

Five Ways to Design Inclusive Learning Environments for All Students

By Sue Ann Highland, PhD



It's a fundamental right that every child should have the same opportunity for a high-quality education and the same chance to learn and thrive in school as their peers—regardless of their capabilities, challenges, family circumstances, language, or ethnicity.

For this to happen, the school environment must feel safe and welcoming for all students, which is why access and inclusion are basic necessities in education today.

As our country becomes increasingly diverse in all these ways, educators are tasked with meeting a broad range of student needs. No two students are alike, and each child learns in different ways. Instead of employing a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction, educators are adopting more engaging, inclusive, and personalized approaches designed to support all students more effectively.

Thoughtful [furniture choices](#) and [classroom resources](#) not only promote physical comfort but also facilitate social interaction and collaboration among students of varying backgrounds and abilities, enhancing the overall inclusivity of the classroom setting.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

Access and inclusion require educators to be thoughtful and purposeful in how they interact with students on a daily basis, incorporating strategies such as **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL) into their instruction to support a diverse student population and give everyone a fair shot at success.

UDL accounts for the differences among students and how they learn by giving them multiple ways to engage with instruction, understand the content, and show what they can do. This flexibility gives students numerous pathways to learn the material and demonstrate their skills and understanding, allowing them to draw on their unique strengths and abilities in doing so.

Teachers can also connect what students are learning in school with their interests, languages, and life experiences. This involves getting to know students, including their families and interests; celebrating these unique backgrounds and experiences; and drawing upon these to help students learn the content more effectively.

DESIGNING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

UDL is an evidence-based strategy for creating more inclusive learning environments that support students as individuals, foster a strong sense of belonging and community, and accommodate various learning differences.

But designing an inclusive learning environment is about more than delivering fully accessible instruction. It's also about creating a classroom culture in which all students treat each other with kindness and respect.

The design of the physical environment matters, too. How a **classroom space** is designed, furnished, and equipped plays a key role in whether students feel welcome in that space and how effectively they can learn.

Here are five ways to design physical learning environments that are more accessible and inclusive of all students.



The Library at Oliver Brown Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas offers a mix of colors, textures, and heights to facilitate small group project work, reading and study groups, as well as after school activities. Design, furnishings, and project management by Projects By Design® from School Specialty®.



Hallways, common areas, and other mixed-use spaces increasingly support different learning needs and preferences. Rendering courtesy of Projects By Design® from School Specialty®.

FOCUS ON FLEXIBILITY.

Designing flexible instruction that caters to various needs requires the use of flexible furniture to support it. For instance, using moveable furniture on wheels and modular pieces that easily can be arranged into different configurations allows educators to create versatile classroom spaces that support a wide variety of learning activities and modalities.

OFFER STUDENTS PLENTY OF CHOICES IN SEATING STYLES.

Choice gives students agency and ownership of their learning and leads to deeper engagement. It also makes classrooms more inclusive. Something as simple as having multiple seating styles to choose from can accommodate different learning preferences and helps students feel more welcome.

For these reasons, learning spaces should give students plenty of choices in where and how they'll do their work, with a variety of seating styles and

materials. **Classrooms that include multiple seating options**—such as standing desks, clusters for small-group learning, soft seating, and formal desks and chairs—help students make their own choices to support how they learn best.

By providing furniture that accommodates different learning needs and preferences, schools can create an environment where every student feels valued and supported in their unique ways of engaging with the material. It also gives teachers options to accommodate different learning modalities and instructional options.

PAY ATTENTION TO COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE.

To ensure that students can work comfortably, classroom furnishings should be ergonomically designed and age appropriate. For instance, height-adjustable desks create a comfortable workspace for students, allowing them to easily raise or lower the height of their desks to the right level they need to be productive.

Because some students are sensitive to certain types of materials, learning spaces should offer seating options with different fabrics and surface types. This gives students who have sensory processing disorders a variety of options to choose from. Many students on the autism spectrum have sensory processing concerns and are overly sensitive to touch.



Media Room collaboration between School Specialty® and the College Football Playoff Foundation®. Design, furnishings, and project management by Projects By Design® from School Specialty®.

Environmental factors such as lighting, **acoustics**, temperature, and **air quality** should also be at optimum levels for learning. Students with sensory processing issues in particular might be overly sensitive to light and sound. **Classroom Décor** offers an opportunity for student input and agency and is frequently used as part of daily classroom routines

To maximize students' ability to focus and learn, schools should use natural lighting wherever possible and avoid using fluorescent lights, instead choosing warmer, recessed lighting sources. If replacing light bulbs or fixtures isn't feasible, light filters (such as **Cozy Shades**) can provide an affordable option for softening classroom lighting.

When students are physically comfortable in their seats, they are more likely to participate actively in discussions and activities, regardless of their individual needs or abilities. Soft seating offers comfort and mobility for **both secondary schools** as well as **primary education**.

GIVE STUDENTS A WAY TO MOVE AROUND EASILY.

All students need to move throughout the school day, and those with sensory processing challenges or difficulty self-regulating are likely to move more frequently.

Classroom environments designed to support all learners should accommodate the need to move around, and in fact, **research** supports the idea that frequent movement and fidgeting might actually help students with ADHD learn better. **"Fidget" seating** and **"wobble" stools** allow for frequent movement by letting students twist, rock, or move in place without disrupting a lesson.

ESTABLISH QUIET, CALMING SPACES.

Students who are overstimulated or suffering from anxiety might need some time to decompress by themselves. This is why a growing number of schools are realizing the value of having quiet, calming spaces, such as separate areas of the classroom that are available to students who need those private moments of down time.



The **Snoezelen® Mobile Sensory Cart** brings a relaxing multi-sensory environment wherever needed. Rendering courtesy of Projects By Design® from School Specialty®.



A **Snoezelen® Multi-Sensory Environment (MSE)** incorporates a specialized selection of sensory equipment and materials that can give students agency and help reinforce their responses to sensory inputs. This in turn has been observed to advance therapy goals. Rendering courtesy of Projects By Design® from School Specialty®.

For instance, this **Mini Geode Den** helps block noise and prevents sensory overload, giving students with sensory issues a quiet and calm space in which they can feel secure.

Wholly separate multi-sensory rooms **are also emerging** in schools. A **Snoezelen® multi-sensory room** or Snoezelen® room often includes gentle lighting and soothing sounds, along with furniture that helps define spatial boundaries to help children feel secure in their physical space and **sensory tools** that help students calm down and regulate their emotions.

ACCESSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE

As K-12 leaders look to create more inclusive learning environments for everyone, small changes to the physical learning space can make a big difference.

To learn how School Specialty® can help you design and furnish learning environments - including equipping them with proper resources and supplies - so they are fully accessible and inclusive for all students, please reach out to your School Specialty® Representative.



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