

WHY US?

Students with disabilities will enter the same world as their peers—a world that demands skills like critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, communication, and self-advocacy, and dispositions such as self-determination, resilience, and growth mindsets. Unfortunately, compared to their peers without disabilities, students with disabilities have not been consistently afforded high-quality teaching and learning experiences to adequately develop their full academic capacity. These students are lagging on all major traditional outcomes and perceived measures of success, from academic achievement and graduation rates to postsecondary education persistence and employment. Knowing this, NCLD launched a project to explore how 21st century skills can be implemented with quality, fidelity, and inclusivity in our K–12 schools.

WHY NOW?

There is a strong rationale for focusing on 21st century skills for students with disabilities, as well as strategies that contribute to the development of these skills—also considering past institutional inequalities that were common to previous educational reform efforts. However, shifts in practice can't be realized without action from local, state, and national policymakers. The time to take those actions is now.

21ST CENTURY SKILLS / DEFINED

For the purposes of this project, we are defining 21st century skills as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for a student to engage in educational transfer—taking knowledge from one discipline or scenario and applying it to a separate discipline or scenario. Skills and dispositions associated with our definition include critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, self-advocacy skills, self-determination, and growth mindsets. This definition is informed primarily by the National Research Council's report, *Education for Life and Work*, and is supported by research by a number of other entities including the Hewlett Foundation's definition of deeper learning, the framework developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Jobs for the Future/the Nellie Mae Foundation's definition of student-centered learning, and other national reports.

THE PATH FORWARD

The following actions for impact are based on the actions and steps identified through conversations with educators, experts, and policy leaders.

ACTION #1

Decision makers at the federal, state, local, and school level must set expectations and goals for all learners to achieve the full range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to engage in educational transfer: the capacity to take understanding and skills developed in one context and apply it to a separate unique context or problem.



Traditional/Charter Schools: School leaders should engage special and general educators and other staff who work with diverse students, including those with disabilities, to develop expectations for both educators and learners that reflect the full range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for students to engage in educational transfer and for educators to have adequate capacity to serve students.



Traditional Districts/Charter Authorizers: Authorization or accreditation should be tied to an explicit plan for how the school will engage traditionally disadvantaged and historically underserved groups, like those with disabilities, toward a new educational definition of high-quality teaching and learning—one that fully empowers students to engage in educational preparation and transfer.



State and Federal Policymakers: A new definition of high-quality teaching and learning should be established for all students in the K–12 and higher education systems, including those with disabilities. This definition should emphasize the development of skills such as self-advocacy, critical thinking, and collaboration, and dispositions such as growth mindsets and self-determination. It is critical to leverage and codify this definition through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure that students have greater awareness of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and transition plans and are actively participating or facilitating meetings in older grades; and to acknowledge that free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) in the 21st century requires effective, consistent, and systemic supports to ensure that students develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage in educational transfer as appropriate to the individual's disability.

ACTION #2

Assessment, accountability, and school improvement systems should include multiple measures of achievement that gauge students' 21st century learning success, measure the capacity and effectiveness of those who serve them, provide a clear picture of how groups of students are performing, and be well understood by stakeholders including students, families, educators, employers, and community members.



Traditional/Charter Schools: School leaders should prioritize the use of (or create) a progress monitoring system; facilitate collaboration between special and general educators, case managers, and other staff; and align formative assessment strategies with principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)¹ to ensure inclusivity and accessibility in the classroom.



Traditional Districts/Charter Authorizers: Charter reauthorizations, staff promotions, and other school performance decisions should be based on disaggregated student outcomes across multiple measures and on the use of educator evaluation and support systems that reflect the inclusivity of the classroom. This process should also include data (surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc.) collected from parents/families of students with disabilities.



State and Federal Policymakers: The U.S. Department of Education and state departments of education should ensure that the fifth indicator of school quality or student success selected by states under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) measures outcomes relevant to 21st century success, relates to the overall experience of students (such as chronic absenteeism and demonstration of mastery through common performance assessments), is meaningful for and applicable to students with disabilities, and ensures all measures are disaggregated and reported across subgroups.

ACTION #3

In-school and out-of-school time should be leveraged strategically to facilitate high-quality 21st century learning experiences for students and collaboration among educators, including for academic credit. The experiences should be equally rigorous and equally available for all students.



Traditional/Charter Schools: School leaders should dedicate structured time in the master schedule for staff (general and special educators, case managers, and leaders) to implement communities of practice and discuss data, plan integrated lessons and goals, discuss student issues, and plan interdisciplinary and applied learning experiences that result in academic credit for students.

¹ Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of guidelines and principles that direct educational decision making and create access to higher levels of learning for all students. A school that is implementing UDL moves toward representing content, engaging students, and assessing them in multiple ways.



Traditional Districts/Charter Authorizers: District administrators and authorizers should create a system that provides schools with structured time to accomplish several key functions essential to implementation of inclusive 21st century learning. This should include onboarding for new and existing staff to develop an understanding of what inclusive culture looks like and professional development (PD) on implementing inclusive 21st century learning practices for students.



State and Federal Policymakers: Federal and state laws governing academic standards and graduation requirements can be modified to allow students to attain academic credit for learning outside of school—as long as that learning reflects core knowledge and skills and is of equal rigor for all students, including those with disabilities.

ACTION #4

High-quality preparation, clinical practice, and training opportunities should be provided to school leaders, educators, and educational staff to help them effectively implement inclusive 21st century learning practices.



Traditional/Charter Schools: School leaders should facilitate training for educators, case managers, and other staff to effectively recognize different disabilities and accommodate students' needs in approaching more complex problems, implement a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, and help students exercise greater agency over learning.



Traditional Districts/Charter Authorizers: District administrators and authorizers should require every school to have a dedicated leadership team that can demonstrate skills relating to inclusion, including implementation of UDL, multi-tier systems of supports (MTSS), and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). This should be a comprehensive and systemic approach.



State and Federal Policymakers: Policymakers should incentivize teacher preparation programs to prepare educators to demonstrate through clinical practice their understanding of and ability to serve students with disabilities and to implement approaches to help diverse students develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to 21st century success.

ACTION #5

Resources (including but not limited to time, money, and high-quality, effective staffing) should be dedicated to implementing inclusive and systemic 21st century learning, including resources to facilitate accommodations for—and inclusion of—students with disabilities.



Traditional/Charter Schools: School leaders, working with unions and/or leveraging flexibility in existing policies, should seek to establish and use common planning, early release, and summer planning hours for special and general educators

to collaborate on delivering comprehensive and integrated student supports in developing 21st century skills and dispositions.



Traditional Districts/Charter Authorizers: District leaders and authorizers should secure open education resources, content management systems, and product licenses, and leverage community assets to allow educators to access curriculum, data systems, and other tools that facilitate staff collaboration and inclusive student engagement.



State and Federal Policymakers: Policymakers should support efforts to fully fund IDEA and ensure that any innovation or pilot program targeting 21st century skills includes additional funds to facilitate accommodations for—and inclusion of—students with disabilities.

ACTION #6

A clear, transparent, and inclusive process for ongoing stakeholder engagement should be implemented to ensure that students with disabilities, other traditionally disadvantaged groups, and their families and communities are fully and regularly engaged in the conception, implementation, and evaluation of 21st century learning approaches.



Traditional/Charter Schools: School leaders should train educators and other staff to effectively and regularly communicate and collaborate with families and communities of students with disabilities in the implementation of 21st century learning approaches.



Traditional Districts/Charter Authorizers: District leaders and authorizers should dedicate specific points of contact to facilitate communication with families and communities of traditionally underserved subgroups, including those with disabilities, to ensure that feedback and concerns of these groups are addressed on an ongoing basis in the conception, implementation, and evaluation of 21st century learning approaches.



State and Federal Policymakers: State policymakers should establish advisory groups that are consulted regularly in alignment with principles outlined in the collaborative guide, [*Let's Get This Conversation Started*](#). Experts in serving students with disabilities and other traditionally underserved subgroups of students should be involved when considering and continuously improving statewide initiatives designed to help students develop 21st century skills.