

CHAPTER 1

BELIEVE IN ME



Leaders at every level of the system and the school team believe in the potential of all students, including those with disabilities.

► THE PROBLEM: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES MUST OVERCOME AN ENORMOUS "BELIEF GAP"

Belief is a powerful force. Research has shown that what parents and teachers believe about a child's potential deeply affects how far that child will go in life.² Children often live up to the expectations we set for them. Even though the vast majority of students with disabilities have mild disabilities and are capable of leading a successful life in school and beyond, adults often lower their expectations for what they think is possible for them.

In one survey, 85% of students with disabilities expected that they would graduate with a high school diploma.³ But just 59% of parents of students with disabilities expected their child to do so.⁴ Despite having the best interests of their children at heart, parents may not know what is realistic to expect of their child.

Students with disabilities have high expectations for themselves



**85% of students with disabilities
expected that they would graduate with a high school diploma**

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 2 youth telephone interview/mail survey, 2003.

Educators also play a significant role in shaping the opportunities that students with disabilities have. Yet, with competing priorities, challenging working conditions, and few resources, they, too, often have expectations for students with disabilities that are far too low.⁵ While more research is necessary to fully understand the impact of teacher expectations on students with disabilities, a 2003 Education Week survey of over 800 general and special education teachers found that “a striking 84 percent of teachers reject[ed] the concept that special education students should be expected to meet the same set of content standards as general education students their age.”⁶ If students with disabilities are going to graduate with a meaningful diploma, they must have access to challenging, grade-level content every step of the way.

The reasons parents and teachers might lower their expectations for students with disabilities vary widely. But when adults don’t believe in students’ abilities, their actions show it. For example, parents might enroll them in less challenging courses or they might not explicitly discuss plans for college or career in specific terms from an early age. In the classroom, teachers might call on these students less often than others or give them less time to answer a question before they give the answer or call on another student. They might seat these students in the back of the classroom so they don’t distract other students. They may water down the curriculum for them or not encourage them to take on challenging material. When adults lower their expectations, they might simply allow these students to give up on themselves.

Students internalize what others believe about them

Students easily pick up on these low expectations. Often, in response, they disengage. They lose motivation and confidence in themselves. This turns what a teacher believes about a student into a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-confidence is one of the biggest predictors of success for students with disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities has found that students with learning and attention issues are four times more likely than their non-disabled peers to struggle with self-confidence.⁷

A lack of confidence may also explain why students with disabilities struggle to stay on track toward a high school diploma. Nationwide, just 65% of students with disabilities graduate -- far lower than the national average for all students at 83%.⁸

Students of color with disabilities face even lower expectations

Just as teachers expect less from students with a disability, research has also shown that teachers expect less from Black and Latino students in general.⁹ Both racism and ableism are rooted in a long history of educational segregation and discrimination. In fact, concerns and lawsuits regarding the segregation of African American students in special education classrooms helped lead the way toward the first federal special education legislation in 1975.¹⁰

To this day, low expectations for students of certain races and for students with disabilities stand in the way of their success. Chapter 3 “Find Me” describes this issue in more detail.

Whether driven by good intentions or by implicit biases, the result of low expectations is the same: students with disabilities are unfairly denied the learning opportunities they deserve.

THE SOLUTION: WE MUST BELIEVE THAT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES CAN ACHIEVE AT HIGH LEVELS

Experts affirm that the vast majority of special education students - more than 80% - can meet the same academic standards as other students, as long as schools give them the access, accommodations, instruction, and support they need.¹¹ A common misperception is that students with disabilities are inherently less intelligent than other students. But research has shown that there is no correlation between IQ and disabilities.¹² That means a student can have both a high IQ and a learning disability.

Of course, some students face very severe disabilities that limit their academic success. But too often, we inaccurately lower expectations way too far for even students with moderate disabilities. Once a school labels a student as having “special needs,” often staff automatically assume this student should be held to a lower standard. They then give these students work that is too easy or far below their grade-level and they don’t have the chance to progress. Low expectations set a ceiling for what students with disabilities can do.

“I can’t even remember all the times I have heard the sentiment, ‘If they could meet standards, they wouldn’t have a disability,’” said former education journalist Karin Chenoweth.¹³ To Chenoweth, that statement shows a deep misunderstanding of disabilities and the role special education should play.

Just as a student’s zip code, skin color or family income should not determine what is possible for him, neither should his disability status. Instead of underestimating what students with disabilities can do, school teams must hold all students to a very high bar, and then provide the curriculum and support to help students get there.

“In many cases, students have surprised their teachers and parents - and themselves - by mastering content that, before standards-based reform, was never taught to them,” said Martha Thurlow, Director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO).¹⁴

Statewide graduation rates for students with disabilities range from 28 to 83%.¹⁵ California is in the higher end of this range: 66% of the students with disabilities in the 2015-16 cohort graduated from high school within four years.¹⁶ The high graduation rates for students with disabilities in some states prove that disability status doesn’t necessarily determine a student’s destiny. “Not only must we do better, but clearly we can,” said Johns Hopkins education professor Robert Balfanz.¹⁷

When teachers and parents set ambitious but realistic goals for students, it challenges everyone to rethink what is possible. Education research professor Beverly Weiser of Southern Methodist University studied how teacher expectations for students affected their performance. She found that when teachers give students with disabilities challenging work along with helpful feedback, the students score higher on tests. They also show increases in motivation and confidence.¹⁸

Some schools and districts have already proven this is possible. Here are a few examples:

- In California alone, 200 schools prove that students with disabilities can master grade level standards in both English and math at the same rate as students without disabilities in the state.¹⁹
- In California, just 10-15% of students with disabilities achieve at grade level. But at KIPP Raíces Elementary in Los Angeles, which serves primarily low-income students, students with disabilities are scoring more than twice the state average in English (36%) and math (50%).²⁰

- At Lafayette Elementary School, a school in San Francisco Unified that attracts deaf and hard-of-hearing students from across the city, students with disabilities outperform their peers elsewhere in the district and state. By third grade, most of the deaf and hard-of-hearing students at Lafayette are reading and doing math at grade level or beyond.
- Some districts are bucking the trend and graduating high numbers of students. For example, 86% of students with disabilities in Milpitas Unified graduate high school.²¹ Piedmont City Unified School District also graduates the majority of their students with disabilities. In 2015-16, all 39 of their high school seniors with disabilities graduated within four years. Many were also eligible to attend a four-year university in California."²²

When teachers have high expectations, students rise to the challenge

A teacher's low expectations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for students. The good news is that the self-fulfilling nature of high expectations is just as strong. In 1964, Harvard researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson did the first study on the impact of teacher expectations on student performance.²³ They told teachers that certain students (chosen randomly) would experience dramatic growth in IQ. In the years that followed, teachers began treating those students differently. Rosenthal observed this in subtle yet significant ways. Teachers gave these students more time for answering questions. They gave them more feedback. They even touched and smiled at these students more. Ultimately, these small actions resulted in these students experiencing greater academic growth than others. This finding is somewhat intuitive. When teachers expect certain students to succeed, those expectations become reality.

Teachers can raise their expectations by changing their own actions

It's clear that we all need to raise our expectations for students with disabilities. But how? One approach is to train teachers and parents to analyze their perceptions of students with disabilities. But attitudes and beliefs are hard to change.

Some recent research suggests that schools instead start with changing teacher behavior, rather than beliefs.²⁴ Robert Pianta at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia studied two groups of teachers; he gave the first group standard information about what teachers should believe and expect of their students. He gave the second group an intense behavioral training in which teachers worked with personal coaches to learn ways to change their behavior. These teachers would videotape their classes over a period of a few months, then reflect with their coach about which new behaviors they could try. For example, when a boy speaks out of turn in class, a teacher may instantly believe the boy is disruptive and needs to be managed. This training would instead show the teacher how to acknowledge the boy's energy and encourage him to express it positively.

The result: the beliefs of the second group of teachers changed way more than the first. When teachers learned *how* to change their behavior towards students, their beliefs about *what* students can achieve organically changed over time.

"It's far more powerful to work from the outside in than the inside out, if you want to change expectations," he said.²⁵ In other words, to change someone's mind, talking about it is usually not enough. It is far more effective to show someone what to do.

Instead of trying to convince teachers to change their deep subconscious beliefs about students, this research suggests it is more effective to give them tools to respond differently to certain student behaviors. Pianta suggests how teachers can change their behavior toward students who are struggling. When teachers use these strategies over time, they can actually shift their mindset about what they believe students can accomplish.

7 WAYS TEACHERS CAN CHANGE THEIR EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL STUDENTS - INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

- 1 - Watch how each student interacts:** How do they prefer to engage? What do they seem to like to do? Observe so you can understand all their capabilities.
- 2 - Listen:** Try to understand what motivates them, what their goals are, how they view you and their classmates, and the activities you assign them.
- 3 - Engage:** Talk with students about their individual interests. Don't offer advice or opinions – just listen.
- 4 - Experiment:** Change how you react to challenging behaviors. Rather than responding quickly in the moment, take a breath. Realize that their behavior might just be a way of reaching out to you.
- 5 - Meet:** Each week, spend time with students outside of your role as "teacher." Let the students choose a game or other non-academic activity they'd like to do with you. Your job is NOT to teach but watch, listen and narrate what you see, focusing on students' interests and what they do well. This type of activity is really important for students with whom you often feel in conflict or whom you avoid.
- 6 - Reach out:** Know what your students like to do outside of school. Make it a project for them to tell you about it using some medium in which they feel comfortable: music, video, writing, etc. Find both individual and group time for them to share this with you. Watch and listen to how skilled, motivated and interested they can be. Now think about school through their eyes.
- 7 - Reflect:** Think back on your own best and worst teachers, bosses or supervisors. List five words for each that describe how you felt in your interactions with them. How did the best and the worst make you feel? What specifically did they do or say that made you feel that way? Now think about how your students would describe you. Jot down how they might describe you and why. How do your expectations or beliefs shape how they look at you? Are there parallels in your beliefs and their responses to you?

Robert Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia

Excerpted from NPR Morning Edition on
"Teachers' Expectations Can Influence How Students Perform"
by Alix Spiegel, September 2012

Mindset matters, and it starts at the top

School and district leaders can play a powerful role in pushing teachers and students to reach higher. They can create district-wide and school-wide goals that put the needs of their most vulnerable students first. This creates a strong sense of shared responsibility for the success of students with disabilities. Here are a few examples:

- In Shenendehowa, New York, the district's strategic plan stated as one of their goals "to share responsibility for student achievement among general education staff, special education staff, and other staff of the district." This district also set clear targets for achievement levels. For example, "By year 2014, 85% of students receiving special education services will reach at least a level 3 [proficiency] on State assessments."²⁶
- In Florida, an Orange County Public Schools goal stated that "80% percent of students receiving special education services will graduate with a standard diploma."²⁷
- At James Campbell High School in Honolulu, Hawaii, the school's goals stated clearly, "The performance gap between general education students and students receiving special education services will be reduced to no more than 10% by 2014."²⁸

Setting ambitious goals does not guarantee improvement. But it is a good place to start. When districts and schools explicitly state their high expectations for students with special needs, they send the message that all students can learn and achieve, despite their differences.



WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



BELIEVE IN ME

Leaders at every level of the system and the school team believe in the potential of all students, including those with disabilities.

WHAT TO ASK

- Does everyone in the school system believe students with disabilities can learn at a high level?
- Do they show it in their interactions with students, families and each other?
- Do they make these goals and intentions clear in the plans to which they hold themselves accountable?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- District or charter school network leaders express their belief that all students can achieve at high levels and act on that by making sure everyone shares responsibility for the success of students with disabilities.
- The school board and district leaders have publicly stated that the success of students with disabilities is a priority. They publicly present data at least twice a year on how students are doing, and assess whether it's effective.
- District-level or network-level strategic plans include specific measurable goals about improving the performance of students with disabilities and these are updated on an annual basis.
- The district / charter school network surveys students to understand their experience and sets targets for improving on issues that surface in the survey results that relate to students with disabilities.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- All teachers take responsibility for all students. Teacher teams regularly review and discuss data and progress of students with disabilities during common planning time.
- Students with disabilities are enrolled in all levels and types of courses including advanced classes, AP/IB classes, and college-track courses, as well as participate in enrichment and extracurricular activities. Schools track how many students with disabilities are in these classes and activities, and set goals accordingly.
- Students with disabilities are among the students highlighted and celebrated for their strengths in school assemblies, awards ceremonies, newsletters, programs, etc.
- All school staff use language that demonstrates their deep and unwavering belief in the potential of all students to achieve significant academic gains and find success in college and life. This belief is expressed clearly throughout classes and during school events.

HOW CAN PARENTS KNOW WHETHER THEIR SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE THEIR CHILD WITH A DISABILITY WILL THRIVE?

At the end of each chapter in this guide, advocates will find this two-page summary that describes the concrete actions that districts, charter management organizations, and schools must take to ensure that students with disabilities succeed. Each section aligns directly with each chapter of this report. Parents can use this tool to advocate not only for their own child, but also to push for reforms that are necessary at a broader level. These observable actions help parent advocates know very clearly what to “look for” in a school, organization, or district that is truly doing what it takes to help students with disabilities succeed. It helps parent advocates pinpoint exactly how their school system is falling short, and more importantly, how to demand more.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The superintendent/CEO, principal, special education and general education teachers, staff, and student families believe all students can graduate prepared for college and/or career.
- The superintendent/CEO and principal set an educational vision that addresses how to use school money, staff, space, and time to support students with disabilities, and makes this a priority for everyone -- not just special education specialists.
- Leaders hold all staff accountable for having high expectations for students with disabilities and proactively include these students in the classroom. The school team - including teachers, administrators, and instructional support staff - takes responsibility for the success of every student. They make sure all students receive appropriate support to engage in challenging work, and they regularly discuss each student's progress.