

Tips for Inclusive Programming:

The Voice of Youth on Belonging and Inclusion

Members of the CPAC Youth Advisory Board (YAB) shared their perspective on “belonging” in school, based on their personal experiences throughout their educational journey. Here are some things to consider when planning programming for students with disabilities in their own words.

When did you feel most included at school?

- Extracurricular activities made me feel included, like theater and sports, no one cared about my disability and academics didn't matter at that moment
- When the focus was on me as a whole, not as a student with a disability
- When I can share parts of myself with others that may or may not be related to my disability
- When I'm doing things with other people who love the same thing
- When general education teachers made a point to highlight my strengths

What are some factors for schools to consider that support community and belonging?

- Flexible teaching, some days I'm not running on all cylinders, but I still want to learn
- Students sometimes don't fit in like cookie cutters, but that's ok
- Build a sense of community in the schools and classrooms and explore things in the community that might help students in social areas too not just employment and college
- Remember my goals when I'm having a rough patch, I still want to go to college so academics matter
- Include disability history, literature and pop culture regarding disabilities in school programming which will help remove stigmas

What would you suggest to the PPT team to help students feel more included?

- Get information to me early, so I can be prepared to talk about my disability and help with goals
- Glossary of words I need to know, I will feel like I can understand the conversation
- I'm always the last person entering the room of the PPT, if I could see the room before and select a chair and pick who was next to me it would help
- Have fidgets and weighted blankets, I might need them to relax and focus
- Don't wait to talk to me the day of the meeting and think I'm going to be ready
- Get my information in braille or recorded, and allow my Otter pilot to take notes for me
- If an IEP says accommodations in “all classes” remember that for the PPT and other places

- If a student is anxious allow them to prepare something on video, or practice a mock PPT to help with anxiety
- Information on the IEP should be shared with the student especially the accommodations so they can create a “toolbox”
- Give me documents before the PPT meeting so I can ask questions
- Student first documents, IEPs are complicated to understand
- The support team needs to be on the same page, how are you going to create a sense of positive culture, support me, and where I can make mistakes and learn from them

What is something important to share with adults to create an inclusive environment and a sense of belonging?

- Design classrooms so they aren't so packed, the person in the wheelchair always has to be in front and doesn't get to choose a space
- Sensory input space for students who need to take a moment in a quiet environment to regroup
- At times para's provide too much support or assistance which can take away the student's ability to overcome obstacles
- Use yellow tape to mark areas for students (like stairs)
- Navigational supports - student-friendly directions so students can increase independence in the hallways and around the school
- Don't out my disability by handing me items like study guides in front of everyone, if you hand out items, hand them to everyone. And don't make my accommodations look like a privilege to the other students by talking about them
- Remove the stigma around my disability, disability awareness clubs (strengths and challenges)
- Educators should be prepared when meeting a student and know a little about them

What suggestions do you have for adults who support students to help them feel more comfortable speaking up for themselves?

- Building a relationship with a couple of staff members who get to know me
- Staff changes are really hard on students. It takes time to build trust, staff should feel supported and have a sense of belonging too, so they are there for students
- Teach students how to be comfortable with the uncomfortable
- Consider the student's point of view, and understand that it is hard to speak up for yourself
- Help me work on scholarships and prepare for life after school
- Educators believing in you support self-advocacy
- Transition programs are helpful because you get to learn about the educators on a different level and work on skills for life
- When I can focus on my goals, build my self-confidence, be part of the community, and feel good about myself