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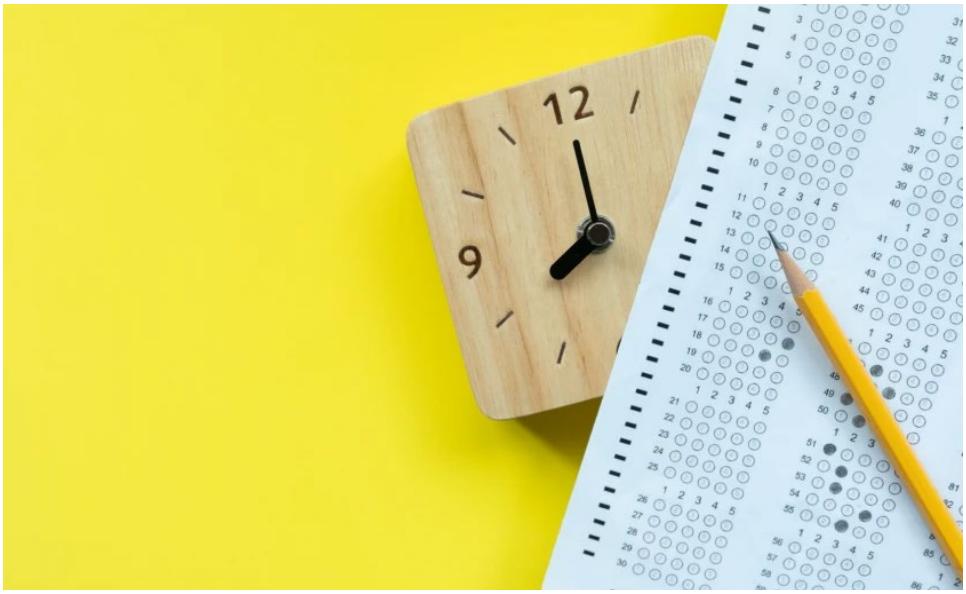
ADHD, Inclusion, and IDEA: How Schools Are Redefining Support For Students With Disabilities



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EDITOR'S NOTE

As schools work to better support students with disabilities and learning differences, educators are reexamining long-held assumptions about **ADHD, inclusion, accommodations, and special education**. This collection explores **emerging research** that **challenges traditional views of ADHD**, questions whether common supports like **extended test time** are always effective, and highlights strategies for creating more **inclusive, student-centered classrooms**. The articles also examine the legacy of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the push to **dismantle segregated learning environments**, and the unique needs of **English learners with disabilities**. Together, they offer educators practical guidance and fresh perspectives on building school systems that emphasize **understanding, equity,** and **meaningful support for every learner**.

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OPINION

Katie Dobies/iStock

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New ADHD Research Challenges Former Assumptions. Why It Matters

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Roughly 11% of all U.S. children ages 3–17 have been diagnosed with ADHD, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. That's the equivalent of two to three students in a typical classroom. And the brain-based disorder is only becoming more common. Between 2016 and 2022, about 1 million additional children were diagnosed with ADHD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As ADHD diagnoses increase, so, too, does the scientific community's understanding of the disorder, challenging long-held assumptions about how the condition affects attention, motivation, and learning.

For decades, ADHD was widely associated with hyperactivity or impulsivity. But researchers now recognize that not everyone with ADHD displays those traits. Students with inattentive ADHD, for example, may struggle to focus and be organized without exhibiting hyperactive or impulsive behavior.

Recent research also suggests that a lack of attention may not be the primary driver behind the challenges facing children with the disorder.

"There's this implication that these children [with ADHD] lack the ability to pay attention," said Benjamin Kay, an assistant professor of neurology at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "A lot of these patients can hyperfocus, for instance, on video games. It's just that their attention is selective. You have to engage it," he said.

> **"What students are used to in their free time are digital environments that offer immediate reward, constant novelty, and minimal effort."**
>
> **CHRISTY WALCOTT**
> Associate professor of school psychology
> East Carolina University

Kay led a study published in December 2025 in the scientific journal *Cell*, which used advanced brain imaging to examine patterns of more than 5,000 children ages 8 to 11, including some who had been administered stimulant medication used to manage ADHD.

For the first time, researchers were able to see that these drugs act mainly on the brain's reward and alertness networks—not on brain circuitry associated with attention, as previously hypothesized, said Kay.

These and related research findings, experts believe, may hold important insights for educators aiming to better understand the behavior of students with ADHD and engage them in classroom learning.

Why students with ADHD may struggle with school tasks

Kay's findings may help explain why students with ADHD find school and its lack of immediate rewards, well, boring, said Christy Walcott, an associate professor of school psychology at East Carolina University.

"If students with ADHD have to sit still and persist on things they find relatively boring compared to what they're experiencing in other parts of their life, perhaps medication helps them tolerate that boredom," Walcott said.

She also noted that the study results align with delay aversion, a theory about ADHD described as "the motivation to escape or avoid delay" that arose in the early 2000s. It explains why children with ADHD prefer small, immediate rewards over large, delayed ones, according to proponents of this theory.

If children with ADHD are somehow "wired" to want immediate rewards, it explains why they may hyperfocus on things they find particularly interesting.

"If they're doing something they enjoy or find psychologically rewarding, they'll tend to persist in this behavior after others would normally move on to other things. The brains of people with ADHD are drawn to activities that give instant feedback," Russell Barkley, a retired psychologist and recognized authority on ADHD, told Additude, an online publication covering ADHD topics, in 2025.

What the ADHD research means for classrooms

Teachers don't necessarily need to understand the intricacies behind ADHD brain circuitry. But they may find the takeaways from recent research on the disorder, particularly useful as they work to engage all students, especially those with ADHD, Walcott explained.

"School tasks, by traditional measure, are kind of low-novelty and take a lot of sustained effort, whereas what students are used to in their free time are digital environments that offer immediate reward, constant novelty, and minimal effort," Walcott said.

So, how can teachers compete?

They can start by aligning lessons to broader themes that are interesting and relevant, a strategy that applies to every level of K-12 education. Here are some real-world examples happening now in schools around the nation:

- Kindergarten teachers are exposing kindergartners to the natural world around them as they learn vocabulary.
- Elementary and middle school teachers are enhancing students' interest in STEM concepts by providing real-world encounters with astronauts.
- High school students are benefiting from internship experiences that align with classroom learning and personal interests.

Rethinking rewards and feedback

How content is presented affects the way students with ADHD respond. So, too, does how school-based reward systems operate. Students with the disorder benefit from a shorter time frame between the effort they put into a task and when they're rewarded for it, say experts.

Positive affirmation helps all students succeed. But forms of positive reinforcement that motivate most students, like quarterly or semester report cards, don't necessarily have the same effect on kids with ADHD, explains Gregory Fabiano, a professor of psychology at Florida International University.

"Traditional report cards don't do enough to make a difference for children who are prone to outbursts or other challenging behaviors," Fabiano told EdWeek. But daily report cards can, especially for elementary and middle school students.

Fabiano suggests using daily report cards for younger students with ADHD. These tools help track the daily performance on specific, predetermined goals—often tied to behavior. They work best when the goals are clear and objective. "It's not just, 'I had a good day.' It's 'I completed my work within the time given,' or 'I had no more than three reminders for calling out during the lesson,'" he said.

Not every strategy will work for every student with ADHD. But with climbing numbers of students being diagnosed with it and digital media providing riveting content and immediate feedback, teachers need all the support they can get.

As Walcott observed: Digital media "is kind of rewiring how and if we're able to tolerate slow, kind of effortful tasks." ■

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Published February 09, 2026

How Nashville Dismantled Segregated Classrooms For Students With Disabilities

By Evie Blad

Brett Carlsen for Education Week

Debra McAdams, executive director of the department of exceptional education at Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, visits Isaiah T. Creswell Middle School of the Arts in Nashville, Tenn.

When Debra McAdams stepped into her role leading special education for Nashville schools in 2009, she knew she would immediately face a deeply entrenched system that separated students with disabilities from their peers.

Elementary and middle school students with disabilities were largely taught separately from students without disabilities, often bused past their neighborhood schools—including those attended by their siblings—to regional hubs where educators offered specialized services.

The district, the second largest in Tennessee, operated nearly 200 segregated classrooms, where students with disabilities learned apart from their peers. That included many students with relatively low support needs, such as speech impairments, most districts would place in general education classrooms for the full day. The situation wasn't just stigmatizing; it conflicted directly with a federal requirement that students with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment."

It was McAdams' job to tear down those silos.

Under her leadership, the district committed to a clear principle: students with disabilities would attend their zoned neighborhood schools and participate in core general education classes unless there was a clear educational justification not to.

"All of our students, including those with disabilities, are general education students first, and we should not have separate settings," McAdams, a 2026 Leader To Learn From honoree, said. "We are all part of one big community, and the earlier that everybody understands that for all of our students, the more accepting everyone is."

'A massive mindset shift'

The transformation—part of a broader, multipronged effort to improve education in the 81,000-student Nashville district—required strategic planning, coalition-building, and deep trust-building from McAdams and her team. But the results were measurable: Before the work began in the 2008-2009 school year, about 36% of Nashville students with disabilities spent more than 80% of their time in general education classrooms, a federal metric used to define the least restrictive environment. By the 2023-24 school year, that number had climbed to 76%.

"It was a massive mind shift change," said Sonya Dobbs, the director of exceptional education student supports for Nashville schools. "It wasn't easy, and it didn't just happen. There were a lot of bumps in the road, but we stuck with it because it's what was best for [the] children."

A committee of educators, community members, and a Vanderbilt University education professor collaborated on the transformation plan with support from the city's mayor and business leaders. Students with disabilities who had previously been sent to hub schools would instead attend their neighborhood campuses, starting with kindergartners the first year and adding an additional grade each following year.

The change required a mindset shift from both special education and general education classroom teachers, McAdams said.

"We had general education teachers who had never had a child with autism or a child with an emotional disturbance in their classroom," she said. "We had to really work to ensure students had access to general education at their new schools."

To support that shift, the district created targeted professional development on inclusive classroom practices for principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers. Leaders trained staff on co-teaching strategies and classroom management, and they embedded special education in clusters of schools to aid implementation.

Special education leaders also focused on the details. One of the first changes was linguistic: The district adopted "people first" language, referring to students as individuals before referencing their disabilities. Where a teacher might have once said "a disabled child," they were encouraged to say "a child with disabilities."

At each school, leaders mapped students' support needs by cataloging all the services and accommodations outlined in every student's individualized education program, or IEP. They then ensured that general education classrooms had the resources to meet those needs—like adaptive technologies or help from a paraprofessional—and encouraged collaborative planning among general education, special education, and English-learner teachers.

Leaders also briefed parents about the changes in their children's IEP meetings,

home visits, and larger meetings. While many parents were eager to send their children to neighborhood schools, some needed assurances that their needs would still be met in the new setting.

At the secondary level, the district has partnered with local employers, like the Nashville Zoo, to offer professional learning opportunities and internships for students with disabilities as part of their transition planning, said Megan Cobb, a former special education teacher who now works as a family-engagement specialist with The Arc Tennessee, an organization that helps families navigate the special education system.

McAdams is "very approachable," Cobb said. "That's her strength."

Shoveling the ramp first

Ask people who work with McAdams to describe her approach to education, and many will point to a cartoon she includes in every presentation. It depicts a ramp and a staircase leading to a school, both covered in snow. Students, including one in a wheelchair, wait at the bottom while an adult shovels the stairs.

"If you shovel the ramp first, we can all go in," the student in the wheelchair says.

"When we do something for students with disabilities, we do something for all students," Dobbs said. "That's really her message."

With that philosophy in mind, the district emphasized universal design for learning practices, which stress giving students options in how they engage with material and demonstrate understanding. For example, a teacher might tape off an area around a desk, allowing a student with ADHD to stand and move without disrupting classmates. Clearly posted lesson goals and classroom expectations can support students with disabilities who value predictability, but they may also help all students stay engaged in their work.

As logistics and classroom practices shifted, educators noticed less formal but equally powerful signs of inclusion. Students with disabilities no longer had separate field trips and separate tables in school lunchrooms, McAdams said.

"I knew we'd made progress when I opened a yearbook, and there was no longer a separate page for the special education classroom," she said.

A teacher at heart

McAdams earned credibility with educators because she had spent years as a special education teacher in a variety of environments before stepping into leadership, said David Williams, the deputy chief of academics for the district.

After growing up in Long Island, N.Y., McAdams attended Mansfield University in Pennsylvania before working in a lab school for students with disabilities at Lehigh University, co-teaching students by day and going to class at night.

She held roles as a master teacher, a coordinator for students transitioning to college and career, and a behavioral interventionist before moving to Nashville in 1999. There, she taught at a K-8 school in the Nashville district serving students who needed extensive support for behavioral difficulties. In 2006, she helped create a similar school for high school students.

"It's difficult because you're dealing with very aggressive behaviors all day long and students who have had major trauma in their life," McAdams said. "But at the end of the day, those kids knew that we cared about them and that we weren't giving up on them."

Today, McAdams leads the district's largest academic department, which has about 400 employees, including coaches, behavior interventionists, school psychiatrists, and other staff, Williams said. She has deep expertise in special education law, but she's also still a teacher at heart, he said.

Williams recalled visiting a middle school classroom with McAdams and noticing a student struggling to manage his emotions.

"The first thing Debbie does is sit on the floor next to him and talk to him. She had never met him before, but that part of her nature just turned on," he said. "She carries that clarity and credibility into interactions with kids, lawyers in remediation, parents, principals."

A process that never ends

McAdams acknowledges that the district still has work to do.

Like most districts, Nashville struggled to address the needs of students with disabilities during the abrupt shift to remote learning in March 2020. Parents worried about lost instructional time for their children when services like physical therapy couldn't be delivered in a remote environment and when technology platforms didn't seem to fit their complex learning needs, said Tiffany Acuff, who chaired the district's Exceptional Education Families Advisory Council during the pandemic.

Acuff credited McAdams for her willingness to hold online forums to hear concerns from families of children with disabilities, even when there weren't clear answers. Acuff also ran a private Facebook group for parents, and met with McAdams weekly to share feedback.

Despite significant progress, the district fell short of the state's least restrictive environment targets last year, McAdams said. In response, educators are auditing IEPs school by school to determine what resources they need to provide in general education classrooms to ensure students with disabilities can spend more time learning with their peers.

It's a process of continuous improvement that will never end, McAdams said.

"This is not just me," she said. "This is our department, this is our team, this is our district." ■

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Courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum

President Gerald Ford, pictured in the Oval Office on Jan. 27, 1976, signed into law the predecessor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975.

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50 Years of IDEA: 4 Things to Know About The Landmark Special Education Law

By Evie Blad

Fifty years ago, Congress dramatically expanded schools' responsibilities when it passed the nation's primary special education law, requiring children with disabilities to receive a "free appropriate public education" alongside their non-disabled peers.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, as it was then called, required schools to identify students with disabilities and make individualized plans to meet their needs.

Disability rights advocates celebrated the law. But even as President Gerald Ford signed it on Dec. 2, 1975, he expressed concerns that Congress would not be able to provide adequate funding to meet its detailed mandates.

"Everyone can agree with the objective stated in the title of this bill—educating all handicapped children in our nation," Ford said in a signing statement. "The key question is whether the bill will really accomplish that objective."

The landmark legislation was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, in 1990, and amended again in 1997 and 2004. Fifty years after its initial passage, advocates for students with disabilities fear its promise is under threat, both from the original concern Ford expressed—inadequate funding—and from newer issues, like changes in federal education policy.

Here are four things to know.

The number of students with disabilities has grown steadily over time

Part B of IDEA outlines states' requirements to provide a free appropriate public education, or FAPE, by identifying students with disabilities and creating individualized education programs to outline goals and supports.

About 3.6 million students—8% of overall public school enrollment—were identified under Part B when the law first took effect in 1976. That number climbed to 7.5 million in the 2022-23 school year, about 15 percent of total enrollment, the most recent federal data show.

That increase was fueled by several factors, including increased efforts to identify students with disabilities at earlier ages, broader diagnostic criteria, and the later addition of autism, traumatic brain injuries, and developmental delays as disability categories.

Thirty-two percent of students served under the law have a specific learning disability, like dyslexia or dysgraphia, making it the largest disability category. The other large categories include speech and language impairments like stuttering (19%); "other health impairments" like ADHD or epilepsy that impact learning by affecting issues like attention or focus (15.3%); and autism (13%).

Federal funding for IDEA is well below targets outlined in the law

When Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, it recognized that the new obligations for schools created under Part B of the law would create new expenses.

To cover "excess costs" associated with providing services to students with disabilities, the law created a graduated federal spending schedule. By 1982 and all of the years going forward, "the maximum amount" of each state's grant under Part B would be equivalent to 40% of overall average per-pupil costs in the United States multiplied by the number of children in the state identified under the law.

Appropriations are handled separately by Congress, and decades later, it has never come close to meeting that 40% threshold. Educators and advocates see it as an unfulfilled promise. In the 2024 fiscal year, the $14.2 billion in Part B grants provided to states was equivalent to 10.9% of the average per pupil expenditure, well short of the 40% target, the Congressional Research Service said in an August 2024 report.

Bipartisan groups of senators and representatives have repeatedly introduced bills to "fully fund" IDEA that have not advanced to a vote. The most recent version, proposed in April, would mandate gradual increases in federal funding over 10 years, requiring Congress to reach the 40% threshold by 2035.

Special education teacher shortages remain a top concern for schools

School leaders consistently rank difficulty recruiting and and retaining special education teachers as a top staffing concern, and some advocates say turnover in the role affects the quality of services students receive.

Thirty-four percent of public school leaders reported understaffing in special education in an Oct. 2024 federal survey. By comparison, 22% reported shortages in general elementary education positions.

That shortage is in part due to a persistent trend of teachers with special education certification shifting to general education classrooms, rather than leaving the teacher profession entirely, researchers have found. That may be because of the stresses of the job: paperwork, additional legal responsibilities, case management, and limited resources.

Advocates have pushed for strategies like teacher residencies that allow special education candidates to learn in the classroom with additional support from a certified teacher, bonuses for special education teachers in high needs areas, and mentoring programs that give special educators a backstop on the complicated aspects of their work.

Advocates sound the alarm over IDEA enforcement worries

Implementation of IDEA has always been imperfect; the U.S. Department of Education found just 19 states met the law's requirements in 2025. The agency reviews states' plans to comply with IDEA and key data related to academic progress, discipline and learning environments for students with disabilities. States that don't meet requirements must seek federal technical assistance or target funding to areas that need improvement.

But changes by President Donald Trump's administration have stirred new concerns of weakened federal enforcement of IDEA's mandates.

In November, the Education Department announced plans to offload the duties of many of its offices to other federal agencies. Those offices include elementary and secondary education, which will see core responsibilities such as administering Title I and other key funding streams shift to the U.S. Department of Labor under an interagency agreement made without congressional approval.

Plans to move the office of special education and rehabilitation services and the office for civil rights, which investigates legal complaints about schools' treatment of students with disabilities, to other agencies remain on the table, administration officials said. Even if those offices remain in the Education Department, spreading federal education programs across agencies will increase bureaucracy and put vulnerable students at risk, critics have said.

The Trump administration has also terminated millions of dollars in grants for special education teacher training and other special education projects, attempted to reduce special education oversight staff, and closed seven of 12 regional offices operated by the office for civil rights. About 33% of the 25,000 complaints OCR received in 2024 were related to disability rights, the agency said in a report to Congress, and that category historically has been proportionally among the largest. ■

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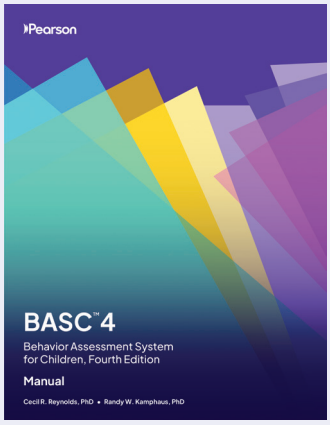

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Published October 13, 2025

Does Extended Time on Tests Actually Help Students With ADHD?

Some of the most common supports for students with ADHD might not be effective

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Picture a student with ADHD whose hallmark symptoms include struggling to sit still and focus for extended periods of time, especially when the subject holds little interest. Then picture that same student receiving extra time to complete a test or assignment—from low-stakes weekly math tests in elementary school to the high-stakes SAT that helps determine college admissions.

The practice seems counterintuitive. Some experts agree.

"For many kids with ADHD, that's an absolutely absurd recommendation," said Gregory Fabiano, a professor of psychology at Florida International University whose research focuses on effective assessments and interventions for children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. "They have a hard time paying attention for the typical time that they're supposed to do the task. Why would giving them another 20 minutes to do that task be thought of as something that would help them at all?"

Yet, "extended time" has become one of the most commonly offered accommodations in K-12 classrooms designed to allow children with learning disorders to complete the same assignments as their classmates but with adaptations. Other such accommodations include preferential seating, in which teachers identify a seating arrangement for a student with ADHD believed to minimize distractions, the use of study notes created by a teacher or peer, and the use of handheld toys such as fidget spinners during class time.

The routine use of these and other accommodations in general education classrooms has burgeoned in recent years, spurred by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as well as a greater awareness and acceptance of ADHD and other developmental or learning disorders. An estimated 11% of the nation's children have ADHD.

But Fabiano and some other special education experts say that many of these practices, albeit well-meaning, found their way into classrooms with little to no proof that they actually worked.

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Indeed, a growing body of evidence suggests that for many students with ADHD commonly used classroom accommodations—like extended time—don't necessarily improve academic outcomes and, in some instances, may actually lead to worse ones.

How extended time became a fixture in classrooms, despite lack of evidence

More than 80% of students diagnosed with ADHD receive extended time, according to a 2021 systematic review of accommodations for students with ADHD.

Despite its prevalence, though, few studies have directly examined the effectiveness or appropriateness of extended time for students with ADHD, the researchers from Teachers College, Columbia University, and the University of Georgia, Athens, found. In two studies, middle and high school students scored better when given additional time—regardless of whether or not they had a diagnosis of ADHD.

Judith Harrison, an associate professor of special education at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., has spent the majority of her professional career researching effective ways to teach life skills to children with ADHD and behavioral disabilities. She's skeptical of many commonly used classroom accommodations—and extended time in particular.

"Extended time for students with ADHD comes from the idea that they're off-task—so if you give them more time, they'll come back to focusing and complete the assignment," Harrison said, "which we're really finding out is not true."

Research seems to bear this out. A 2010 study conducted by Fabiano and colleagues divided a group of 33 school-age children (ages 7 to 12) with ADHD into two groups: One group received the standard 30 minutes to complete seat work; the other received 45 minutes.

The students who received the standard amount of time completed significantly more problems correctly per minute than those who received extended time, the authors found. Further, the researchers observed that the behavior of the students in both groups declined the longer they spent on the assignment.

The researchers who conducted the systematic review of the research suggested that schools use extended time liberally because it's easier and cheaper to implement than behavior-management plans and other evidence-based interventions.

Harrison agrees. An evidence-based intervention "takes longer than just giving students extra time," she said.

Effective use of accommodations requires a nuanced understanding of learning disorders

Still, these accommodations have been found to work for certain groups of students. Experts say teachers may need more training to know which accommodations work for which students and why.

Take preferential seating, for instance—an accommodation commonly applied to students with ADHD.

"I've seen kids that are seated in the front of the class, and it's a very poor placement for them, because they spend the whole class turning around and looking at things behind them," Fabiano said. "On the other hand, I see kids in the back of the class for whom it's problematic because if they're shouting out a lot, that's distracting all the other students around them."

Preferential seating might be ill-advised for many students with ADHD, but it maywork well for the students with the disorder who struggle with inattention, but not hyperactivity or impulse control.

Similarly, while students with ADHD alone may gain little to no benefit from extended time, this accommodation may help students with anxiety perform better. (Some students have a dual diagnosis of ADHD and anxiety.) Eliminating the "timed" element of a test can help a student with anxiety to relax and focus better on the information presented, Harrison said.

Interventions over accommodations?

Instead of simply adopting these accommodations, some experts recommend interventions that provide skills that can benefit a wide berth of students—not just in the classroom but in all aspects of life.

That's a key piece to learning at Bridges Middle School in Portland, Ore., which serves students in 5th through 8th grade with learning differences. Principal Carrie Hall estimates that 60% of the schools' students have ADHD and that they can all benefit from learning how to identify and advocate for strategies that work for them, individually.

Unlike at some schools where teachers decide the timing of breaks for students with ADHD, Bridges aims to teach students to learn when they need a break from work, to advocate for themselves by requesting it, and to know when it's time to get back to work.

"We have found that to be more successful than saying, 'You have to do this. You can't take a break until it's time,'" Hall said.

Similarly, Harrison said that rather than organizing students' school backpacks for them, which some accommodations call for, teaching all children ways they can organize their own spaces—be it a backpack or a locker—can serve them throughout their school and post-school livesaid.

"When we present these ideas at conferences, teachers get really excited," Harrison said. "They agree that we need to teach students skills as opposed to continuing to try to remove barriers." ■

Getty

Published October 02, 2025

ADHD Is Punished in Schools. How Teachers Can Flip the Script

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Excessive squirming and fidgeting. Difficulty paying attention. A tendency to act impulsively and make careless mistakes. Trouble acting cooperatively. These hallmark symptoms of childhood ADHD run counter to behavior that teachers welcome in their classrooms.

It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that the estimated 11% of the nation's children who have the common developmental disorder tend to get punished far more than their classmates. High school students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are twice as likely to get suspended, and five times as likely to be expelled from school, compared to their classmates without ADHD, according to a study of students from nine high schools.

Younger students with ADHD feel the effects of school discipline disproportionately, too. One national survey of parents whose children had ADHD, conducted in 2014, found that nearly 6% of boys and 1.5% of girls with the disorder were expelled from preschool.

A lack of training for teachers on the best practices for classroom management for students with ADHD is partly to blame, say experts. In a study that surveyed elementary teachers 20 years apart, in 1999 and 2019, just 10% of respondents in the initial survey and 30% in the later one reported feeling appropriately trained to manage behaviors of students with ADHD.

Teachers who lack effective training tend to resort to punitive measures in response to behaviors associated with ADHD, like inattention or impulsivity, said Gregory Fabiano, a professor of psychology at Florida International University whose research focuses on effective assessments and interventions for children with ADHD.

But meting out punishments—especially exclusionary discipline, like suspensions—rarely works in the short or long term to address the challenges that students with ADHD face, he argues.

Students with ADHD too often get trapped in a negative feedback loop

The school experience of students with ADHD often looks far different than that of their peers, Fabiano observes.

Students without behavioral challenges typically have the privilege of positive interactions with adults, he said. Nobody groans when they come into the room or automatically expects them to misbehave. On the contrary, the school experience of someone with ADHD can feel lonely and discouraging.

"The sort of kids that I often work with as a clinical child psychologist, the ones with behavioral challenges, their entire day is often commands, demands, reprimands, corrective feedback, criticism, getting in trouble," Fabiano said. "You can imagine how that approach wears thin for both the adult and the child really quickly. It's just repeating the same kind of approach over and over again until the student drops out or disengages from school."

One study from 2010 estimated that 32% of students with ADHD drop out of high school, compared to 15% of teens that don't have a psychiatric disorder.

By the time a student with ADHD is in middle or high school, they're likely to have accumulated a history of negative interactions with adults in the school setting, Fabiano points out.

"They're often only seen or heard when they've been misbehaving, and oftentimes the adults miss opportunities to engage with them when things are going the right way," he said.

The daily report card can reinforce positive behavior for students with ADHD

Receiving positive affirmation is critical to the success of all students. But forms of positive reinforcement that motivate most students, like quarterly or semester report cards, don't necessarily have the same effect on kids with ADHD, said Fabiano.

"Traditional report cards don't do enough to make a difference for children who are prone to outbursts or other challenging behaviors," he said. But daily report cards can, especially for elementary and middle school students.

The tool sets specific, daily goals to which the classroom teacher, student, and his or her parents or guardians agree in advance. When those goals are met, the student—with parents' buy-in—receives a specific and previously agreed upon home-based reward, like a slightly later-than-usual bedtime or screen time privileges.

Fabiano offers advice on how to make the daily report card effective, starting with making sure the goals are clear and objective.

"It's not just, 'I had a good day.' It's 'I completed my work within the time given,' or 'I had no more than three reminders for calling out during the lesson,'" he said.

Providing feedback in real time, throughout the day, also helps, said Fabiano, as it gives the child an opportunity to course correct if needed.

"The daily report card gives the opportunity for the child to have a great day and positive attention," he said. "But also, if they have a rocky day, they have a clean slate the next day. That's what's often missing in interventions for kids with ADHD."

A 2025 study by Fabiano and colleagues found the use of these daily report cards effective. The study included 213 students ages 5 through 13, all of whom had ADHD and an individualized education program in special education classes. One group of students received daily report cards tailored to their specific needs. The other group did not.

Diligent use of the strategy resulted in significantly improved classroom behavior and fewer incidents of disruptive or rule-breaking behavior for students compared to those who received standard special education support, the researchers found.

For older students with ADHD, individualized support can keep them on track

High school students with ADHD may not respond well to the idea of a daily report card, but they can still benefit from the positive reinforcement of trusted adults.

Bryan Rotella, the principal of Niagara Falls High School in New York, has adopted a system that focuses on providing individualized support from assigned staff members to students with behavioral challenges. PASS, which stands for Positive Approaches to Student Success, aims to improve students' attendance, behavior and coursework through regular touchpoints—from helping students build class schedules or agendas, offering support on coursework, making sure they're coming to school on time, or helping with whatever aspect of school that presents a struggle.

The program enrolls about 100 of its estimated 2,150 students; about 75% of students who participate have been diagnosed with ADHD or exhibit symptoms of the disorder. Staff members assigned to support them may be a teacher, paraprofessional, or other educator. The primary criteria for staff members, Rotella said, includes "people who have developed great relationships with the student body as a whole."

As for the students, he said, "they don't necessarily have IEPs, but they are on the cusp of falling off the fence."

These supportive staff members understand how overwhelming high school can feel for a student with attention issues, Rotella said.

"Think about a school schedule where you have seven or eight classes in a day, and they almost never align with one another," he said. "It's like a champion reassuring these students that they're not in this alone."

Rotella believes that program, which has been active for the past five years, has had a significant impact on the school's graduation rate. In 2019, the school's graduation rate was 66%. In 2024, the most recent year for which data are available, the graduation rate reached 82%—an increase that included students with symptoms of ADHD.

Effort on the front end pays off in the long run

Fabiano emphasized that he does not place blame on teachers for the poor outcomes of students with ADHD.

"I have empathy for educators. It's hard work to manage a whole classroom of children," he said.

So too, he acknowledges, is effectively addressing students' behavioral challenges, whether that entails developing daily report cards for students in elementary school or assigning individual trusted adults to provide ongoing support to struggling high schoolers. But he sees the value in putting in the effort up front.

"If there is any child in the class that's taking up most of a teacher's time already, it's probably the child with the disruptive behaviors," Fabiano said. "And if you can figure out an approach that helps that child be more successful and promote your ability to do what you really want to do, which is to educate the students in your class, that investment is probably worthwhile because of the long-term dividends it's going to pay." ■

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Published October 07, 2024

Talking to Students About Their Learning Differences: A Guide for Teachers

By Arianna Prothero

Nix Ren for Education Week

If, as a teacher, your student asks you what dyslexia is, can you answer? What about dyscalculia?

Most students with learning differences are going to spend the majority of their time in general education classrooms. That means their teachers need to be prepared to talk with them about why they struggle to read, write, or do math so students are equipped with the knowledge needed to learn and advocate for themselves to the best of their abilities.

Unfortunately, many general education teachers are not prepared for those conversations, say experts.

That's for a variety of reasons. There's lingering stigma around using terms like dyslexia. Myths and misconceptions about how brains function abound among educators. And teacher-preparation programs don't often give budding educators a grounding in the basics of common learning differences, said Holly Lane, the director of the University of Florida Literacy Institute and an associate professor of special education.

Talking to students about their learning disabilities and understanding how those differences will affect their academic progress shouldn't solely be the purview of special education teachers and school psychologists, she said. But many general education teachers don't have the understanding, the training, or even the language to have those conversations.

"I hear so often from teachers, 'this child has an IEP and I don't know what to do,' or, 'I don't understand the nature of their difficulty,' and I think the way that a lot of school systems have set up their systems, it's a mentality of, 'those kids' needs are addressed elsewhere and I don't have to know what to do.' That's the problem," Lane said. "Teachers are spread thin, overworked, and expected to know a whole lot of things—it's not a slam on teachers."

Whether a student has dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, or any other neurodivergent condition that makes learning harder for them, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, it helps for them to have a basic understanding of why they struggle to learn or do things when their neurotypical peers don't. It can improve students' confidence and their ability to advocate for themselves in the classroom, which is an especially important skill when they get into high school, college, and the workforce, say experts.

Helping students—and teachers—understand learning differences starts with naming them, said Robin Zikmund, a parent of a high school student with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Zikmund is also the founder of the Idaho chapter of Decoding Dyslexia, an advocacy organization.

She has met many teachers and other school staff who shy away from using "the D words," Zikmund said.

But for her and her son, learning that there were labels—and ultimately a reason—that he struggled academically was a huge relief. Zikmund's son was officially diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia when he was in 3rd grade. It was his struggles with reading that prompted Zikmund to get her son evaluated independently by a neuropsychologist.

"By the time you're in 3rd grade, children are reading to learn, they're no longer learning to read. You know how mean kids are—he couldn't read, and it started to stand out," Zikmund said. "He came home to me at 9 years old, [and said], 'Mom what is wrong with me? I just want to kill myself.'"

When her son learned the word for what ailed him, it was "everything," Zikmund said. She bought children's books about dyslexia to read to him. She told him dyslexia is probably hereditary and that it's not that uncommon.

"I had that conversation and it was such a game changer," she said. "You could see it in his eyes, like, 'oh, I'm not just dumb?'"

But using correct terminology can be fraught. Students may not want their learning difference discussed publicly in class, and parents may fret about their child being saddled with what they perceive to be a negative label, said Zikmund. And teachers should never say a student has dyslexia without a formal diagnosis or evaluation.

But, Zikmund said, it's critical for terms like dyslexia to be at the very least used on internal documents, like an individualized education program, or IEP, and in discussions among educators and parents working with a student with a learning difference.

The U.S. Department of Education issued guidance in 2015 clarifying that schools could use terms like dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia when developing IEPs for students.

Even among a student population almost entirely made up of students with dyslexia, Maria Paluselli has found that parents can be tentative about using labels. Paluselli is the CEO of Provident Charter School in Pitts-

burgh, which specializes in serving students with dyslexia.

Dyslexia can be an emotionally raw topic for families and students, she said.

"You might have 10 people who want you to talk about it; you might have 10 others who say that's something for me to discuss with my child, why are you going there?"

Why teachers need to know what's happening inside the brains of their students

Students with learning differences benefit from knowing more about how their brains function—that specific areas in the brain related to, say, language, quantity, and motor skills process information differently—and how common specific learning disabilities like dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia are.

Dyslexia and dyscalculia both affect 3 to 7 percent of people, with some estimates suggesting that 1 in 5 people have dyslexia. Similarly, estimates for how many people have dysgraphia range between 5 and 20 percent.

That doesn't mean that teachers need to be prepared to launch into lectures on neuroscience, said Edward Hubbard, an associate professor in educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. But it is important for teachers to impart to their students that their learning challenges are related to biology, not their intelligence or willpower.

It's vital for students to understand that brains are not static—they change, said Hubbard. Teachers are in an ideal position to help students learn how they learn.

Students should understand the idea of brain plasticity and "how much the brain can change in response to learning, and the idea that with extra support, with extra practice, you will be able to get better at these skills," he said. "Maybe you won't be as good as somebody who doesn't have the same sort of setbacks or difficulties to overcome. But you can get a lot better."

Having a deeper understanding of their learning differences helps students advocate for themselves and their needs, especially as they get older when they may have to describe their condition and the accommodations they need to teachers, professors, and bosses.

That's why teaching students how to advocate for themselves—as well as refining their studying and test-taking skills—is a major focus for 7th and 8th graders at Provident Charter School before they graduate and head to a regular high school, said Paluselli.

"Your family knows [you have dyslexia], we know this, but you're going to a different school and you need to be able to speak up for yourself," she said.

All of this means that students benefit greatly if their teachers also have some baseline understanding of how the brains of students with learning differences work differently. While teachers don't need to be able to name the intraparietal sulcus, a part of the brain related to dyscalculia, Hubbard said, they should know enough about how dyscalculia affects students' math learning. That helps them tailor their instruction to the students' needs.

"When we start to think about why kids struggle, a lot of people will say, 'all we need to know is if they're succeeding or not. Isn't that enough?'" said Hubbard.

He answers that question with an analogy.

"If I go out to the garage and my car doesn't start, it might be useful for me to know if it's out of gas or if the battery is dead. Because I'm going to do very different things to fix [it]," he said. "I am not very mechanically inclined, but I have to know a little bit about what is happening under the hood to decide what is going to be the right strategy to solve this problem."

Teachers should be able and willing to dispel common myths around learning differences for their students—or at the very least not perpetuate them, Hubbard said.

Surveys of teachers in England, the United States, and the Netherlands have shown widespread beliefs about the brain that aren't true, he said. One of the most entrenched "neuromyths" is the belief that students are either visual or auditory learners.

"I see a lot of preservice teachers taking my classes, and they are often surprised by some of the things they have heard about that aren't true," Hubbard said. "They often have heard about dyslexia, but they are often gratified to find out about dyscalculia and get some insights into why some kids may struggle."

Debunking common myths and misconceptions about learning differences

Widespread myths about dyslexia include the belief that dyslexia is more common among boys, that it only affects English speakers, that children will grow out of it. Another one is that dyslexia is related to vision and that giving students text in a specific font will help them read, said Lane.

Although not the same as a myth, Lane worries about a trend that is generally seen as a best practice: telling students that while their learning difference will cause them to struggle in some academic pursuits, it will lead them to excel in others.

"You can be very smart and have dyslexia, but there's a tendency almost to overplay that part," she said. "That's a really common approach that people will say to kids: 'All these really smart people with all these really great talents have dyslexia.'"

But that can make kids feel worse, Lane said. "People talk about dyslexia being a gift," she said. "I think that's a problem, because for a lot of kids there's nothing gift-like about it. It can be a real challenge."

Taken together, this advice might start feeling like an impossible tightrope to walk:

- Don't shy away from talking openly with students about their learning differences, but not if it makes them uncomfortable;
- Be honest about how the makeup of their brain may make learning certain things more difficult for the rest of their lives, but don't stigmatize them; and
- Encourage a growth mindset and an understanding of the plasticity of their brains, but don't prime them for failure by building them up too much.

It seems like a mess of contradictions, said Peter Faustino, the president of the National Association of School Psychologists, but it's a mess that teachers are likely used to navigating.

Every student, whether they are in special education or not, learns differently, said Faustino. Teachers need to take their lead and cues from the student on how much information they need about the inner workings of their brains and the specifics of their learning difference, he said.

"Learning is a complex set of processes," he said. "We want a student to pay attention to something, we have to input the information through their senses, they have to organize it, and then we want them to retrieve that information at some point. That looks very different for every single person. When we have a challenge in doing a task, it's really the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset."

But just as important as understanding students' learning differences, is that general education teachers develop strong relationships with them, said Benjamin Tillotson, a long-time special education teacher in Salt Lake City.

It can be hard for students to open up about their disability, he said, because often times their learning differences only come up in school when they're failing at something, he said.

"That sets up a negative pattern in the student's mind and in this educational relationship," he said.

Teachers should get ahead of that, he said, by talking with students early about their learning difference and what they need to be successful in an upbeat, forward-looking way.

"It's about fostering not only a relationship with a student, but I'm creating a safe environment for them to communicate that they have a disability, and not punishing them."

Educating the rest of the class—and teachers—about learning differences

Talking about how everyone has strengths and weaknesses is a good way to message learning differences to all students.

Teachers have an important role in normalizing learning differences for the rest of the class, said Rachel Ganz, a pediatric neuropsychologist for the Child Mind Institute. Teachers shouldn't focus solely on the students who have them.

She recommends teachers use phrases like, "Johnny learns differently than Sarah," she said, or "Sarah might need to sit in a quiet setting to read." Say that students have different brains, she said, just like they have different hobbies, likes, and dislikes.

"Talking about it openly as a class, I think, leads to more acceptance and, hopefully, for students to advocate for themselves," she said.

If teachers feel out of their depth talking about learning differences with their students, they don't have to do it alone. They should ask for help, said Paluselli. She recommends teachers lean on in-house experts, such as a school psychologist, to talk to the class about learning differences and other neurodivergent conditions.

Zikmund, the parent, said she really appreciated when her son's 4th grade teacher invited her into his classroom to give a talk about dyslexia. Zikmund handed out pencils to the students, with one out of every five pencils being red instead of the standard yellow, to represent some estimates of how common the characteristics of dyslexia are. She said students were curious and nonjudgmental, and she felt like the exercise helped create a more hospitable environment for her son to learn in.

Including the entire class in discussions about how people's brains are wired differently, affecting how they learn, helps create a positive classroom culture where students with learning differences feel comfortable enough to try and fail, rather than stigmatized, said Faustino. It can also help students develop those all-important self-advocacy skills, he said.

Teacher-prep programs fall short in grounding all teachers in learning differences

While experts say it's valuable for general education teachers to have a baseline understanding of what common learning differences are, how they present, and how to work with students who have them, teachers often aren't receiving that guidance in their teacher-prep programs, said Lane.

All educators in a school should have some familiarity with common neurodivergent disorders and their students' IEPs, said Zikmund. She remembers her son coming home from school "in a puddle" because the music teacher didn't understand his dyslexia and embarrassed him in front of the class because he couldn't read music.

Not requiring preservice teachers to learn about learning differences in schools of education is a missed opportunity and not good practice, Lane said. Every teacher will encounter and need to know how to teach students with learning differences. Between 10 and 20 percent of students in any given class could have a learning difference, Lane said, whether or not they have been evaluated or diagnosed.

And what works for students with learning differences usually works for everyone, she said.

"Very seldom is there a particular instructional practice that a child with a disability needs that wouldn't also help some other child in your classroom or maybe all children," Lane said. "It's not just like you're learning something just for those specific children. Those are practices that are going to be beneficial to everyone—they're not going to be harmful to anyone." ■

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Nicole Xu for Education Week

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'A Unique Challenge': What English Learners With Disabilities Need

By Ileana Najarro

Students with disabilities face a gamut of challenges when it comes to accessing high-quality K-12 education, including a shortage of specialized teachers. The nation's growing English-learner population faces outsized needs as their English-language proficiency scores remain lower than pre-COVID-19-pandemic averages, and immigrant English learners in particular require more trauma-informed instruction.

English learners who also have disabilities face their own intersectional issues, researchers and advocates say. They range from schools locking students out of dual-language programs in favor of English-only special education programs, language barriers between schools and families, and teachers ill-equipped to serve their students' needs.

"It's a complex issue. If it was easy, we would have probably figured out a better way forward by now," said Sarah Salinas, an assistant professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato's department of special education. "[This group] includes students that are at the intersection potentially of cultural differences, linguistic differences, and disability differences."

According to federal data from the school year 2020-21, nearly 14 percent of all students ages 5 through 21 enrolled in public schools were served under IDEA Part B. Of those students, 11.7 percent were English learners.

As this dual-identified population continues to grow, researchers and advocates offer some potential systemic solutions to many of the prevailing challenges these students and their families face.

A lack of access to bilingual education

One of the top concerns researchers and parents alike shared in interviews with Education Week when it comes to English learners with disabilities is a lack of access to bilingual education or dual-language programs.

Parents are encouraged to speak only English with dual-identified students, in part because of a flawed assumption that bilingualism will confuse them or hinder their academic progress or language progress, said Nikkia Borowski, a Ph.D. candidate in inclusive education at Syracuse University who studies access to bilingualism among such students.

She added that there is also the idea that dual-language programs are enrichment programs designed for academically gifted students, locking dual-identified students out in the process.

This preference for English-only instruction for English learners with disabilities plays out in smaller contexts as well, such as speech-generating devices students use that are programmed only in English.

"As a result, the students are missing access to a bilingual identity and missing access to really important cultural aspects as well," Borowski said.

There is also the matter of how federal policy works for these dual-identified students.

Both the Equal Education Act of 1968 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act apply to this student population.

The IDEA, in its 2004 reauthorization, defines a least restrictive environment as the premise of providing services to a student with the greatest access to the general education curriculum, without any explicit mention of what these services look like for multilingual students, Salinas said. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 focuses on language access for students whose first language is not English without explicit mention of education access for students with disabilities.

So while dual-identified students stand at the intersection of distinct federal policies and laws, the policies and laws are not intersectional themselves.

And even though an English-learner tool kit from the U.S. Department of Education's office of English-language acquisition reminds educators that a student's English learner and disability-related educational needs must be met, what ultimately ends up happening is special education and IDEA are consistently prioritized over bilingual education services, Salinas said.

Policymakers have talked about reauthorizing IDEA with more explicit mentions of the needs of dual-identified students, though such a move remains hypothetical, Salinas added.

But even before policies and practices can better align to the linguistic, cultural, and disability-related needs of students, another challenge is at play that presents a quicker potential solution.

The need to reassess communication between schools and families

Navigating IDEA and individual education programs, or IEPs, can already be a daunting task for families. Doing so while English is not the family's home language is all the more complicated.

Under IDEA, districts must ensure that a student's parents understand the proceedings of the IEP team meeting, including taking steps such as providing a translator.

In an April survey by the EdWeek Research Center, 65 percent of participating district and school leaders said they offered translation services for special education programming for students whose first language is not English. 37 percent said they did so for all relevant languages spoken by students and families.

Meanwhile, 6 percent of leaders said they do not offer such a service although they have special education students with that need.

Even when considering that 37 percent said their school or districts covered all relevant languages in translation needs, there's a question of whether the translators involved were trained professionals who understand things like IEPs, or if Spanish-language teachers and bilingual receptionists were called in instead, said Christy Moreno, the chief community advocacy and impact officer of the Missouri-based family-advocacy group Revolucion Educativa.

Moreno, a trained interpreter and translator herself, said offering translation services is the minimum schools and districts must offer families. High-quality translation is key to ensuring families are fully informed of their rights, she added.

"I've seen IEPs that are done by Google Translate," Moreno said.

In addition to investing in proper translation and interpretation, Moreno said educators need to proactively ensure that parents understand how to ask questions about their children's education. That includes taking into account cultural barriers at play such as stigma within the Latino community over the experiences of students in special education.

Lizdelia Piñón, an emergent bilingual education associate for the Texas-based advocacy nonprofit Intercultural Development Research Association, or IDRA, knows all too well how important it is for families to advocate for their children. Her Spanish-speaking 11-year-old triplets require several accommodations for their autism, cerebral palsy, ADHD, and more.

On several occasions, Piñón said she had to file formal complaints against her local school district to ensure her children's linguistic and special education needs were met—including pushing back against an attempt to reduce the time her triplets spent with their special education teacher.

However, one systemic issue she sees is a lack of proper training among educators on how to best work with dual-identified students.

The need for better teacher preparation

Piñón worked as a bilingual teacher for about 10 years. She knows that existing bilingual teachers can get their certification in special education as well. But there is a gap of information in both programs, she said, leaving teachers without full context on how to best work with dual-identified students.

"I think that educating English learners with disabilities is a unique challenge for our teachers," Piñón said.

Overall, there aren't many teacher-preparation programs that train teachers on what to do in bilingual special education classrooms, said Salinas of Minnesota State University.

Recognizing that knowledge gap, Piñón worked on legislation signed into law in 2021 in Texas to create a bilingual special education certification. However, approval of the new certificate program remains stalled within the state board of education.

Yet, a temporary solution to such knowledge gaps in teacher preparation lies in strategic collaboration among educators, Salinas said.

Such work isn't always possible between special education and bilingual education teachers on account of tight school schedules and other barriers, she added.

Still, it's a strategy researchers focusing on English learners say can mitigate not only a lack of bilingual and special education teachers but also address how little training general education teachers have when it comes to working with English learners and special education students overall. ■

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What RFK Jr. Is Getting Wrong About ADHD

What educators should know about Make America Healthy Again misinformation

By Keona J. Wynne, Andrew Kahn & Jennifer Spindler

Teaching students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder requires educators to have a deep understanding of the challenges—and strengths—that the learning difference can bring. But now, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Make America Healthy Again Commission is adding confusion and mixed messaging to educators' plates. While the secretary's views on vaccines have been commanding the most attention, a new strategy report released by his department this week affirms that ADHD also remains on his agenda.

The most comprehensive report detailing what that agenda is, originally released in May, has since come under fire from medical experts, public health officials, and researchers for making misleading claims about childhood health.

With large portions of the report displaying hallmark errors of AI-generated text, "Make Our Children Healthy Again: Assessment" contains scientifically unproven and misleading claims and inaccurate citations.

As researchers who focus on neurodiversity and health, we worry about the damage a report of this magnitude will do to public understanding and, ultimately, to America's students.

First, misleading statements can increase stigma surrounding ADHD. This stigma may make parents, teachers, and even kids themselves hesitant to seek support.

Second, educators need accurate information about ADHD. More than 30% of the time, someone at school or day care is the first person to express concern about a child's ADHD symptoms. Those educators need to rely on proven methods to help students with the disorder get the most of their schooling.

This is why we at Understood.org extensively reviewed the claims related to ADHD in the original MAHA report. We set out to determine what was true, what was scientifically unproved, and what may have been slanted.

While the report makes many references to the condition, we extracted seven specific claims for our evaluation. Here, we break down three that have the largest implications for educators.

Claim #1: The rate of ADHD is increasing

This is somewhat true but misleading. The study cited by the MAHA report did find that in 2022, roughly 1 million more children had ever received an ADHD diagnosis compared with 2016. When we look at additional research, we also see a surge in diagnoses in girls and in people of color during this same period. This surge reflects an increased understanding of how these conditions show up in people who are not white boys.

While the number of diagnoses in the United States is increasing, to the best of our knowledge, there's no evidence to suggest this is the result of overdiagnosis. Instead, it's far more reasonable to conclude that people have always had ADHD, but millions have gone undiagnosed for a variety of reasons.

What this means for educators: Roughly 7.1 million children in the United States have ADHD, so it's likely that there's at least one student with ADHD in every classroom. It is important for educators to understand that the disorder is real and that diagnosis rates are increasing, especially among girls and children of color. They must effectively support students who have a diagnosis. And they should not hesitate to refer students for evaluation out of fear of contributing to an "overdiagnosis" crisis. Research shows that diagnosis improves education outcomes for students with ADHD, and a great education is the bedrock for a lifetime of success.

Claim #2: U.S. children are more likely to be prescribed stimulants

The studies cited by the MAHA report don't support this claim. The studies cited appear to compare the numbers of prescriptions in the United States to those of other countries like Japan and the United Kingdom by roughly estimating the numbers. But to be sure of their claim, they'd need to do more than a rough estimation. They'd need to make mathematical calculations to consider things like population size, age, and prescription preferences of providers in each country. Those calculations would ensure that we're comparing United States populations with others accurately.

The authors of one U.K. study cited in the report are in agreement with research showing that the increase in ADHD medication prescriptions is a global trend, not specific to the United States.

What this means for educators: When educators understand how ADHD medicines help, it can reduce stigma and unconscious bias. A systematic review of 30 studies found that caregivers consistently reported that lack of understanding of the condition by educators negatively impacted the child and resulted in missed opportunities. This sentiment

may be especially true for Latino and Black children in the United States.

The evidence is overwhelmingly clear: Stimulant medications can extend lives. A new large-scale, rigorous study from Sweden found that people who started and maintained medication usage within three months of diagnosis were less likely to attempt suicide, misuse substances, get into an automobile accident, or be convicted of a crime when compared with those not on stimulants within three months of diagnosis.

Claim #3: Consumption of food dyes is associated with ADHD

This is somewhat true but misleading. The MAHA report correctly points out a growing interest in how food dyes affect kids' behavioral health. But it's still tough to say for sure if dyes directly cause ADHD or just make hyperactivity or ADHD symptoms worse in some children. In our view, it's appropriate to describe food dyes as a public health concern but not necessarily an ADHD concern.

What this means for educators: Educators need to understand that ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder. Scientists believe it's caused by a mix of genetics, environment, and brain differences. It's not a disorder that can be cured through food choices alone.

The truth is that ADHD affects millions of children and adults each year. When our nation's top public health officials describe it inaccurately, educators may end up with misinformation. This may prevent students from receiving the critical support they need at home and in school.

Instead of feeling discouraged, now is the time to spread awareness about what children with the condition need to thrive. We must push for more long-term research. And we must give educators accurate resources so children with ADHD get the support they need at school. ■

Keona J. Wynne is the senior research manager of interdisciplinary research at Understood.org, which provides resources for adults and children with learning differences. Andrew Kahn is associate director of expertise and strategic design and, Jennifer Spindler is the associate director of interdisciplinary research at the organization.

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Late Assignments: Tips From Educators on Managing Them

By Larry Ferlazzo

'Taking Late Work Can Be Challenging'

Ann Stiltner is a high school special education and reading teacher in Connecticut with more than 20 years of experience in education. She shares her passion and love for working in the classroom at her blog from Room A212 (www.annstiltner.com/blog). Follow her on Twitter @fromrooma212:

Being a special education teacher means most of my students have the IEP modification of extra time, which generally translates to time and a half. For a test a teacher gives a class one hour to do, my student would have 1½ hours. For a project the class had one week to complete, my student would have 11 days. However, even with this extra time, some of my spec. ed. students are not able to complete the work. With diagnoses such as ADHD, LD (Learning Disabilities), or anxiety, they find maintaining focus and accessing one-on-one support difficult to fit into these time constraints. Their motivation is unpredictable based on their mood, family challenges, or social drama.

Due to these factors, I have adopted a policy where I accept work from both regular and special education students at any time for full credit or I take points off for each day late depending on the circumstances and if that will motivate a student to finish.

I realize that taking late work can be challenging for teachers of 100-plus students. It means constantly updating your grade book and keeping track of papers. Some teachers don't accept late work because they think a firm cutoff teaches students the importance of meeting deadlines. Even though I agree this is an important skill, I fear that some students won't learn that lesson from a policy of not accepting work late. These students prefer to give up and forget about the assignment in order to feel a sense of control and protect themselves from failure. Getting a zero on an assignment does not make them rethink their decision to not do the work, since a zero to them doesn't mean the same as it does to us teachers. To them, a zero is the grade they think they deserve based on their past experiences.

I have found a time limit gives students a reason to give up and not try. This is learned helplessness in action. My working definition of learned helplessness is a person's lack of effort due to previous experiences which have taught them that making even the smallest effort won't make a difference.

For many students, trying involves a large investment of cognitive effort and a huge risk to put themselves out there. They are not ready to set themselves up for what, they are sure, will make them feel like a failure and especially not in a setting where they might be bullied, yelled at, or insulted. If they do not feel safe and supported, they will not risk being teased by their classmates. This is the thinking behind my policy to accept late work at any time. I do not want my conditions and requirements to be used as an excuse for why they do not engage in my lesson and do the work.

This same philosophy explains why I provide supplies like writing utensils or computer chargers. I consciously decide not to create barriers for a student to complete work. I do not want to rob them of a chance to engage with the material, learn something new, experience deep thinking and feed their curiosity by dictating conditions that they can blame for not engaging in the work. Accepting an assignment late gives them time to get motivated or set up one-to-one support so they can focus on the work when they are ready. I do not want to distract students with rules concerning time limits, pen vs. pencil, or on paper vs. on computer.

Don't get me wrong: I do have classroom rules and expectations. I want the focus in my class to be on what is most essential—learning. This approach means the student—and their parents—will have a hard time holding me responsible for their grade. The responsibility falls on the student and their choices. This open policy allows me to create rapport when I explain my belief in their ability to do the work and my dedication to provide them the support and necessary modifications to be successful. If and when a student is ready to engage in the work, make an effort and take a risk, I am ready.

'A Balanced Approach'

Ruth Okoye, Ed.D., is a 30-year veteran educator. She has taught in private and public school settings and is passionate about literacy, educational technology, and ed-tech coaching. She currently serves as the K-12 director at a nonprofit organization:

As an ed-tech coach working with fellow educators in their journey of professional growth, handling assignment submissions beyond the designated due date is a nuanced process that reflects both practicality and a deep understanding of individual circumstances. The approach I adopt recognizes the unique challenges that my learners who are teachers face in their daily lives, and it aims to create an inclusive learning environment that supports their development while acknowledging the diverse contexts in which they operate.

My policy on due dates is rooted in the realization that a one-size-fits-all approach fails to account for the myriad of responsibilities

and situations that learners encounter. Rather than rigidly adhering to stringent deadlines, I advocate a balanced approach that considers the academic integrity of assignments and the need for flexibility.

To strike this balance, I establish a preferred due date for assignments, considering the majority of learners and allowing them ample time to complete their work. This desired deadline also has a more concrete counterpart—a hard deadline—that offers a reasonable time frame for those genuinely committed to finishing their tasks. This dual-deadline structure allows proactive learners to demonstrate their dedication while acknowledging the potential challenges others may face.

For example, in a book study, there would be weekly assignments. The posted due dates would give the learners three weeks to get each assignment done. I would establish a hard deadline for all assignments two weeks after the study is completed. I've found that for a six- to eight-week book study, that allows ample time for a learner to deal with an external complication and then get back on track.

Of course, the purpose of the assignment plays a significant role in determining the flexibility of the due date. For instance, tasks geared toward in-class reflection, like exit tickets, maintain their original deadline as they serve an immediate and time-sensitive purpose. On the other hand, assignments designed to assess learners' application of covered material need a more lenient approach, allowing participants the time to digest the content and apply it effectively.

I also believe in allowing learners ample time to attempt tasks and even granting multiple opportunities for submission. This practice is grounded in the understanding that the learning process is not linear, and different individuals require varying duration to internalize and implement new concepts. By granting extensions and multiple tries, I encourage a growth mindset and empower learners to engage more deeply with the subject.

One of the cornerstones of my policy is the recognition that external factors beyond the learning experience can impact a learner's ability to meet deadlines. Illness, family emergencies, or resource constraints can hinder progress, and rigid due dates should not serve as barriers to measuring their ability to apply course concepts. Instead of penalizing them for circumstances beyond their control, I aim to evaluate their understanding of the material and capacity to use it effectively, irrespective of external hindrances.

So you can see, my approach to handling late submissions from learners revolves around flexibility, empathy, and practicality. By acknowledging the diverse challenges teachers face and tailoring due dates to the purpose of assignments, I create an environment that fosters deep learning, personal growth, and a commitment to the subject matter. This policy recognizes the unique circumstances of each learner. It underscores the overarching goal of professional learning—to nurture and support the development of capable and resilient professionals in education.

What Is the Goal?

Jessica Fernandez is a full-time high school teacher and instructional coach near Chicago who specializes in teaching multilingual English learners and in supporting colleagues to make small language shifts that will benefit all learners:

Fortunately, my high school freshman English PLC has decided to have two categories: formative (anything at all that is practice), which is weighted 10 percent, and summative, which is weighted 90 percent. Since the purpose of formative tasks is to practice a skill they will later demonstrate, late work is accepted until we complete the summative demonstration for that skill. Afterward, there's not so much of a point, plus it would drive us crazy and make work-life balance tough.

The goal, after all, is to give frequent and prompt feedback so kids can improve before their final summative demonstration. Late points are more of what we used to call "habits of work"; important soft skills, yes, but for our purposes, if the kid practiced for their summative skill demonstration, I'm happy, and I'm not scoring them on timeliness. Who knows what they had going on? I've gotten grace, and 10 percent won't make or break their grade anyway. ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades. He is currently a volunteer tutor to English-learner newcomers at a local school and to youth in juvenile hall.

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Diagnosing ADHD Is Hard. Here's What Teachers Need to Know

Certain groups of students are vulnerable to being over- or underdiagnosed with ADHD

By Evelyn Polk Green

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The chances are high that at some point in your teaching career, you'll be asked to fill out an assessment (or many) for students suspected of having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

Most diagnoses require observational data of a student's behaviors in different settings, such as at school and at home. But these observations are subjective and vulnerable to biases. An increasing number of studies show that certain groups of students are either over- or underdiagnosed with ADHD due to misconceptions about the disorder and differences by gender and race.

An estimated 6.1 million children in the United States have been diagnosed with ADHD. Millions more children with the disorder are surely left undiagnosed. Early intervention is so crucial for success down the road, at home and at school.

It is important that teachers—who play a key observational role in ADHD assessments in a school setting—understand that many factors can play into a diagnosis and how racial, gender, and age biases can affect those factors. It is equally important that school systems provide educators additional support through more objective testing measures, many of which already exist.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines ADHD as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent patterns of inattention or hyperactivity to the point where they interfere with development and daily functioning. Common symptoms are a lack of impulse control, restlessness, daydreaming, disorganization, forgetfulness, and poor attention to detail. While many of these behaviors can be attributed to typical child development, a key difference in a child with ADHD is they struggle with the same problems repeatedly, regardless of consequence or incentive.

Of course, many of these same symptoms are common with other disabilities, including anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and autism. External factors like a lack of sleep, an unstable home life, stress, and trauma can also produce these symptoms.

Put all those factors together, and it can be difficult to distinguish ADHD from other issues initially.

When people think of a child with ADHD, they probably envision a child with boundless energy, constantly moving and talking, disruptively jumping from task to task. While these are classic signs, they do not paint a complete picture of ADHD and lead to the underdiagnosis of female students and the overdiagnosis of younger students.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, male students are more than twice as likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis than female students. This is because ADHD symptoms often present differently between genders. ADHD is typically defined by three categories of behavior—hyperactivity-impulsivity, inattention, and combined. These behaviors are a common display of hyperactivity-impulsive type and are more often, but not exclusively, seen in male students.

Across genders, all three behavior types show up very differently. For example, hyperactivity-impulsivity in females often deals with difficulties in regulating emotion and can lead to difficulties forming social relationships with their peers. Females are also more likely to display inattentive-type behaviors such as distractibility, forgetfulness, inattention to detail, and disorganization. Because inattentive behaviors are often less overtly disruptive than hyperactive-impulsive behaviors, they are often overlooked.

Where girls are less likely to be diagnosed than boys, younger students are far more likely to be diagnosed than their older classmates. A recent meta-analysis of 19 studies in 13 countries covering more than 15.4 million children concluded that children whose birth date puts them on the younger side of their age-based cohort in school are considerably more likely to be diagnosed with or medicated for ADHD than their older peers. The pace of child development is very rapid, especially in the early years, so students who are months younger than their grade-level peers will display marked differences in behavior, especially when it comes to impulse control and activity levels.

In both instances, children who go undiagnosed develop coping skills that then mask their symptoms. Critics of ADHD use these studies to argue that the diagnosis of ADHD is a sham, but this disparity is actually the result of emotional immaturity in younger children.

Implicit bias can also hinder a diagnosis for students of color. It's an uncomfortable fact that everyone brings certain biases to their worldview. Our personal experiences, cultural messaging, and exposure to different people and ideas shape our judgments, for better or worse, and we may not know we have these implicit biases.

While these types of judgments are not maliciously intended, they can have a disproportionate effect on students of color. A 2013 study found that nonwhite students were 46 percent to 69 percent less likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis than their white peers. Follow-up studies as recently as this year have continued to confirm these disparities. In fact, students of color are more likely to be labeled with conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) for behaviors that are labeled as ADHD in white students. Additional hurdles like higher rates of poverty, less access to health care, and cultural stigmas towards mental health within communities of color compound the problem.

The reality is that diagnosing ADHD is hard. With so many age-related and developmental questions at play in competition with our own biases, nothing is more important to the future of ADHD diagnosis than the widespread adoption of objective testing measures.

To get to an accurate (and unbiased) diagnosis, educators should use computer-based tests. These objective tools are already used by many clinicians who offer ADHD testing and diagnostic services, and the data generated serves as a valuable supplement to observational assessments, aiding behavioral health professionals in determining the best course of action. Tests that are cleared by the Federal Food and Drug Administration and can measure all three core symptoms stand to provide the largest benefit to clinicians and schools.

As our children face yet another year impacted by the pandemic, isolation, and remote learning, they are staring down the barrel of serious developmental challenges uniquely associated with growing up in this uncertain time. This is why now is a critical time for improvements in the assessment and diagnosis of ADHD and other developmental disorders so that we can get students the services they need to navigate this unprecedented era. ■

Evelyn Polk Green is a past president of both Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA) and Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD). Diagnosed with ADHD, she is the mother of two adult sons with ADHD. She is an administrator with the Chicago public schools, where she plans professional development programs for early-childhood special education professionals and families.

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6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org