Effective Teaching Strategies for Meeting Diverse Student Needs

“Because all students are capable learners, you as a teacher must demonstrate that all students are expected to fully participate in all activities. Sometimes you will want to offer options for students to choose from, but everyone should be involved in learning.”

—Susan Winebrenner, author of Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom

Mental health and learning disorders can create many challenges. You probably know some students who, because of difficulties, don’t like school. Learning and psychological problems can make them feel worried, frustrated, and unable to succeed. Maybe you have struggled to motivate children who have become demoralized—doing so when you are accountable for raising the achievement of all students can seem impossible. You might wonder, “How can I address all of these needs while at the same time meeting state and federal requirements?”

This section includes some creative teaching strategies you can use to teach students with different needs in the ways they learn best. It summarizes some of these methods that help to better understand and respond to these students. You can incorporate these instructional efforts, when applicable, with supports and accommodations spelled out in a student’s IEP or 504 plan.
Differentiate instruction. It’s important to recognize that “fairness” in education doesn’t mean that all children are taught in the exact same way. Instead it means accounting for the needs of individual students and adjusting the curriculum accordingly. Differentiation allows you to provide individualized instruction by changing the pace, level, or style of teaching to engage student strengths and interests. Students with mental health and learning disorders are not the only children who benefit from this instructional philosophy—all children in your classroom can achieve at higher levels when you are conscientious about providing instruction that fits how they learn best. Differentiating instruction includes, when appropriate, reducing assignments or extending deadlines to accommodate a child’s abilities.

Capitalize on learning styles. Students learn in a number of different ways. Visual learners learn most effectively from visual information, while auditory learners learn best from verbal or audio presentations. Tactile-kinesthetic learners do well when touching or moving in some way as they take in information (experiential learning). While students can often learn to some degree in all of these different ways, many excel in one area so that instruction based on a particular style is much more effective than that of another. Deficits in one or more areas of learning can be particularly common in students with learning disabilities.

Incorporate multiple intelligences into curriculum. Students often have areas of learning in which they are particularly strong. These learning strengths can be engaged to help students succeed in the classroom and reach their full potential. The multiple intelligences are a framework of strengths outlined by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner. They are linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical-rythmic, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Most students have strengths in one or two of these areas.

Capitalize on student interests. One of the best ways to motivate students is to incorporate their interests into the curriculum. As much as possible, allow students to choose the topics they’ll report on in a paper or project. Also look to include interests in other smaller ways—such as in math word problems. Tying learning to interests is a potentially powerful way to reinforce core curriculum concepts.

Involves students in educational goals. Students perform best when they feel they are active participants, as opposed to passive subjects, in learning. Try to involve students in creating goals related to learning activities. Children with mental health and learning disorders may have a negative attitude toward schoolwork so incentives are required at the outset. Your goal ultimately should be to have students genuinely engaged in learning so that rewards become less important.

Use computerized instruction. Most students enjoy working with computers, which can stimulate their interest in schoolwork. A wide assortment of available programs—from reading instruction to voice-recognition software—makes
computerized instruction very relevant in helping students with special needs. Activities and games that incorporate material from content themes can reinforce concepts for visual and tactile learners.

**Group students effectively.** Group projects provide great opportunities for you to put together the talents of students in complementary ways. A child who struggles in one aspect of a subject may excel in another. Group students so that they can both showcase strengths and learn from peers. Also give careful consideration to the social dynamics of groups. Children who have mental health and learning disorders benefit from working with students who are especially kind, patient, and empathetic.

**Consider outside placement options.** Some children may have needs you simply cannot meet in the regular classroom. At these times, work with your school’s specialists to ensure skills are developed in other settings. A child with a communication disorder might require intensive work with a speech-language pathologist. An extremely disruptive student may need to spend part of the day in a program set up for children with serious emotional disorders.