

Bring balance to your class

Our students live, and will work, in an increasingly diverse society. Ethnic diversity in student populations is increasing, immigration is bringing new languages and cultures, family structures are changing and men and women continue to take on new roles in society. Students with special needs are being included in general education classrooms more frequently.

The challenge for educators is to meet students' diverse educational needs while preparing all students to understand and appreciate differences in culture, learning style, interests and values.

Here are some suggestions:

- Look out for your own unconscious bias and treat students as individuals. It's important to assess the needs of students individually so each can develop his or her potential. Pay attention to when your own biases might affect your behavior and decisions.
- Affirm and validate students' ethnic experiences. Ensure diverse cultures are embedded into your curriculum all year, reflecting the contributions of people of color in all curricular areas.
- Recognize and understand cultural differences. Be aware of such cultural elements as clothing, time, space, gestures, ethics, values, religion, holidays, gender roles, sexual orientation, rights and duties. Make an effort to learn more about your students' cultures by reading, taking classes and talking to people from the groups represented in your classroom.
- Make sure your expectations are the same for boys and girls. Challenge all your students, and make sure you interact equally with boys and girls.
- Vary your teaching style. Students bring different experiences and learning styles to your classroom, so use a variety of approaches to be sure everyone is successful.
- Build on diversity in your everyday teaching. Students' multicultural perspectives are assets that can be used to help all students develop literary and critical thinking skills. Make connections through instructional themes relevant to many cultures.
- Familiarize yourself with your district's harassment policies. Every district is required to have policies on racial and sexual harassment.
- Watch for signs of bullying in your classroom, hallways and playgrounds. Cultural differences, including immigration status, religious practices, gender identity and sexual orientation, often result in physical or emotional bullying. Your school is required by state law to have a bullying prevention and intervention plan, which includes training for educators and guidelines to follow when bullying incidents are reported.



Help students of all abilities thrive

You show up on the first day of school and discover that your class is made up of students with a variety of abilities—physical, developmental and cognitive. How do you make sure they are all accepted and progressing satisfactorily?

When special education teachers or education support professionals join your classroom, how do you determine how to work with your students and the other adults?

Those are just some of the challenges of an inclusive classroom. Here are some suggestions for working successfully with students of all abilities.

- Welcome all students. Avoid labeling students. When you refer to your students, make sure they're all your kids and not “the special ed teachers’ kids,” “the ELL teachers’ kids,” “the Title I kids,” “the gifted kids” and so on.
- Be supportive and flexible. You will need to adapt some of your assignments and strategies so students of all abilities can achieve success.
- Be an active member of the special education support team. Together you can discuss concerns and develop strategies for working with students with special needs. As a member of a student’s individual education plan (IEP) team, you will have input into the goals of the plan, which should reflect your goals for the general education classroom. If a student comes into your class with an established IEP, work closely with all the service providers and the parents to determine their top priorities.
- Enable all students to participate. Look for ways all students can share interests and ideas. Participating in an activity, classroom duty or discussion boosts self-esteem, confidence and achievement.
- Explore teaching options. After you “get your feet wet” in the classroom, consider co-teaching, collaborative partnerships or concurrent small group instruction with other staff, including special education teachers and teachers of English language learners.
- Seek help from other teachers. Talk to someone with more experience. Find out how others handle specific situations. Look for ways you can support each other. If problems arise, quickly discuss them with the other staff, the building principal or the student support team. Create a collaborative planning team to address classroom issues on a regular basis and also celebrate your own learning.
- Seek help for struggling students. You may be assigned students who have not been evaluated for special education services, but may need them. Ask other staff about the proper procedure for referrals.

Check out these resources

- **American Federation of Teachers**
www.aft.org
- **Council for Exceptional Children**
www.cec.sped.org
- **Education Minnesota**
www.educationminnesota.org
- **IDEA Partnership**
www.ideapartnership.org
- **Minnesota Department of Education's Special Education page**
<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/SpecEdProg/index.html>
- **National Association for Gifted Children**
www.nagc.org
- **National Education Association**
www.nea.org
- **Special Education Resources on the Internet**
www.seriweb.com
- **Special Education Network**
www.specialednet.com
- **PACER Center**
www.pacer.org