teachers with effective instructional practices for students with exceptionalities. Savanna has published a host of instructional articles and her latest book, Shaking Up Special Education: Instructional Moves to Increase Student Achievement is now available:

When we unpack the term “inclusive practices,” it is both about ideology, that every student deserves an equal chance to succeed, and action, which moves us to proactively plan to remove barriers and add supports based on the student. Together, ideology and action provide ALL students with opportunity for emotional and academic achievement. Therefore, as inclusive teachers, our goal is to be an asset-based believer and subsequently, a doer, empowering students with exceptionalities to enhance their strengths and grow in their challenges.

When students are empowered to reflect on who they are as a learner, how they learn best, and resources that help them achieve learning goals, they develop agency and can advocate for their learning (which, I would argue is the purpose of special education services). The most critical support we can add for our students with exceptionalities at the beginning of the new school year is the opportunity to create a “Me Profile.” A “Me Profile” is an organized, student-friendly chart that allows students to record their strengths, interests, challenges, and resources (tools and strategies) for challenge areas. Students revisit their chart as they reflect on learning goals for the curriculum, and teachers confer with students regularly to discuss progress.

Are you ready for the good news about a “Me Profile”? This strategy can benefit every learner in our P-12 classrooms, and there is no right or wrong template! Here are three steps for implementation success:

**Step 1**: As a team (content, grade level, co-teaching, etc.), plan for dedicated time to support students with completing strengths and challenges questionnaires and/or fun get-to-know myself activities for their “Me Profile.” One teacher I worked with gave students opportunities to show their strengths while contributing to the community project—like participating in a community garden and a reading-buddy program. There are hundreds of great examples of reflective learning tools that students can use to create a “Me Profile” on Pinterest and teacherspayteachers. Specifically, a great example of a reflective learning tool for students is Laura Candler’s free Multiple Intelligence Survey.

**Step 2**: What do want our student’s “Me Profile” chart to look like? As mentioned, there is no right or wrong template. Do we want to create a four-by-four chart (interest, strengths, challenges, resources/strategies), add a column for the student to draw a picture or add a bitmoji of themselves, or “tech it up” and create a template on a Google slide, etc.? The options are endless; choose a format that works for you and your students. Also, consider what questions are important for our students to reflect on as learners. For example, general questions, such as “What are my strengths as a learner?,” “What I can contribute to the classroom is,” “I am proud of …” “When I’m feeling great at school, it’s probably because…” Or, we can add more specific questions for students to reflect on, such as, “How do you like to learn and practice new concepts?” or “How do you like to share what you’ve learned?”

**Step 3**: Revisit the “Me Profile.” This reflective tool should be a flexible, living, breathing component of a student’s journey on learning goals throughout the curriculum. Use this tool to support student conferences and allow students to share their progress with classmates. Learning is continuous; we all change and figure out better ways to support our challenges. For example, one student I worked with indicated that he had trouble writing and explaining his ideas. Initially, the student used resources like voice type in a Google doc to brainstorm; later, he found that a TIDE graphic organizer and Adobe Spark were more effective for brainstorming and he updated his “resource” column accordingly.

As inclusive teachers, we provide every student with opportunity and access. We intentionally use asset-based language, empower students to exercise their agency, and reflect on their strengths and identities. When we are asset-based, we work relentlessly to ensure each student feels authentically seen, heard, and recognized for their strengths, talents, and contributions. A “Me Profile” is a great place to begin!

‘New Routines’

Melissa Davis is a 4th grade special education paraprofessional for the Denver public schools. She is also a content contributor and member of the production team for Building the Bridge, a podcast series hosted by Wendy Oliver, which connects educators and parents in one productive conversation around online and blended learning.

Drawing from my own experience, I think the best way to support students in special education as they return to in-person classroom instruction is to remember that we all need grace at this time and students who rely on daily routines will need some time to learn what the new routines are.

The elementary school where I work returned to in-person learning in January. As a staff, we all pitched in to do extra duties that, prior to the pandemic, we never imagined we’d be asked to do. One of my duties was to take the temperature of each student who entered my assigned door. Each grade level had...
staggered start times and assigned different entrances in an attempt to not cross cohorts.

The first day back in the building was fine for some but not for others. We must remember as education professionals that everybody processes information differently. The new normal required health screens prior to entry and wearing a mask at all times except during our outdoor mask breaks. Some students needed to take a moment to process what was happening as we got back into the swing of things, including students in special education.

One big thing that students had to get used to was staying in their cohorts. It seemed that everybody had a best friend who was outside their own cohort. Some students were quick to adapt by making new friends, while others became withdrawn.

A student who particularly sticks out in my mind caused a bit of worry at first. This student has autism spectrum disorder, and during the first two weeks back at school, he would pace during lunch and recess. He would not eat his lunch and he did not interact with other students. I was concerned about how he must have been feeling to behave this way, and it also hurt my heart that he seemingly had no friends in the cohort. Slowly, he began to get used to the new way school had taken shape, and after a month, he formed a friend group with three other classmates who enjoyed his humor and wanted to engage in the games he thought up. By the end of the school year, a tight-knit group of four friends had formed. I would have never guessed that I was seeing the same student who had previously been feeling to behave this way, and it also hurt my heart that he seemingly had no friends in the school.

What I would like to point out is that our return to “normal” will likely not be the same “normal” we were used to prior to the pandemic. We all experienced a trauma and we may need some extra time to process. If a student feels comfortable talking to a friendly face like one of their interventionist specialists, please try to make an arrangement with that person. Sometimes the stimulation of the classroom is far too much, and they just need a chance to collect themselves before they are ready to participate.

Going back to school will feel different for everybody. Some students will act out, some students will withdraw, and some will have so much anxiety that they will try to become people pleasers. Everybody will need support during this time, especially our friends in special education.

Lastly, we need to remember that inclusion is important. Creating a classroom community where everybody is appreciated for their contributions will be conducive to learning and also teach all students that everybody is valued.

Resist Pressure to ‘Catch-Up’

Anne Beninghof is an experienced special educator and consultant with a passion for inclusive services. Anne focuses on creative, practical solutions for co-teaching and specially designed instruction. Her newest book, Specially Designed Instruction: Increasing Success for Students with Disabilities, includes a step-by-step approach to adapting for students with disabilities:

Students with disabilities are fortunate to have dedicated teams of educators working together to provide specially designed instruction. These teams can help pave the way for a successful return from virtual instruction by implementing these five suggestions.

- **Prepare for some students to be anxious or confused about routines.** New precautions will be surprising, and even old routines may be forgotten. Consider creating social stories that guide students through routines and making these accessible to families prior to the first day back. Develop personalized daily schedules for students, using pictures for students who need extra scaffolding. Refer to the schedules more frequently than typical so that students have time to prepare for transitions.

- **Review IEP accommodations for each student and ensure that all team members are aware of these commitments.** Certain accommodations, whether or not they are listed in the IEP, may be especially helpful for returning students. For example, educators who provide extended wait time after asking questions are allowing students time to process, gain confidence, and prepare more complex answers. While there may be a pressure to “catch up” for lost instructional time, research shows that teachers who resist this pressure and allow wait time will see very positive results.

- **Executive functions are essential to managing change.** Because many students with disabilities have weaknesses in this area, taking time to identify which executive functions are needed for the return to school. Will they need to learn new organizational methods? Will they struggle with sustained attention? Will self-regulation strategies be different in person? A simple chart can help you reflect and plan for proactive instruction or accommodations to meet executive-function needs.

- The first step in planning for specially designed instruction is to clarify the learning target for the lesson. When learning targets are shared in comprehensible ways, students can see the lesson destination clearly and channel their efforts to staying on the trail. Instructional objectives and standards, on the other hand, are meant to guide teachers in their larger and longer-term quest. While derived from these bigger...
statements, learning targets help students to be present in the moment. Students can answer the question, “What will we accomplish today?” This will help students feel less overwhelmed by the return to school. “I can write a topic sentence,” will be much more manageable than, “Today we are going to start writing our essays.”

- Talk with team members about the best ways to provide small-group instruction upon return and then create a chart with your four favorite models. Even with social distancing, small-group instruction will yield higher results than whole-group instruction. Get creative about how to make it work. One of my favorite models is to pull a small group of two to four not-yet-proficient students as my “expert group” at the beginning of class. These students receive three minutes of preteaching and a supportive sheet of information, while the rest of the class works through a warm-up or organizational activity. When the whole-group lesson begins, the “experts” are hearing the information a second time and can add details to the discussion. Whatever your favorite grouping models are, don’t abandon them because of safety concerns. Instead, creatively tweak them to fit your school’s guidelines and use them liberally for maximum learning.

**‘Focus on Relationships’**

Kathryn A. Welby is the author of Remote Learning Strategies for Students with IEPs and a professor of practice and director of K-12 teacher-preparation programs at Merrimack College in Massachusetts. Kathryn has over 20 years of experience in special education and incorporates practitioner experiences and voices into her research, course development, and writing.

Disrupted routines and change can be difficult for all students, especially students with exceptionalities, disabilities, and learning challenges. How can we best support students in special education programs to return to normal-in-person instruction? Educators can help ease transitions back to school by focusing on preparation, utilizing parental support, and establishing nonacademic classroom goals.

**Prepare for the Transition**

**Back to School Social Stories** – Create back-to-school social stories for students focusing on what to expect in the upcoming weeks. These individually created social stories should include visuals, the upcoming daily classroom routine, behavior expectations, teachers’ names, and classmates’ names. Using social stories will alleviate some of the fears of the unknown, which can initiate behavior challenges and anxiety. Parents and caregivers can read these social stories daily with their children in preparation for the upcoming school year.

**School Visits** – Allowing student opportunities to visit the school in preparation for returning to school can help students ease anxiety, raise comfort levels, and increase confidence.

**Parent/Caregiver Involvement**

**Survey Concerns** – To gain insight into the challenges the students faced over the past year, create a quick survey to ask parents about some successes and challenges their students faced during the virtual or hybrid school year. Survey results can provide educators with critical and vital insights on what to expect at the start of the school year regarding emotional needs and Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and benchmarks. Additionally, educators can use survey insights to plan and guide instruction, create activity ideas, and as a relationship-building tool.

**Schedule Check-Ins** – As routines and behavior expectations are being established, regularly scheduled check-ins with parents are helpful to reinforce classroom goals, routines, accommodations, and expectations. Parents and teachers are all very busy, so figuring out the best method of communication is helpful, whether it is a phone call, email, paper communication journal, or an ongoing Google Document.

**Classroom Goals**

**Establish Predictable Routines** – When school begins, spend extra time creating and reinforcing predictable classroom routines and worry less about academics. Overall productivity will increase by spending time supporting and practicing classroom routines, rules, and expectations. Create a predictable, visual schedule and post in a central location that all students can see. Additionally, creating individualized schedules (including service deliveries such as occupational therapies, speech and language therapies, physical therapies, etc.) can be taped to each student’s desk as a visual reminder of the next activity. Routines will provide comfort to students’ previously unpredictable world of virtual and hybrid learning. Through constant and consistent reinforcements and routines, transitions will be easier, students will gain trust in the process, and eventually, productivity and academic achievement will increase.

**Focus on Relationships** – Rebuilding in-person relationships is essential in the transition back to school. Look for warning signs that may point to distress and back-to-school anxieties. Get to know your students by asking questions, one-on-one conferences, daily feeling shares, daily check-ins, and use the information you learn about your students to differentiate your instruction by providing opportunities that focus on students’ interests. Some communication and relationship skills may have diminished with virtual learning, so spend extra time guiding peer relationships by integrating peer social-interaction skill-building frequently into the day.

In short, transitions tend to be difficult, but preparation, utilizing parental supports, and establishing initial classroom goals focusing on expectations, rules, and routines can support students in special education programs as they return to normal class instruction. Students are ready and resilient and, no doubt, will overcome the initial transition and thrive.

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

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