

**New report highlights barriers that DC students with disabilities face; makes recommendations for student success**  
***Report calls for school and system leaders to drive innovation for student learning***

**Washington, DC** — Today, the DC Special Education Cooperative (Co-op) released a new report, [All In: Getting to Solutions for Students with Disabilities](#), making key recommendations for how public schools can better serve students with disabilities, including:

- Centering student voice in learning environments and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs);
- Creating professional development for every staff member so every staff member is equipped to support students with disabilities;
- Supporting collaboration between general education and special education teachers;
- Investing in MTSS to meet students' academic and social-emotional needs;
- Prioritizing data to inform practice, especially for quality and access;
- Listening to student voice; and
- Developing relationships with families.

In DC, nearly one in five public school students have disabilities — about 16,000 children in total. One in four Black male students and one in eight Black female students are identified as students with disabilities in DC, two times the rate of their white peers. Academically, only 8 percent of students with disabilities performed at grade level in English language arts on PARCC, and only 6 percent did so in math.

In response to these staggering numbers, the DC Special Education Cooperative with DC's Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, SchoolTalk, EmpowerK12, and the Gamba Foundation — brought together the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE), 27 DC charter schools, community partners, parents, and students to chart a vision to support students with disabilities.

"Today's reality is that DC's students with disabilities are languishing academically with low rates of academic success, chronic absenteeism, and low graduation rates," said Julie Camerata, executive director of the DC Special Education Cooperative. "But we are also the city that — with a focused mindset, a strategic vision, and the right systemic shifts — can chart a new course for students with disabilities, one that is academically rich and rigorous and acknowledges and respects students with disabilities."

"That's why we brought together the students, families, and system leaders who are closest to this work to identify our biggest bets to transform DC into a city that serves its students with disabilities well," continued Camerata. "We can be 'all in' for our students, but that work begins with our school and system leaders prioritizing and elevating this community, their needs, and their success."

During the summit, stakeholders overwhelmingly identified a mindset of low expectations and negativity towards students with disabilities, citing 'incapable,' 'lazy,' 'bad,' and 'different' as common words to describe the beliefs that people have about students with disabilities. Other barriers that stakeholders identified include:

- A focus on compliance instead of quality instruction and effective implementation;
- Too high of caseloads that make individualizing instruction and support difficult;
- A lack of training and coaching for all teachers and staff; and
- A lack of accountability on how resources are used and interventions are implemented.

"I heard diverse voices and perspectives at the All-In Summit call for schools to do better for our students with disabilities and their families," said Serena M. Hayes, Ombudsman for Public Education and cohost of the event. "Students shared feeling unserved and deprioritized. I also heard hope from school administrators and leaders as they shared their desire to get education right for students and families with disabilities. The overwhelming consensus from participants was the hope that with bold systemic shifts, schools can be a positive addition to the lives of our students with disabilities. Our schools and systems should adopt these recommendations as a baseline to providing high-quality instruction to the 16,000 children in our city who are learning with disabilities."

The report also names key recommendations that schools can implement to better support students with disabilities, including leadership and system innovation. To better support students with disabilities, leaders must foster a culture of collaboration; prioritize students with disabilities in school budgets; hold themselves and their teams accountable for implementing the changes needed for student success; and take a holistic approach to meeting the academic, mental health, and general well-being of students with disabilities and their families.

"I encourage all of my fellow school leaders to go all in for students with disabilities," said Raymond Weeden, board chair of the Co-op and executive director of Thurgood Marshall PCS. "For me that has meant gaining a better understanding of what instructional and foundational shifts will better serve students with disabilities and then providing my teachers and staff with the support, time, and resources to be successful in those shifts."

**All In: Getting to Solutions for Students with Disabilities** is available [here](#).