



An Urgent Imperative for States: Developing Whole Child Policies to Support an Equitable Education for Students With Disabilities

Effective education policymaking and policies are central to the work that states do to ensure that all young people experience and benefit from an equitable and excellent education. This must include students with disabilities, with an awareness of [intersectional identities](#). At every level of a state’s education system, from classrooms and other learning settings¹ to school districts and charter networks to state capitols, policy creates the enabling conditions for all young people to learn and develop.

Decades of research across multiple scientific disciplines tells a hopeful and factual story about what is possible for every young person: *When young people are engaged in and supported by conditions intentionally designed to reveal their potential, they will learn, develop, and thrive.* Further, for young people to understand and then act on their unique potential, education practices and the policies that enable them must simultaneously attend to multiple dimensions of learning and development: *academic, cognitive, social and emotional, moral and ethical, identity, and physical and mental well-being.* This is what is meant by educating and developing the “whole child.”

The challenge for states in this moment is to redefine, retool, and, in some cases, rebuild statewide systems with the primary purpose of educating and developing the whole child. To do so effectively, policymakers and system leaders will first need to take stock of the extent to which their state’s education and youth-serving systems meet young people’s integrated whole child needs. Particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis affecting millions of families across the country, state policy should work to ensure that every young person is known, engaged, and supported with the resources they need to positively learn and develop. Meeting this historic moment and prioritizing the well-being of all young people will require imagination, flexibility, and better policymaking at the state level — informed by the [science of learning and development](#) and centered on equity — so that school districts, charter networks, schools, and educators have the direction they will need to make a positive difference for young people and families.

A Note on the COVID-19 Pandemic

The significant negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related, overlapping national crises have hit students with disabilities and their families especially hard. As a result, state policymakers are grappling with the challenge of re-engaging young people in their education, attending to the “whole child” needs of every individual young person, as well as redesigning education systems to be more resilient and effective. While the need for this work has been underscored by the pandemic, awareness of the benefits of whole child education for all children is not new. Rather, the actions needed to achieve these benefits have yet to be sufficiently supported by policymakers.

Today, state policymakers have an important opportunity and need to upgrade their education systems with a whole child approach to education. By understanding and embracing emerging knowledge from the science of learning and development to inform and guide this essential work in the months and years ahead, states can make significant progress toward ensuring equity and excellence for all young people. This includes the near-term work of helping students with disabilities recover from many months of lost instructional time and other critical supports that they rely on to learn.

The Science of Learning and Development Holds Lessons for All Young People's Education

Specifically, the science of learning and development reveals the following universal principles that should inform state education policymakers seeking to address whole child development, especially when centering the needs and aspirations of students with disabilities within state policies:

- **Potential:** Each child develops billions of neural pathways providing significant potential to learn and thrive.
- **Malleability:** The brain is highly malleable, from birth through adolescence and beyond.
- **Individuality:** Every child learns and develops differently.
- **Context:** Experiences, environments, and cultures are the defining influences on development.
- **Relationships:** Strong, trusting relationships are essential to learning and development.
- **Integration:** Intentional integration accelerates learning.
- **Continuum:** Human development is a progression, but not a linear one.
- **Meaning making:** People continuously make meaning of the ideas, concepts, experiences, and relationships they encounter, and of the cultures in which they live.

While these key findings of the science of learning and development apply equally to all young people, research also demonstrates that young people with disabilities are disproportionately marginalized by current systems. In fact, due to the design of our current systems, students with disabilities experience worse educational and developmental outcomes compared to other groups of students. As is the case with any young person, equitable and excellent education for students with disabilities is fundamentally predicated on systems that center whole child education informed and enabled by the science of education practice and policy. When states leverage universal knowledge from science about how young people best learn and develop, they will be in a better position to ensure that students with disabilities and their families have a seat at the table when important decisions are being made about their education and their opportunities to thrive both in school and in life.

State Policy Recommendations to Support Whole Child Learning and Development for All Learners

[The Whole Child Policy Table](#) (see sidebar) identified five overarching categories, informed by the science of learning and development, to advance state policy change to better support whole child development. Each is accompanied by a set of policy actions to further clarify potential mechanisms to support achieving that end.

The categories include:

1. Setting a whole child vision
2. Transforming learning environments
3. Redesigning curriculum, instruction, and assessment
4. Building adult capacity and expertise
5. Aligning resources efficiently and equitably

By utilizing the WCPT framework and its levers for change, state policymakers can more effectively attend to the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. This work will look

The Whole Child Policy Table: An Opportunity to Improve State Education Policy

In 2019, the Learning Policy Institute convened state-serving education policy organizations and advocates to create the [Whole Child Policy Table \(WCPT\)](#) in order to develop a unified framework to guide state policymaking to effectively attend to the needs of the whole child. The WCPT dived deep into the science of learning and development and its implications for whole child learning and development, with a particular focus on supporting young people who are often marginalized and underserved by current systems, including students with disabilities. The WCPT also considered the current state of statewide education and youth-serving systems and worked to identify the highest leverage opportunities for states to re-envision and reconstitute systems to close persistent and unacceptable achievement and opportunity gaps.

The result of two years of work by the WCPT is a complete framework for redesigning education and youth-serving systems so that they meet the integrated academic, cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, and physical developmental needs of all young people. The WCPT framework is deeply informed by the science of learning and development and prioritizes the conditions that every young person needs in order to realize their unique potential to learn, develop, and thrive in school and in life. These conditions include a focus on providing strong, trusting relationships, rich learning experiences, and supportive environments that are the fuel and accelerant of learning and development.

different from state to state, but the fundamentals of the science of learning and development and how they apply to all young people do not change. The primary goals for states are to center the knowledge from the science of learning and development and to engage students with disabilities and their families in advancing attendant policies.

Building on the work of the WCPT, NCLD has identified policy opportunities specifically aimed at recognizing and responding to the needs of students with disabilities to ensure that they have access to an equitable, whole child education aligned with the core findings from the science of learning and development. In each category, there are examples of ways some states are making progress toward realizing a whole child education for students with disabilities in their state.

1. Setting a Whole Child Vision

A whole child vision expands upon the antiquated notion of education that focused only on academic growth as a measure of a young person’s success. Instead, the whole child vision includes cognitive, social and emotional, moral and ethical, identity, and physical and mental well-being as well. States that develop a strategic plan focused on each student’s health, well-being, and education ultimately can better support whole child development. This work addresses the challenges associated with the silo approach to child development and can incentivize and develop interagency collaboration focused on the needs of the child.

Setting a meaningful and inclusive whole child vision must include recognition of students with disabilities. Often the state education systems created to serve students with disabilities are viewed as separate entities rather than being the responsibility of all who work in the education system. Incorporating students with disabilities into the whole child vision acknowledges their presence in the schools throughout a state; reinforces the need for collaboration to support their integrated cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and academic development; and acts as a first important step to ensure access to an equitable and excellent education.

Policy Action ²	Considerations for Students With Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene a diverse set of stakeholders to develop an equity-focused, statewide whole child vision. • Integrate the shared whole child vision into all policies that impact learning environments by analyzing existing policies and practices against this vision, and by supporting state and local learning and developmental competencies for students aligned with this vision. • Establish a children and youth cabinet to help coordinate, strengthen, and streamline services for children, youth, and families/caregivers across state agencies, identify current state capacity and needs, and provide guidance to support local service provision. • Create a plan to track and evaluate progress toward implementing and achieving the whole child vision through investments in statewide data systems and learning opportunities for educators, communities, families/caregivers, and other stakeholders, focused on appropriately using data to make decisions for improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disaggregate and report all relevant education and youth-serving system data, including health and wellness data, that is needed to monitor and incentivize progress toward achieving the vision to reflect students with disabilities – and, where feasible, the intersectional identities of students with disabilities. • Create a statewide clearinghouse that identifies and disseminates best practices and highlights exemplary systems, schools, and other learning settings that are effective at implementing a whole child vision that centers students with disabilities. • In developing the vision and strategy, meaningfully engage and include stakeholders like educators with experience with students with disabilities, students, families and caretakers, community providers, and youth development specialists. • To foster stronger coordination and collaboration, ensure that students with disabilities, their families, and the educators who serve them are invited to be part of children and youth cabinets that may be established by the state.

State Examples

Ohio

In its state vision for education, "[Each Child, Our Future](#)," Ohio emphasizes the importance of serving each child who attends a school within the state, recognizing each child's key role in contributing to the future for the entire state. Its vision states, "In Ohio, each child is challenged to discover and learn, prepared to pursue a fulfilling post-high school path, and empowered to become a resilient, lifelong learner who contributes to society." Part of the rationale for this new vision was recognition that the state had been inadequately meeting the needs of specific student groups, including students with disabilities. Ohio's vision advances the idea that the state must better meet the "nuanced learning needs" of different student groups, including students with disabilities, by providing wider access to education opportunities.

Ohio goes beyond simply mentioning the importance of better meeting the needs of students with disabilities as part of their vision. They have taken key actions to bring the vision to life for these students. Ohio State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria directed the Office of Exceptional Children (OEC) to develop a complementary plan focused on realizing this vision for students with disabilities. In March 2021, the Ohio Department of Education released "[Each Child Means Each Child](#)." This plan, developed in conjunction with stakeholders and informed by data, "offers recommendations, tactics, and action steps to ensure students with disabilities benefit from the vision and core principles heralded in Ohio's strategic plan for education, Each Child, Our Future." Based on stakeholder input, the following [recommendations](#) emerged as key to achieve the "Each Child, Our Future" goal for students with disabilities: "1) Getting to the Problem Early: Development and Implementation of a Statewide Model for an Integrated Multi-Tiered System of Support, 2) Building Educators' and Systemwide Capacity: Promotion of Ongoing Job-Embedded Professional Learning, and 3) Educating for Living a Good Life: Advancement of Postsecondary Learning Experiences and Outcomes." To support implementation in the coming months, OEC is engaging a cross-agency team to advance the necessary work to ensure that the vision of "Each Child, Our Future" is realized for all students, and especially for students with disabilities.

Georgia

During the State Systemic Improvement Plan development process, Georgia's stakeholders and education leaders observed a concerning trend. Each year, over one-quarter of students with disabilities who exited school dropped out before completing high school. Upon further investigation, it was determined that a significant majority of these students were students with a specific learning disability. In light of this finding, Georgia sought to better understand why the state has so many students with learning disabilities failing to complete high school, particularly given that these students have the same intellectual functioning as their peers and just need to learn material differently. Conversations with stakeholders across the state revealed an enlightening realization: To change outcomes for students with disabilities in Georgia, it was first necessary to shift mindsets about what students with disabilities are capable of achieving.

With this mindset shift in clear focus, Georgia began a series of efforts to reorient understanding. Several key principles were at the core. One, students with disabilities are young people first. Two, not all disabilities are the same. The label "students with disabilities" encapsulates a significant variety of learning and developmental differences. By correcting misunderstandings and helping educators better understand the many types of learning disabilities and differences, the state better prepared educators to meet the diverse needs of their students. Three, inclusive leaders and practices can benefit both students with disabilities and *all* students. Integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into the curriculum should be viewed as a best practice for all young people, rather than something only for students with disabilities. Finally, schools have the responsibility of preparing students both for academic success *and* for success in life. Schools must attend to whole child development to set the student up for success across both dimensions. (Additional information about Georgia's Whole Child resources is available [here](#).) Taken together, these principles have begun to meaningfully advance change and shift mindsets regarding what is possible for students with disabilities in Georgia.

2. Transforming Learning Environments

Creating inclusive, welcoming learning environments centered on trusting relationships and physical and emotional safety will better enable all students to thrive. Transforming learning environments to better meet the academic, social, emotional, physical, and developmental needs of students with disabilities is an important part of this. It cannot be a “one size fits all” approach, but instead needs to reflect the nuanced needs of individual students.

Policy Action	Considerations for Students With Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize and support districts and schools in redesigning learning environments in ways that prioritize positive, caring, and consistent relationships between students, staff, families, and communities. • Support districts and schools in creating inclusive environments that provide all students with safety and belonging. • Adopt and invest in inclusive, restorative, and educative approaches to school discipline practice and policy. • Support integrated support systems to better serve the holistic needs of students, families, and caregivers. • Provide high-quality expanded learning time to reduce opportunity gaps and increase opportunities for enrichment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify best practices on inclusion, and ensure that educators receive professional development on meaningful and effective inclusion that supports improved outcomes and relationship building between students with disabilities, school staff, and peers. • Ensure that students with disabilities have equitable access to identity-safe environments and restorative discipline systems that nurture whole child learning and development. • Ensure that physical learning settings are accessible and healthy. • Educate school professionals on trauma-informed approaches to building strong conditions for learning, including ways that a student’s disability may or may not be visually apparent or commonly understood, and how disability may impact a student’s responsiveness to school discipline. These approaches include Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). • Ensure expanded learning time programming for students with disabilities, prioritizing opportunities for a well-rounded education, including education in the arts, music, physical education, and other extra- and co-curricular activities such as apprenticeships and mentoring supports. • Establish systems and structures that encourage and enable students to advocate for themselves and their needs.

State Examples

Massachusetts

In April 2014, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) published its [“State Equity Plan for 2015–2019.”](#) This plan aims to support ESE as it works “to identify equity gaps in [its] students’ learning and to determine strategies to eliminate those gaps.” One of the commonly reported challenges noted in Massachusetts was a lack of training to effectively support students with “diverse needs,” including students with disabilities and students with social-emotional issues.

In response to this challenge, Massachusetts created the [“Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practices,”](#) which aims to enable educators to “create a place for all students to thrive in general education settings.” The Guidebook defines inclusive practice as “the instructional and behavioral strategies that improve academic and social-emotional outcomes for all students, with and without disabilities, in general education

settings” and centers on educators’ role in establishing inclusive learning environments. Further, it provides “tools for districts, schools, and educators ... that promote evidence-based best practices for inclusion following the principles of Universal Design for Learning, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and Social and Emotional Learning.” Additionally, Massachusetts developed a [virtual course](#) for general and special education teachers to guide teachers as they work to support students’ social-emotional and academic development in alignment with the practices elevated in the Guidebook.

Michigan

The Michigan Department of Education has long recognized the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral benefits of MTSS for students with disabilities and for all students. The statewide [MTSS program](#), begun in 2000, has continuously improved its model, implementation, and supports to better meet the needs of students and support their success. In approaching this work, Michigan focused on creating a set of supports that would be inclusive of all students, while benefiting students with disabilities — paying particular attention ensuring that students with disabilities benefit from their time in general education classrooms in addition to any other specific interventions they may receive.

With a vision to expand the MTSS model across the state over time, Michigan recognized the need to ensure fidelity of implementation to achieve the desired outcomes. To support schools and districts as they implement MTSS, Michigan established the MiMTSS Technical Assistance Center, which “assist[s] educators in developing infrastructures to support high-quality and sustained implementation of effective, data-driven practices within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework.” Through high-quality, evidence-based, and data-informed technical assistance, the [MiMTSS Technical Assistance Center](#) helps schools confront challenges they face while implementing the MTSS model, signals the need for additional professional development and technical assistance, and supports the provision of more effective, school-level interventions across all three tiers.

3. Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

States and districts often create curriculum, instruction, and assessment without giving significant attention to differentiation, instead relying on individual schools and educators to determine the extent to which it should be adapted to support different learners. These materials frequently are not designed with students with disabilities in mind, often leaving educators to their best to provide adaptations and accommodations. Redesigned curriculum, instruction, and assessment with academic content in multiple forms (e.g., verbal, visual, etc.), integrated social-emotional learning, and several different ways for students to demonstrate understanding would better support students with disabilities and all students.



Policy Action	Considerations for Students With Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote and support the development of rich learning experiences through high-quality standards, curricula, and personalized learning structures. • Support the design and implementation of authentic systems of assessment that support student growth. • Adopt an effective, holistic accountability system that measures students' opportunities to learn and that supports a system of continuous improvement. • Strengthen distance and blended learning models to ensure equitable access to virtual learning and engagement opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop culturally relevant and competent curricula that include multiple modalities for learning academic material, such as UDL, embed social-emotional learning with academic content, and are inclusive of the narratives, perspectives, and expertise of people with disabilities. • Provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding of academic content. • Design IEP goals and implementation structures to help students make progress in all areas, including academic, social, and behavioral, and aligned to grade-level standards. • Ensure that IEP accommodations are tailored to individual student needs and that educators and other school staff are aware of the accommodations and how to best provide them. • Provide professional development to help educators understand the importance of executive function in accessing educational content, and ensure that educators can explicitly teach those skills and support students who struggle with these skills.

State Examples

New Hampshire

Rather than rely on more traditional forms of instruction and assessment, New Hampshire adopted [Performance Assessment for Competency Education \(PACE\)](#), “an innovative assessment and accountability system grounded in a competency-based educational approach designed to ensure that students have meaningful opportunities to achieve critical knowledge and skills.” Teachers assess students’ comprehension over the course of a year through a set of performance tasks designed to determine whether a student has mastered a particular competency. This replaces high-stakes, moment-in-time tests with real-time feedback and assessment that can inform instruction.

According to an NCLD [case study on PACE](#), students with disabilities may benefit from the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of competency through more flexible assessments like those in PACE. Additionally, compared with a multiple choice exam score, the performance assessments may inform more personalized approaches to learning as educators can more effectively pinpoint students’ individual challenges. Early research indicates that students with disabilities in districts implementing PACE increased their Smarter Balanced eighth-grade math scores more significantly than their peers in non-PACE districts.

Washington

In 2018, the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) announced a new set of Priorities for Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities, which emerged from statewide stakeholder listening sessions. Underscoring each of the focus areas was a deep interest in improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

This intensive stakeholder engagement ultimately translated into legislative action when, through the 2019–2021 biennial budget, the state legislature authorized \$25 million to address inclusionary practices. Out of this funding, the [Inclusionary Practices Project \(IPP\)](#) was born with the goal of “achiev[ing] full inclusion for 60 percent of students receiving special education services by Spring 2021.” At a time when Washington State was among the 10 least inclusive states, reaching this goal required significant change to the way instruction was happening, focusing both on mindsets and on instruction. Beginning with mindsets, Washington worked to elevate the

significant data discrepancies in outcomes for students with disabilities compared to their peers and to develop a sense of collective responsibility to better meet these students’ instructional and developmental needs. IPP then turned to strong educator coaching with a clear focus on improving “inclusive education, differentiated instruction, and individualized instruction.” Within two years, IPP had surpassed its initial goal by increasing the number of students in least restrictive environments to 65%, and by changing mindsets and beliefs about students with disabilities.

Policy Action	Considerations for Students With Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design educator preparation standards, programs, assessments, and accreditation to ensure that educators have the knowledge and skills needed to support students’ whole child developmental needs. • Adopt proactive recruitment and retention strategies to address teacher shortages and to ensure that all young people have access to diverse and effective educators. • Support high-quality mentoring and induction programs. • Promote professional development and school structures that promote educator collaboration, are responsive to educators’ learning and growth needs, and help them meet whole child needs. • Adopt educator evaluation and improvement systems that support student and educator learning growth and well-being and that encourage teacher collaboration and reflection. • Support educator and staff social, emotional, and mental health and well-being. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include requirements related to understanding and instructing students with disabilities in general educator preparation program standards, approval/ accreditation processes, and educator certification, including licensure and assessments. • Ensure that all in-service professional development sessions include considerations for how classroom/ school practices, policies, and procedures may need to be adapted for students with different disabilities. • Require structures to support cross-functional, school-based team collaboration that includes general education teachers, special education teachers, and specialized instructional support providers to ensure whole child learning and development. • Include measures related to effective instruction of students with disabilities in teacher evaluation and improvement systems, and provide teachers with the necessary support to enhance their practice. • Implement professional development on research-based frameworks like UDL principles to better meet the learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities. • Develop systems and structures that incentivize the retention of special education educators such as through financial incentives and effective professional support.

4. Building Adult Capacity and Expertise

To support a shift to a whole child system, states must work to build educators’ and other youth-serving adults’ expertise related to young people’s social, emotional, and cognitive development through professional learning opportunities and ongoing supports. This includes preparation and professional learning that address the skill sets needed to meet students’ individual social, emotional, and academic needs, including the specific needs of students who may have a disability. To more effectively serve all students, adults who work with young people, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and service providers (e.g., occupational therapy or physical therapy specialists), must understand how instruction and assessment can be adapted or differentiated for students with different strengths and needs.

State Examples

New York

New York is the only state that has standard/coursework and practica requirements related to students with disabilities. Within the [New York State teacher standards](#), Standard I requires “Knowledge of Students and Student Learning” and explicitly focuses on teachers’ ability to develop (and modify as needed) lessons that are appropriate to meet students’ learning and developmental differences, including through differentiation of instruction. Additionally, teachers are required to complete [coursework](#) focused on “understanding the needs of students with disabilities, including at least three semester hours of study for teachers to develop the skills necessary to provide instruction that will promote the participation and progress of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum.” Finally, [registered teacher preparation programs](#) require “at least 100 clock hours of field experiences with students with disabilities related to coursework prior to student teaching or practica.”

New Mexico

[New Mexico Educator Standards](#) reflect specific criteria associated with providing meaningful, differentiated instruction designed to meet different students’ “exceptionalities, including learning disabilities, visual and perceptual difficulties, and physical or mental challenges.” This includes an understanding of several things: how to provide different approaches to learning and instruction for students based on their diverse needs as well as elements to support the inclusion of students with disabilities; the range of disabilities a student may experience; the role of an educator in developing and implementing a student’s IEP; the importance of collaboration between general education and special education professionals; and the unique social, emotional, and academic developmental needs that students with exceptionalities may experience.

5. Aligning Resources Efficiently and Equitably

Even with the continued federal underfunding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states can take actions to ensure that resources are allocated effectively and efficiently for students with disabilities. By better aligning resources and supporting improved coordination across multiple child-serving systems, and by recognizing and addressing persistent resource inequities, states will better be able to support a more equitable, whole child system.

Policy Action	Considerations for Students With Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adopt more equitable school funding formulas that prioritize high-need schools and that support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed.• Allocate adequate funding across the developmental continuum to ensure that children and families are supported from birth to age 5.• Blend and braid federal, state, and local resources to reduce fragmentation, improve alignment across programs and funding streams, and strengthen supports to children, youth, and families.• Leverage federal funds in ways that support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed.• Invest in community schools and wraparound services to better serve the holistic needs of children and families.• Close the digital divide to ensure that every child has access to appropriate technology and connectivity to meet their whole child needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue advocacy at the federal level for full funding of IDEA.• Use COVID relief funds to directly address challenges faced by students with disabilities during the pandemic.• Consider implementing weighted funding formulas that provide additional resources for students with disabilities.• Understand how various funding streams that support students with disabilities interact with each other, and identify opportunities to maximize the allowable uses of each source of funds.• Use Medicaid funds, where possible, to reimburse allowable education expenditures for students with disabilities.• Provide technological supports that include accessibility tools for students with disabilities, and teach students’ parents/guardians and students how to operate those tools.



Dimensions of Equity

The [Alliance for Resource Equity](#) Dimensions of Equity Framework includes 10 dimensions of education resource equity that education systems should attend to in order to advance resource equity. When evaluating equity across schools and states, these dimensions should be considered as they may help reveal the multiple ways that inequity can manifest:

- School funding
- Teacher quality and diversity
- School leadership quality and diversity
- Empowering, rigorous content
- Instructional time and attention
- Positive and inviting school climate
- Student supports and intervention
- High-quality early learning
- Learning-ready facilities
- Diverse classrooms and schools

State Examples

California

In 2020, California [made progress toward more equitable special education funding](#) by correcting a decades-old “quirk” in their education funding laws. The old funding formula allocated funding based on the overall number of students in a given school district, rather than just the number of students in special education in a district. As a result, the additional per-student special education funding in districts ranged from \$500–\$800. The new funding formula aims to remedy the inequity, altering the way funds are allocated and closing the gap between the districts receiving lower amounts of funds and districts receiving larger amounts funds in the old formula.

Wisconsin

In an effort to support the development of a comprehensive school improvement plan and to align the efforts of teams who operate across different federal and state programs, Wisconsin provides [coordinated technical assistance](#) across Title I, special education, and ELL teams to address the needs of specific student groups. The state connects Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) interventions with those required under the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) for students with disabilities, creating a more unified and comprehensive approach. By coordinating resources, the state aims to avoid duplicative interventions and maximize existing resources to improve outcomes.

Conclusion

Strong policy alignment and implementation at all levels of a state’s education system are key to ensuring that the learning and developmental opportunities and services that allow students to thrive are provided for every young person – and especially for those with disabilities. The good news is that there is ample scientific research and evidence showing what works when policymakers take a whole child approach for learning for all young people, beginning with students with disabilities.

Policy plays an important role in the process of advancing whole child education for all students and especially students with disabilities. By approaching policymaking while attending to the scientific knowledge and policy considerations presented here, states can achieve more meaningful, equitable, and promising outcomes for their students.

A Note on Using American Rescue Plan Funding

In recognition of the challenges faced by schools and districts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). As these funds flow into states, states will have the important role of distributing them and providing specific guidance to districts and schools on how to best use these funds to support academic and social-emotional learning for all students, including students with disabilities.

Within ARPA, Congress allocated \$3.03 billion for the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). This increase in funding is long overdue, as IDEA has been woefully underfunded for decades. Many states use their IDEA funds to hire special educators, specialized instructional support personnel, and others who can provide special education and related services to students with disabilities. During the pandemic, these services were limited in some places due to challenges with virtual learning and the health risks posed by in-person learning. Further, students with disabilities may return to school with new and increasing needs. Therefore, IDEA funds can be used to prepare educators to effectively identify and respond to students' needs and to reconnect children with the in-person learning environment.

Additionally, ARPA provides \$130 billion dedicated to elementary and secondary education that should also be leveraged to meet the needs of all students, and districts must pay special attention to the needs of specific populations such as students with disabilities. These funds should be used to intentionally design interventions, learning acceleration programs, and SEL programs with attention to accessibility. States should issue guidance on allowable uses of funds with specific attention to uses for students with disabilities, prioritize resources for students with disabilities recognizing the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on their education, and continue to monitor the outcomes for students with disabilities with particular attention to early warning indicators that may signal needs for additional support.

¹ When this brief refers to "other learning settings," the term refers to all of the places where young people, including students with disabilities, learn and develop throughout their young lives, from birth to early adulthood. These places include before-school, after-school, and expanded learning time programs; extracurricular activities; sports and recreational programs; mentoring; community organizations; internships; apprenticeships; career and technical education; system-provided physical health, mental health, and therapeutic services; and any other settings where young people learn and develop.

² The Policy Actions presented in this document were developed and will be published by the [Whole Child Policy Table](#) and the Learning Policy Institute.



For more information, visit www.nclld.org or contact NCLD via email: info@nclld.org

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