

# Common Threads for Inclusive Education



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## Learning Disabilities

### PLANNING YOUR LEARNING JOURNEY

What universal and targeted strategies and supports can be used to address the learning needs of students with learning disabilities in an inclusive learning environment?

### INTRODUCTION

#### Learning Disabilities Definition

*Learning disabilities* (LDs) refers to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information (Alberta Education 2019b, 7). Learning disabilities range in severity (mild, moderate or severe) and may result in difficulties in one or more of the following areas:

- Oral language (listening, speaking, understanding)
- Reading (decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- Written language (spelling, written expression)
- Mathematics (computation, problem solving)

The determination of a learning disability/specific learning disorder must be based on an assessment and diagnosis by a professional psychologist and requires persistent difficulties in reading, writing, arithmetic or mathematical reasoning skills during formal years of schooling (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

#### Severity of Learning Disabilities

- **Mild:** some difficulties with learning in one or two areas, but able to compensate with supports
- **Moderate:** significant difficulties with learning, requiring some specialized teaching, accommodations, support services
- **Severe:** severe difficulties with learning, affecting several academic areas and requiring ongoing, intensive specialized teaching

*People with learning disabilities are just as intelligent as their peers but have difficulty learning in traditional learning environments.*

—[ldonline.org/indepth/aboutld](http://ldonline.org/indepth/aboutld)

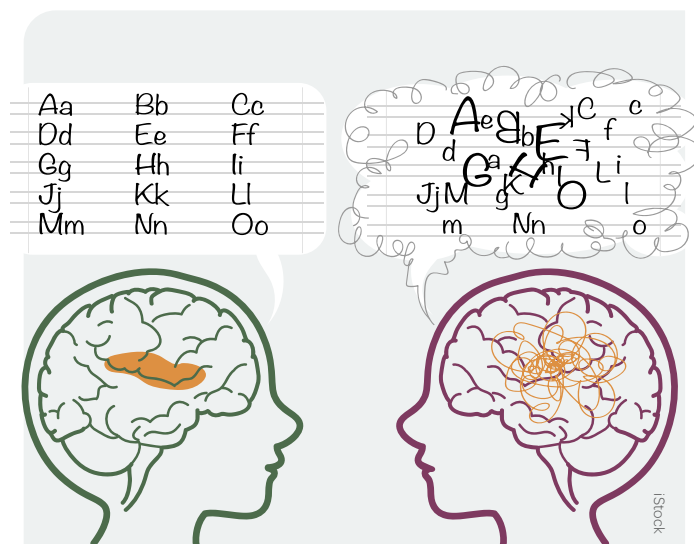


**Every human brain is created with a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses (NILD 2019).**



Learning disabilities can have a profound impact on a person's schooling and extend into other areas of life. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) reports that "learning disorders, if not recognized and managed, can cause problems throughout a person's life beyond having lower academic achievement. These problems include increased risk of greater psychological distress, poorer overall mental health, unemployment/underemployment and dropping out of school" (APA 2018).

Alberta Education student population statistics for 2018/19 indicated that the most prevalent diagnosed special education exceptionality was learning disabilities. In that year, 20,500 K-12 students had a diagnosis of learning disabilities, representing approximately 2.8 per cent of the total student population, or roughly 3 in 100 students (Alberta 2019). Knowing that other students are undiagnosed, it is possible that every class may include a student with some form of learning disability.



For more information on signs of a learning disability, prevalence of learning disabilities and understanding learning disabilities, visit the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada at [www.ldac-acta.ca/causes/for-professionals/](http://www.ldac-acta.ca/causes/for-professionals/) and the National Institute for Learning Development at <https://nildcanada.org/learning-disabilities/>.

## UNDERSTANDING LEARNING DISABILITIES

A learning disability is an area of weakness, inefficiency or altered functioning in the brain that significantly hinders one's ability to learn. It is a pattern of neurological dysfunction in the brain that causes a person to have difficulty correctly receiving information (perception), correctly processing information (cognition/thinking) or satisfactorily responding to information (written and verbal expression, visual-motor coordination, memory and so forth).

People with learning disabilities (LDs) have a variety of strengths and challenges. Many challenges are not from a physical problem, such as the eyes or ears, but rather from basic neurological functioning of the brain. Every human brain is created with a unique pattern of strengths and weaknesses. We each have certain subjects that make sense to us easily as well as areas that require outside explanation and extra effort to understand (National Institute for Learning Development [NILD] 2019).

At times, students with LDs may struggle with feelings of frustration, a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Students may appear to be unmotivated or not trying hard enough, when in fact they have become discouraged because they've been struggling in one or more areas. Students with LDs can experience successes by having access to specific skill instruction, compensatory strategies and accommodations. It is important to teach students self-advocacy skills to ensure that they ask for supports when needed (LD@School 2019).

## PLANNING FOR INSTRUCTION

"Students with special education needs receive adapted or modified programming that enables and improves learning" (Alberta Education 2007, 3). Students with learning disabilities usually require adapted programming and additional learning resources so they can actively participate. These additional resources may include adapted instructional strategies and materials, assistive technology, personalized learning materials, assessment accommodations, or supplementary supports. These learning resources must be reflected in the student's instructional support plan (ISP)/individual program plan (IPP).



*Developing a student's individual program plan (IPP) with their parents or guardians can be an effective way to ensure that the student has optimal support both at home and in the school environment.*

Some students with learning disabilities may require modified programming because they are not on a graded curriculum but receive programming that focuses on life skills, foundational skills and academic readiness skills. Modified programming outcomes are specifically selected to meet a student's special education needs and are outlined in the student's ISP/IPP; following are some considerations for deepening your understanding and informing instructional planning for your student:

- Review the student's cumulative record.
- Have conversations with the student, previous teachers, learning support personnel and family to determine
  - › how the school can support the student and their needs,
  - › the student's strengths,
  - › successful strategies that have helped the student at home or school and
  - › characteristics of the student's specific learning disability, if already diagnosed.
- Learn as much as you can about how this disability may affect learning and social and emotional well-being.
- Collaborate with the school and/or jurisdictional team to identify and coordinate consultation and supports.
- Develop a system for sharing information with relevant staff members about the student's condition and successful strategies.

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTS

Success for a student with learning disabilities does not mean that the disorder disappears. It means that the student makes effective use of strengths and compensatory strategies to accomplish personal and educational goals (British Columbia 2011, 8). Using a response to intervention (RTI) approach, teachers can effectively target interventions and compensatory strategies to support student success.

### Response to intervention (RTI)

*Response to intervention* (RTI) is a three-tiered approach (universal, targeted and individualized) in which teachers use data to monitor student learning needs and to select evidence-based strategies, interventions and behavioural supports that are most likely to make a difference to student success (Alberta Education 2019a).

### Universal programming (Tier 1)

*Universal programming* is the teaching and learning strategies that teachers use to accommodate a range of diverse learning styles and needs. Teachers design their classroom curriculum to incorporate multiple methods of instruction, to offer choice and flexibility in student learning activities and to use a variety of assessment

techniques. Differentiated instruction and universal design for learning (UDL) are important curriculum planning frameworks that provide universal teaching and learning strategies.

## Differentiated instruction

*Differentiated instruction* is an approach to curriculum design that acknowledges and values difference in student learning strengths, needs, interests and abilities. Teachers differentiate content, process, products or the learning environment and use ongoing assessment and flexible groupings to address individual student needs. Differentiated instruction is student centred and gives students multiple options/choices in their learning.

For more information on differentiated instruction, see

- Alberta Education 2010, *Making a Difference: Meeting Diverse Learning Needs with Differentiated Instruction*, at [https://education.alberta.ca/media/384968/making\\_a\\_difference\\_2010.pdf](https://education.alberta.ca/media/384968/making_a_difference_2010.pdf);
- Government of Alberta 2015, *Using Differentiated Instruction to Support All Learners*, at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqIXSV7By\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqIXSV7By_s);
- "Differentiated Instruction," Knowledge and Employability Teacher Workstation, Learn Alberta, at [www.learnalberta.ca/content/kes/pdf/or\\_ws\\_tea\\_elem\\_02\\_diffinst.pdf](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/kes/pdf/or_ws_tea_elem_02_diffinst.pdf).

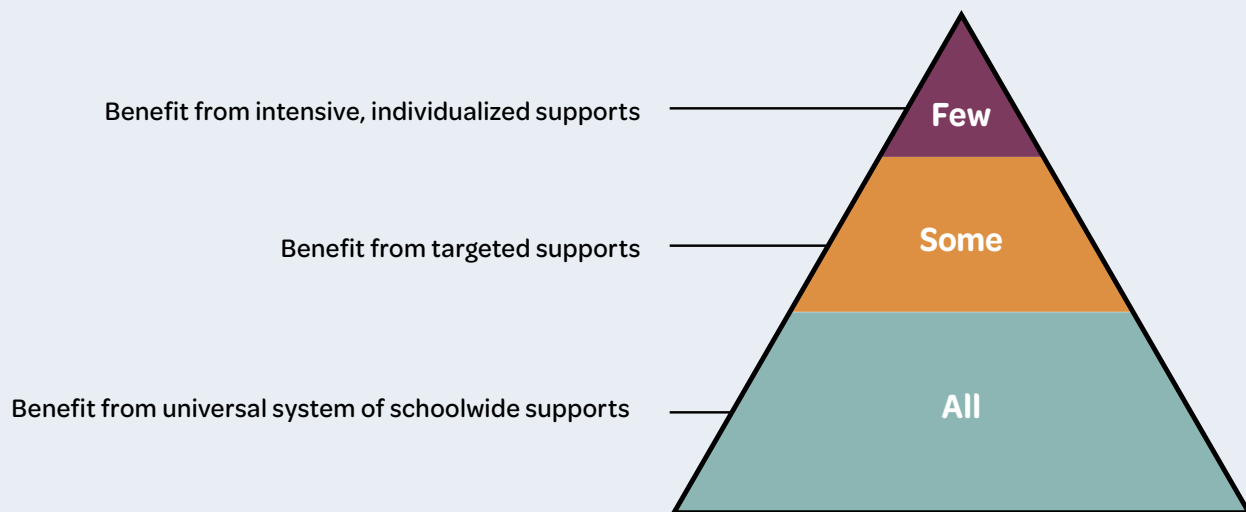
## Universal design for learning (UDL)

*Universal design for learning* (UDL) is a curriculum planning framework that addresses the diverse learning needs of students and reducing barriers to learning. UDL can provide all learners with increased accessibility and enhanced opportunities for success. The three principles of UDL are

1. to provide multiple means of representing the information,
2. to provide multiple means of action and expression, and
3. to provide multiple means of engagement in the learning.

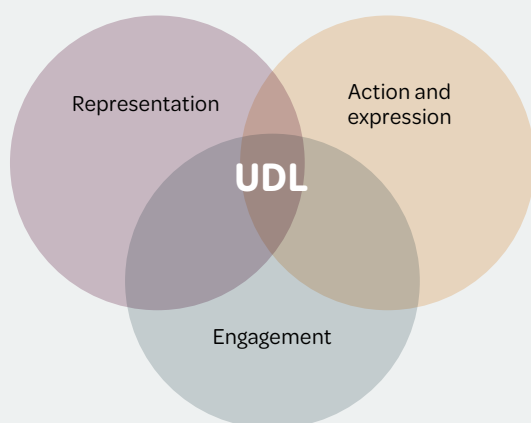
When designing a UDL curriculum to meet diverse learning needs, teachers will consider four main components:

1. Goals or outcomes for learning
2. Teaching and learning strategies
3. Learning materials
4. Assessment strategies and accommodations



*Response to Intervention (RTI) or Pyramid of Intervention*

[www.alberta.ca/response-to-intervention.aspx](http://www.alberta.ca/response-to-intervention.aspx)



For more information on UDL curriculum planning, visit the following:

- Alberta Education, *Making Sense of Universal Design for Learning*, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOUdmzaZrc8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOUdmzaZrc8)
- CAST, *About Universal Design for Learning*, at <http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XielrGhKjnZ>
- Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Oakland University, at <https://oakland.edu/cetl/ou-teaching-initiatives/>

## Targeted interventions (Tier 2)

*Targeted interventions* are provided for students who would benefit from additional supports beyond universal programming.

### Direct instruction

*Direct instruction* for specific skill development is important for most students with learning disabilities. Direct instruction includes

- explicit instruction with clear, detailed explanation and demonstration;
- scaffolding instruction by building on what the student already knows;
- teaching through modelling and demonstrating the steps required;
- memory strategies for storage and retrieval of information; and
- teaching students how to ask for help when they don't understand something.

More direct instruction strategies are available at [www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/learning\\_disabilities.html](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/learning_disabilities.html) (Alberta Education, Learning Disabilities Medical/Disability Information for Classroom Teachers).



*Wheelchair ramps are a physical accommodation that provide access for persons with physical disabilities. Similarly, program adaptations and accommodations are not an advantage—they simply provide equitable access to learning for students with learning disabilities.*



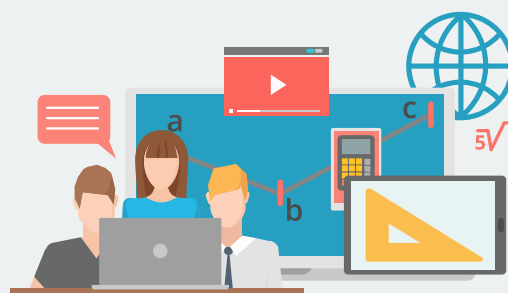
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Assistive technology in the classroom is an excellent tool to support students with learning disabilities.

## Assistive/learning technologies

*Assistive/learning technologies* are excellent tools to support students with learning disabilities in being successful. Assistive/learning technologies can be low tech, such as colour-coding materials and graphic organizers, or technology-based tools such as speech-to-text or text-to-speech software. Some digital apps are available at no cost on the Web, while other software programs require purchasing a user licence. Some assistive/learning technology examples follow:

- Math: electronic math worksheets, arithmetic software programs, hand-held and talking calculators
- Organization: software or apps for calendars, daily schedule, note taking, graphic organizers
- Reading/writing: audio books, text to speech and speech to text software



Check with your assistive/learning technology team to learn about devices and software available in your school and school system.

An extensive list of free assistive/learning technology tools is available at <https://sites.google.com/view/freeudltechtoolkit/home>.

## Individualized interventions (Tier 3)

*Individualized interventions* are individualized strategies and supports directly related to a student's specific learning needs. Students with learning disabilities all have unique needs, and there is no standard set of strategies. Teachers should review a variety of teaching and learning strategies, resources and assessment tools available in the literature and consult with other members of the student's learning team to determine which individualized strategies to try.

More information on individualized intensive strategies is available from

- <https://education.alberta.ca/media/385144/unlocking-potential-programming-for-students-learning-disabilities-2002.pdf> (Alberta Learning, Learning and Teaching Resources Branch 2002, *Unlocking Potential Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities*) and
- [www.learnalberta.ca/content/ieptlibrary/lib08.html](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/ieptlibrary/lib08.html) (Alberta Education, Inclusive Education Library, *Instructional Strategies and Supports*).

## Program adaptations and accommodations

*Program adaptations and accommodations* are a change or alteration to the way a student is expected to learn, complete assignments or participate in the classroom. Accommodations address the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities and provide them with equitable opportunities to learn and participate.

More information on program adaptations and accommodations is available at

- [www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/kindergarten-to-grade-12/teach/teaching-tools/inclusive/learning\\_disabilities\\_guide.pdf](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/kindergarten-to-grade-12/teach/teaching-tools/inclusive/learning_disabilities_guide.pdf) (Province of British Columbia 2011, *Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities A Guide for Teachers*) and
- [https://education.alberta.ca/media/482271/calm\\_ch7.pdf](https://education.alberta.ca/media/482271/calm_ch7.pdf) (Alberta Learning 2002, *CALM Guide to Implementation*, Chapter 7: "Differentiating Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities").

## NEXT STEPS

A welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that accepts and responds to student diversity is key to student success. Working with students with learning disabilities in an inclusive education environment is best achieved by using a collaborative, problem-solving approach. Building a relationship with the student and their family is very important to learning more about the student and how to support them. Working collaboratively with the student learning team and other professionals can develop an understanding of learning disabilities and help teachers to choose supports and interventions that will make a positive difference for that student.

## CONTINUING YOUR LEARNING JOURNEY

### Learning to Know

What are learning disabilities and why are learning disabilities often undiagnosed?

### Learning to Do

What universal and targeted supports and strategies have you developed to support diverse learning needs in an inclusive learning environment? What individualized supports and strategies have been developed to support students with learning disabilities? Are these resources effective? If not, what can you do differently?

### Learning to Be

How do you communicate your belief that all students can learn?

### Learning to Live Together

How do you demonstrate universal acceptance and respect for students with diverse learning needs in an inclusive learning environment?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

- LD Online. 2019. "Signs of a Learning Disability: Preschool, Grades K-4, Grades 5-8, High School Students and Adults." Available at [www.ldonline.org/ldbasics/signs](http://www.ldonline.org/ldbasics/signs) (accessed November 6, 2019).
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