

PURSUING EQUITY FOR BLACK AND LATINE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

CASE STUDIES OF TWO FULL-INCLUSION SCHOOLS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

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In 2023, Envision Learning Partners (ELP) and Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) embarked on a research study to identify and learn from schools that demonstrated positive outcomes for Black and Latine students with learning differences (including students with disabilities and multilingual learners). After a review of data from secondary schools across the country, the study team identified two schools for a more in-depth study, which was conducted during the 2023–2024 school year. This executive summary synthesizes findings from the two case studies.

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ABOUT ENVISION EDUCATION

Founded in 2002, **Envision Education** is a nonprofit charter management organization that administers four public charter schools in California (San Francisco, Oakland, and Hayward), and provides professional learning services through its consulting division, Envision Learning Partners. Envision Education was approached by the Oak Foundation to conduct this study based on its schools' track record of successful outcomes for its Black and Latine students with learning differences.

Envision Education's mission is to transform the lives of students—especially those who will be first in their families to attend college—by preparing them for success in college, career, and life.

Envision Learning Partners is a nationwide consultancy amplifying best practices of Envision Schools. With expertise in driving transformational student outcomes through high-quality performance-based assessment, ELP partners with a nationwide portfolio of school and systems leaders to drive impact at scale.

Learn more at www.envisionschools.org and www.envisionlearning.org.

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INTRODUCTION

As ethnic and racial diversity among students increases, ensuring equitable education for students of color with disabilities remains a critical challenge in U.S. public schools. Over the past 10 years, the percentage of students receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has risen from 13% in 2012–13 to 15% in 2022–2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Among these, 17% are Black and 14% are Hispanic/Latine. Black and Latine students with disabilities (SWDs) often face barriers that lead to systematic disparities in school outcomes, such as lower graduation rates (Rhodes, 2021), lagging academic achievement in reading and math (Wei et al., 2013), and disproportionate disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions (U.S. General Accountability Office, 2018).

Latine SWDs who are also multilingual learners (MLLs) encounter even greater obstacles. Schools often misidentify these students for special education services (Carnock &

Silva, 2019) or fail to provide sufficient language development instruction (Park & Thomas, 2012). There is an urgent need for more inclusive and targeted educational approaches.

Historically, these subgroups have been marginalized and excluded from mainstream educational opportunities. Despite federal mandates, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and IDEA, segregation persists at neighborhood, school, and classroom levels. Black students are disproportionately assigned to special education and self-contained classrooms, which restrict access to rigorous academic opportunities (White et al., 2019; Cosier et al., 2020). Latine and multilingual SWDs face similar inequities.

While the federal definition of “high inclusive environments” stipulates that students spend at least 80% of their day in general education (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), only 62% of Black SWDs and 66% of Latine SWDs met this standard in 2022–2023, compared to 70% of White SWDs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Addressing these disparities requires sustained focus from educators, policymakers, and researchers.

This research focuses on Black, Latine, and MLLs with mild to moderate disabilities, such as learning and language-based disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia), neurological differences (e.g., attention deficit disorders), and emotional disturbances. We recognize that this list excludes students with significant cognitive and health-related disabilities—specifically those who benefit more from specialized instruction in personalized settings. Because the inclusive setting of the learning systems we are studying in this project is general education classrooms, the study focuses on students with IEPs whose disabilities allow them to receive instruction alongside general education peers. The aim of this study was to document inclusive school learning environments that are designed in ways that support the learning and well-being of these historically marginalized students.¹

About the Pursuing Equity for Black and Latine Students with Learning Differences Study

The research question guiding our study was,

“What structures, systems of support, cultures, and practices create the conditions for Black and Latine students with learning differences to accelerate their learning and thrive in secondary schools?”

We searched for public and public charter middle and high schools across the United States that had a strong reputation and track record of supporting the well-being and academic success of Black and Latine SWDs (including MLLs). We initially identified four schools that agreed to participate in phase one of the study, which included school leader and staff interviews and document/data review. From these four schools, we narrowed our sample to two case study schools that had the right demographic composition (at least 50% Black and Latine students and at least 10% students with disabilities) and that had relatively stable school leadership and staffing to support continuity of the school’s program for students with learning differences.

We conducted case study data collection at these two secondary schools in order to more deeply understand the way inclusive school learning structures, systems of support,

school cultures, and instructional practices interact to create learning environments that are associated with positive outcomes for Black, Latine, and multilingual SWDs. Central to our inquiry were the voices of SWDs attending these schools and their caregivers. We wanted to understand their experiences as learners and members of their school communities, the most important aspects of their experiences that they felt supported them in their learning and well being, and whether they felt a sense of agency or self-determination in their learning and school experiences. Research suggests that student voice is an indicator of a positive school culture; a large-scale study of secondary students in Chicago Public Schools found that when students feel that their voices are heard, attendance and grade point averages increase (Kahne et al., 2022). In addition, a number of studies have shown that students’ sense of self-determination is an important predictor of in-school and postschool success (Shogren et al., 2024; Mazzotti et al., 2021)

Data collection at each school occurred during the 2023–2024 academic year and included interviews with school leaders, school staff, seven to eight Black and Latine SWDs and their caregivers, focus groups with at least two groups of six to ten students at different grade levels, and observations of classes, public exhibition nights, professional development/staff meetings, and students’ presentations of learning. Existing survey data from surveys administered by the school and student outcomes data from school report cards, as well as other documents (e.g., program descriptions, accreditation documents, websites) were included. We analyzed qualitative data using both an inductive grounded analysis approach (coding based on emerging themes) and a deductive approach (informed by our theoretical framework).

(See Appendix A for a full description of our research study methodology, and Appendix B for a review of literature on inclusive school structures and practices.)

Theoretical Framework Guiding Our Research

The project’s research staff (comprised of researchers from Envision Education, higher education advisor Dr. Ilene Ivins, and researchers from Social Policy Research Associates) consulted with an expert advisory panel to begin drafting an Effective Learning Environments for Learning Differences framework that draws upon existing research, expert practitioner knowledge, and exploratory data collection on four

¹ In addition, we recognize that the range of disabilities listed above are quite different, and thus, students will have a range of different learning needs. We do not purport that students with all different types of disabilities will benefit equally from specific interventions. We recognize that even among those who are able to learn alongside general education peers, there is wide variation in learning needs. For this reason, we acknowledge the limitations of this research project’s findings and that individual learning needs call for more individualized solutions.

schools that we had identified as effectively supporting the success of Black and Latine students with learning differences. The framework identifies and describes high-leverage structures, systems of support, cultures, and practices that prior research and expert practitioners have found to be associated with positive learning and well-being outcomes for students with learning differences. This framework began with a lengthy list of characteristics that we narrowed down as we conducted more in-depth study of the two case study schools. The final theoretical framework is found in **Figure 1**.

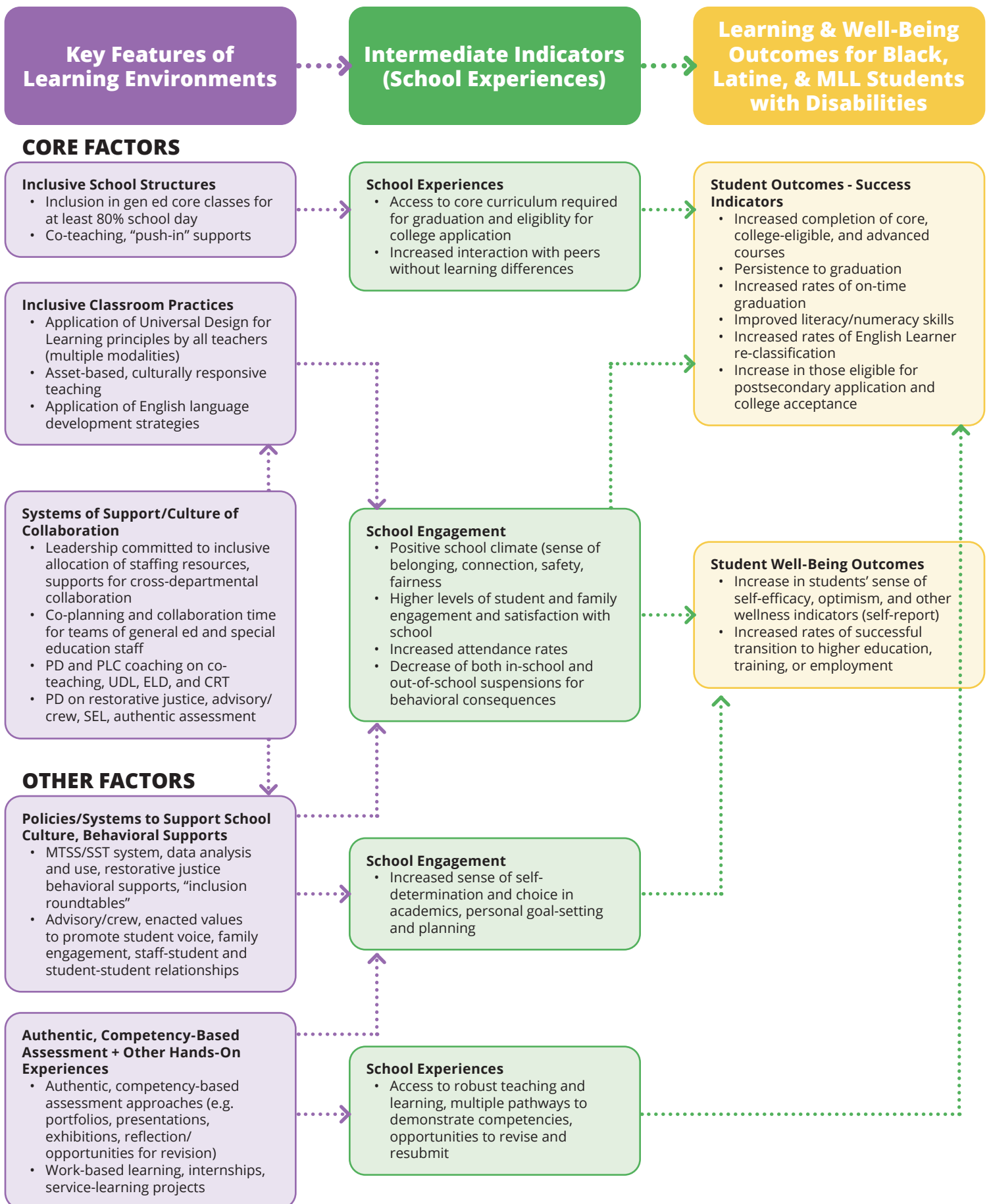
The theoretical framework represents **five key features of learning environments**:

- 1 Inclusive school structures**
- 2 Inclusive school practices**
- 3 Policies/systems to support school culture/behavior supports**
- 4 Authentic, competency-based assessments and other hands-on experiences**
- 5 Systems of supports for adult learning and collaboration; and elements within them that are evidence-based and have been observed in schools that have a track record of success with Black and Latine students with learning differences**

We theorize that an interaction of these five features of the learning environment works to create the conditions for students with learning differences to have positive learning experiences, as evidenced by intermediate indicators such as school experiences and school engagement (for example, positive school climate and higher levels of student and family engagement in school). These learning conditions, in turn, support more positive learning outcomes (for example, course completion, literacy skills, persistence and graduation rates, successful postsecondary transitions, and English learner reclassification rates). (The intermediate outcomes and long-term outcomes all refer to outcomes for students with learning differences.)

In this synthesis of key findings from the two case studies that we completed, we organize our findings using the five features of learning environments in the Effective Learning Environments for Learning Differences framework. Though we did not observe every element in the five features across both schools, we saw many similarities and overlaps in a broader set of inclusive structures, cultures, and practices that school staff implemented across the five features.

Figure 1. Effective Learning Environments for Learning Differences Framework



ABOUT THE TWO CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

Capital City Public Charter School is located in the District of Columbia and situated in a three-story building housing an elementary school on the ground floor, a middle school on the second floor, and a high school on the third floor. Overall, Capital City enrolls slightly more than 1,000 students from pre-K (ages 3–4) through 12th grade. Across grades, 25% of Capital City students are Black; 65% are Latine/Hispanic, and 75% qualify for free or reduced lunch. (Our case study focused only on the middle school and high school.) In the middle school, 17.5% of students are SWDs and 56.5% are MLLs. In the high school, 25.9% of students are SWDs and 29.3% are MLLs. SWDs graduating from Capital City are more likely than SWDs in district public schools to have experiences and supports in their school that have prepared them to make a successful transition to postsecondary education.

- 80% of SWDs at Capital City graduate within four to five years as compared with 61% (four-year) and 66% (five-year) at the district level. Capital City MLLs graduate at a rate of 90% within four to five years, compared with 68% at the district level.
- While 100% of Capital City graduates (including SWDs and MLLs) apply to and are accepted to a college, 62% of graduating SWDs immediately enrolled in a postsecondary institution within six months of graduation. This last figure is nearly twice that of the district (32% of SWDs enrolled in a postsecondary institution within six months).

(Data source: DC Report Cards, 2024)

Crosstown High is a small public charter high school in Memphis, Tennessee, and is located on the fourth and fifth floor of Crosstown Concourse, a large mixed-use building that has a café, stores, a medical clinic, apartments, and an art museum. Of the 500 students who attended Crosstown in the 2023–2024 school year, 52.6% identified as Black, 12% Latine, 30.7% White, and 3.8% multiracial; 13% are SWDs and 1% are MLLs. A little over half (53%) come from economically disadvantaged families. At 93.9%, Crosstown's overall graduation rate is over 10 percentage points higher than that of the average Memphis high school (81.5%). This is also true for SWDs, students from families that are economically disadvantaged, Black students, and Latine students. SWDs at Crosstown had a graduation rate of 94.7% in 2023, which greatly surpassed the Memphis-wide graduation rate of 78.2%. Similarly, the graduation rate for Black (96.9%) and Latine (92.7%) students at Crosstown was greater than

that of Black (83.7%) and Latine (72.7%) students Memphis-wide. Notably, Latine students, who compose 12% of Crosstown's student body, have a graduation rate a remarkable 20% higher than Memphis Latine students. There is also evidence that Crosstown's Black and Latine SWDs graduate with higher levels of college readiness than students in Memphis. Overall, Crosstown students, particularly Black/Hispanic/Native American and SWDs, fared better on the ACT across subjects than their Memphis peers.

- The proportion of Crosstown students classified as Black/Hispanic/Native American by the Tennessee Department of Education who scored a 21 or higher on the ACT was about twice that of their Memphis-wide counterparts (24% compared to 12.7% respectively).
- At Crosstown, 16.7% of SWDs scored a 21 or higher on the ACT compared to 2.2% of SWDs in Memphis. *(Data Sources: Tennessee Department of Education and Crosstown High)*

(For more detail on achievement outcomes for SWDs and the overall student populations of these two schools, see the full case studies.)

While both Capital City and Crosstown are charter schools where students and their families apply for admission, both of the schools' admissions policies are lottery-based when there are more applicants than openings, and there are no academic or other student-level criteria for admission. Crosstown purposefully recruits across every zip code in Memphis to ensure that the school is representative of the student demographics across the district ("diverse by design"). Capital City has a higher percentage of Latine, MLL, and SWD students than the district overall, and a slightly lower percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged.

KEY FINDINGS ACROSS THE TWO CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

I. Inclusive school structures

Both Capital City and Crosstown implement a full-inclusion model, with almost all SWDs and all MLLs being included in general education classes for at least 80% of the school day, with the exception of a small handful of SWDs with learning needs requiring more individualized services (e.g., students with cognitive and physical disabilities), who spend the majority of their day in self-contained special day classes (only at Capital City). At Capital City, in all core general education classes (humanities or English language arts [ELA], social studies, math, and science) in which SWDs and MLLs

are integrated, classes are co-taught² by a general education teacher and an “inclusion teacher” (with special education certification). Co-teaching is a practice that involves two or more professionals delivering instruction to a blended group of students in a single physical space (Cook & Friend, 1995). At both schools, we observed “station teaching,” “alternative teaching,” and a “workshop model,” with individual check-ins, allowing co-teachers to differentiate instruction, re-teach and review content, and provide additional scaffolding and time for students with learning differences.

Implementing co-teaching at the school level requires a strategic staffing model, which may be difficult in under-resourced public school contexts. At Capital City Middle School, there are almost an equal number of general education teachers and inclusion teachers. At the high school, SWDs and MLLs are strategically assigned to certain sections of courses to allow for co-teaching of all core subjects (without needing to assign an inclusion teacher to all core subject classes). While this is a resource-intensive classroom model, Capital City has made a strategic resource commitment to sustain the co-teaching approach, and it has been able to sustain this staffing model because of the relatively high percentage of SWDs and MLLs enrolled in the school, including those needing more intensive supports. Similarly, Crosstown has general education teachers and “inclusion specialists” (special education teachers) co-teach in math, English and Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH) classes. Inclusion specialists also provide “push-in” support in other classes as well. Focusing on these three classes at Crosstown to implement co-teaching is a slightly less resource-intensive approach than that implemented by Capital City, but appears to be working for SWDs enrolled at Crosstown. One Crosstown student who receives special education remarked,

I feel like [the special education teacher] is supporting me in academics. I feel like it's a crucial thing because a lot of assignments and math in particular are hard for me, and the teacher is always there to try to push me and try to get me back on task.

II. Inclusive school practices

In addition to full inclusion classes and co-teaching structures, we observed that in both of the case study schools, teachers across inclusion classes applied instructional strategies that

support greater access to core academic content and skills through the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines.³ The UDL framework offers guidelines for designing instruction that is both flexible and rigorous, by encouraging educators to consider the various ways that learning happens in the brain through three primary networks: recognition, strategic, and affective. By tapping into multiple means of activating each network, educators utilize UDL to create options for how students are engaged, how they are taught, and how they show what they know. The three domains, engagement, representation, and action/expression, explored in depth in CAST.org’s UDL Graphic Organizer, provide suggestions for educators. With the overarching goal of cultivating learner agency that is purposeful and reflective, resourceful and authentic, strategic and action-oriented, the framework highlights options for planning.

Teachers at both Crosstown and Capital City provide instruction on content in a variety of different modalities to broaden access and understanding, provide options for students to demonstrate their learning, and use asset-based culturally responsive curriculum and instruction approaches. For example, in a 5th grade English language arts classroom at Capital City, students had the option to complete a graphic organizer or compose a multi-paragraph literary analysis essay to demonstrate their ability to analyze how an author used “show not tell” to develop a character. Providing such options are possible when educators pinpoint a common set of criteria for success that can be applied to students’ demonstrations of learning of varied formats. In this example, the teacher was more interested in the reading skill of literary analysis than writing skill.

The use of UDL practices in inclusion classrooms at both Crosstown and Capital City has led students to feel that they have a great deal of choice in how they learn and demonstrate their mastery of learning. Two SWDs expressed how they have options for learning and demonstrating their learning in ways that are personalized and build on their strengths.

In 11th and 12th grade, our whole class had a poem of what book we choose to read as our final book. But how I learn ... I can do things differently from other people. People want to write, I can type. If I want to write, I can write. If I want do a video, I can do a video.
(SWD at Capital City)

² For more information on co-teaching, see Friend (2008) and Murawski & Bernhardt (2015).

³ For more information on the Universal Design for Learning framework, see CAST (2024).

In certain assignments like projects and just in assignments in general, you could do a video format, you could do an audio format, you could draw a picture, you could make a 3D model. You could do all types of things. (SWD at Crosstown)

The 2024 updates to the UDL framework explicitly integrate culture, identity, and belonging to challenge exclusion and biases experienced by Black and Latine students. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices involve valuing students' cultural and linguistic assets while developing their ability to critique and challenge exclusionary practices leading to racist systems (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). Crosstown and Capital City staff consistently applied practices that married UDL and CRT.

For example, in an 11th grade English class at Capital City, co-teachers launched a unit of study on the play *Fences* through interactive stations in which the students learned about the social context of the play in the following stations: a) reading biographical information about August Wilson's life, b) watching a preview of the recent film adaptation of the play, c) viewing and discussing a series of photos of different types of fences in the world; d) reading poems about border walls; and e) preparing for a homework assignment in which they would select or take a photo of a fence that had personal meaning for them.

In culturally responsive UDL classrooms, educators encourage and respect English language variation and cultural dialects. At Crosstown, teachers affirmed the validity of students' language choices. A Black SWD, searching for academic language to describe an abolitionist's political influence, suggested "menace to society" while telling the inclusion specialist that he wanted a peer to "sophisticate it" by using more academic language. The teacher encouraged him to use his own language, remarking, "Use the words that you know and that counts. You don't have to 'sophisticate it' for it to be quality work." The educator affirmed that "the words you know" reflect accurate, quality thinking, cultivating a respect for the student's linguistic choices and culture and reflecting an anti-racist linguistic pedagogy (Baker-Bell, 2019).

In addition to the use of UDL strategies, at Crosstown, the design of flexible physical spaces also allows students to self-regulate. For example, students have a variety of places within the classroom where they can sit, including couches and beanbags, and students have "freedom of movement." Teachers also implement classroom and school-wide routines

that provide structure, consistency, and predictability. At Capital City, we also observed flexible seating arrangements, different types of seating (beanbags, wobbly chairs, bouncy chairs), availability of fidget toys, "calm corners," and use of routines that support students' self-regulation.

Because of the high percentage of MLLs at Capital City, we also observed teachers there implementing English language development (ELD) strategies such as pre-loading of key vocabulary used during the lesson, sentence frames and graphic organizers, differentiation of readings and materials, accommodations or modifications for written assignments, and support for translanguaging (using native languages strategically in the learning process), including translation technologies. Newcomer students were also strategically grouped with partners with a shared native language and encouraged to collaborate using their native language. A number of teachers at Capital City are also bilingual Spanish speakers and were observed providing instruction and check-ins with newcomer MLLs in Spanish. MLLs at Capital City Middle School have embraced and internalized the flexibilities with language at their school. During a class meeting, during which a short animated video on autism was screened (for Autism Awareness Month), we observed students requesting subtitles in Spanish. The request was swiftly honored by the teachers, suggesting to us that this accommodation was a routine expectation.

III. Policies/systems that support a positive school culture and behavior supports

At both schools, students, their caregivers, and school staff cited caring relationships between school staff and students as an important facet of how their schools support the well-being and academic progress of SWDs and MLLs. They described the schools' cultures as "family-like" and welcoming for students with learning differences. Both schools make intentional efforts to collaborate with and engage students' caregivers. Both schools also utilize restorative justice⁴ approaches to manage conflicts between students and between students and school staff.

At Crosstown, student-centered instructional approaches, centering of student voice, and parent engagement all contribute to a positive school climate. However, students repeatedly cited the school's Student Support Team (SST), a team of four to five staff who are responsible for student safety, discipline, and mediation of conflicts, and the school's restorative justice approach as being key to creating a

⁴ Restorative justice in schools is a process that helps resolve conflicts by focusing on repairing harm and building relationships. It is an alternative to traditional punishment and aims to create a positive learning environment.

positive and inclusive culture. Although these practices are supported by all school staff, they are primarily driven and sustained by the inclusion specialists and the SST. When asked whom they would go to if they had a problem, many Crosstown students said they would go to the SST. One student described the SST as “lawyers for students,” illustrating the ways that students saw the SST members as being advocates for them. One of the upper-grade students described the SST in this way:

... the SST team. They're just really, really good, and they've helped me out a lot with, I would always get in trouble [in] 10th grade, and they were always there for me. I've had personal issues and they've always been there. If I am having a problem with the teacher, they're always like, “Yo, try talking to them like this, try doing this.” And I don't know if other schools have them or not, but I feel like here they're really good.

Staff at Crosstown also reported using a Slack channel (a team communication app) to engage in real-time communication throughout the school day with each other and the SST about individual students who may need a check-in or support.

SWDs at Capital City felt that the smallness of their school, small class sizes, and the fact that they had attended the same school with their peers for a long period of time (sometimes since kindergarten) created the conditions for a family-like community among peers and staff. Students and caregivers frequently cited advisors (of their “crew” or advisory class) as well as other teachers, coaches, and staff (particularly inclusion teachers) as a source of caring and reliable support. One 12th grader from Capital City reflected,

Capital City is a great school to go [to], especially for a student who has a disability. And for a person who wants to be in more of a diverse and welcoming community, Capital City's usually a good fit because [the school] treats everybody as more like a family than—Capital City's more like a family than a community.

Dedicated staff members at Capital City (coordinator of school culture; social-emotional learning [SEL] specialist) are also focused on building relationships with students, monitoring data on students who may need more SEL and/or academic supports, supporting teachers in using restorative

justice approaches to respond to behaviors, and planning activities to build a positive community culture. Student voices are invited into school culture decisions and taken seriously (e.g., in grade-level community meetings, leading inquiry meetings to elicit student voice to develop plans for addressing cyberbullying and school graffiti). At the time of our study, Capital City had recently transitioned to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS),⁵ which involves multiple SSTs—academic, attendance, and behavior—that review data for all students, subgroups, and individual students, and try out and evaluate strategies for addressing needs identified by each team. All staff across the school, including the SST members, use an app called High Five to document evidence and communicate in real time with each other in order to monitor and support students needing intervention.

IV. Authentic, competency-based assessments and other hands-on experiences

Both Capital City and Crosstown utilized authentic project-based learning⁶ approaches to engage students in meaningful learning by making connections to real-world phenomena, work, or personal interests. At Capital City, students engage in inquiry-based fieldwork outside the school; go on overnight camping trips; learn through internships, the arts, or athletic activity; or complete a passion project (“senior expedition”) that has an authentic connection to the real world. At Crosstown, in addition to class-based projects, students choose electives (“APEX” classes) where they pursue their passions in long-term projects. These types of projects facilitate student engagement while still presenting academic challenge in ways that prepare students for college, careers, and lifelong learning. SWDs at Crosstown also take work-based learning and life skills classes specifically designed for them.

Students at Crosstown shared that the project-based assignments, the exhibitions of learning, and the end-of-year presentations of learning helped them build confidence, time-management skills, public-speaking skills, and the ability to work with and get along with others. For example, one student with learning differences said, “I feel like from freshman year to now my social skills have skyrocketed. I wasn't talkative. But working in different groups is helping me in working with different people. Sense of belonging. You can make friends easily.”

Instruction is not all project-based at the two schools; teachers balance teacher-led and student-centered approach-

⁵ For more information about MTSS, see American Institutes for Research Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (2025).

⁶ At Capital City, projects are called “expeditions.”

es to instruction and utilize traditional assessments such as quizzes and interim assessments to monitor students' progress toward skills mastery delineated in state standards. However, both schools prioritize projects and inquiry-based assignments over multiple-choice, closed-response types of tests as a means to motivate and sustain student engagement. Both schools also use portfolios of student work, student-led conferences, annual presentations of learning, and project exhibitions to center students' voices as they make an argument about their learning and mastery of content and skills. One student at Capital City High School described a project in which his team demonstrated their learning through "spoken assessment":

I think there's a lot of different ways we show [what we learned]. I think a big way is spoken assessment. So presenting your findings in a slideshow or creating. ... So right now, I'm in Club Youth Justice. ... You write a paper and you do your research project, and then at the end you work with a couple of other people and do a mini lesson about what you learned. And you have to do all the parts of the lesson. You're getting the class ready, introducing them, giving background, and then have an activity. And then you have to assess them on what they learned. So that could look like an exit ticket. That could look like a discussion. And I think we have a lot of opportunities to show what we have learned in unconventional ways, which is really cool.

Both schools also utilized competency-based approaches to assessment and grading (sometimes referred to as "standards-based grading"). Competency-based assessment⁷ contrasts with traditional assessment and grading methods that focus on on-time completion of assignments, quizzes, and tests, with an accumulation of points that determine a final grade. In competency-based or standards-based grading, scores are assigned to student work using scoring rubrics with criteria that are based on grade-level state standards or school-defined competencies. Competency-based grading is decoupled from seat time (attendance), behaviors, or on-time work completion. Instead, it focuses on whether students have demonstrated grade-level mastery of academic content/skills and school-defined competencies, regardless of when this occurs in the school year. Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their mastery, receive timely feedback on their work, and have multiple opportunities to

revise or retake assessments until they meet the standard or are satisfied with their score.

At Capital City, competency-based assessment is supported by a culture of "everybody finishes," rather than leaving behind those who struggle or who need more time to finish. While this may be challenging from the point of view of managing a range of achievement levels in a single class and providing sufficient time for students who need more time to complete major assignments, co-teaching teams have learned to differentiate instruction and assessment in ways that allow for more advanced students to move forward in their learning while still allowing students needing more time and support to complete work from prior units of study.

V. Systems of supports for adult learning and collaboration

While the two schools varied in the structures and systems through which they supported school staff to implement inclusive environments and practices for Black and Latine SWDs, we found two important common through lines: 1) a culture of collaboration between general education and special education staff (as well as the caregivers of SWDs and MLLs); and 2) shared responsibility for the well-being and learning of students with learning differences. This culture of collaboration is supported through intentional design of school schedules and allocation of resources to support staff professional learning, co-planning (in the case of Capital City), use of tech tools that support real-time communication and use of data to plan and try out interventions, and ongoing examination of student data to support planning for instruction or interventions. Both schools also intentionally utilize multiple channels to support regular communication between caregivers and school staff and cultivate a culture of respect for caregivers' voice during IEP and intervention meetings. One caregiver of a SWD explained the many ways to be involved in her child's education at Capital City:

Family engagement is number one for me. ... There are many opportunities for parents to come into the building outside of parent-teacher conferences. ... You see what your child is working on. We have literacy night, we have math night. We have many opportunities to come. And even if you want to volunteer, this is like an open-door policy. You can come in and do a morning meeting and see what that looks like. So I feel like nothing is hidden. ... The main thing I really want

⁷ For more information on competency-based approaches to learning and assessment, see Levine & Patrick (2019).

to share about this school is that even when things get very busy...there's always somebody that you can reach out to for support. And when I look at even the emails that I receive, "Let me know if you need support," that's what they all say.

Though both schools are challenged by language barriers  communicating with non-English-speaking caregivers, they are aware of the need to do more to facilitate communication across language and cultural differences.

At Capital City, in order to support and sustain the co-teaching approach in inclusive general education classes, all teachers receive monthly professional development from the special education leads in each school, as well as meeting monthly with the school culture leads (the coordinator of school culture and the SEL specialist)⁸ to be trained on restorative justice approaches to respond to behaviors, to examine and act on data from the High Five app that allows for real-time communication about specific students, and to use a SEL curriculum during advisory/crew. The school also supports and encourages general education staff to earn special education certification through a partnership with an outside program so they are dually certified.

Most significantly, co-teaching teams at Capital City (general education and special education teachers) have protected daily planning and meeting time so that they can meet regularly in order to debrief lessons and plan their next lessons together, with specific shared students in mind. Co-teachers use a common lesson planning template that supports collaborative planning of lesson materials and activities, the type of co-teaching they will use, as well as specific UDL strategies to be applied.

Crosstown has found it challenging to provide teachers and inclusion specialists with dedicated co-planning time; thus, co-planning occurs in person and virtually before, after, and during class. Staff also find support through "inclusion roundtables," quarterly grade-level meetings where inclusion specialists and general education teachers collaborate to generate ideas for how to support students who are experiencing behavioral or academic challenges. The 30-minute meetings each focus on two students and follow a set structure that includes the identification of student strengths, growth areas, and tactics to try in order to successfully support them. The open sharing of information and collaboration that occurs

through the inclusion roundtables shows up in the classrooms, where teachers implement the discussed approaches with the goal of supporting focal students to succeed. During the study, all teachers at Crosstown also received professional learning opportunities focused on inclusion through a partnership with Facing History and Ourselves—an organization whose mission is to "use lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to racism, antisemitism, and other forms of bigotry and hate."

Leadership Supports. At both schools, commitments to fully inclusive classrooms, co-teaching, and inclusive practices are made possible by leadership teams that prioritize creating the conditions for adult learning and collaboration, creating inclusive school cultures that center student voice and well-being, and sustaining the implementation of these design features. These leaders set the vision and expectations, and follow through on ensuring that the conditions for implementation are supported through fiscal resources, professional learning resources and time, instructional planning resources, and ongoing cycles of data review, observations, and collaboration to solve problems and maintain fidelity to the school's inclusive instructional model.

Leaders seek external professional services and expertise when needed. For example, when initially designing their inclusion program, Capital City leaders requested consultation with the Council for Exceptional Children to share best practices for inclusive schools. They also received support from a co-teaching expert to devise a Co-Teaching Quality Indicators Guide to monitor the quality of co-teaching implementation. Capital City also partners with the KIPP Special Education Fellowship to encourage dual certification of general education teachers. Crosstown partners with the XQ Institute and is a member of XQ Super Schools, a network of high schools that receives support for implementing competency-based assessments and innovative instructional approaches.⁹

The financial resources that are required to implement a co-teaching model and to provide opportunities for ongoing collaboration and professional learning are not insignificant. At Capital City, staffing sufficient numbers of special education staff for the co-teaching model to work is supported financially by the school's relatively high enrollment of SWDs (also with higher levels of specialized supports needed, which is associated with greater levels of special education per pupil funding). Capital City consistently attracts families of SWDs

⁸ The coordinator of school culture is sometimes known as the "dean of students" in other schools. The social-emotional learning specialist was a new position across the elementary, middle, and high schools in 2023–2024 and the role was still being defined at the time of the study. These roles are not specifically to serve SWDs/MLLs, but they are important to building an inclusive school culture.

⁹ Crosstown High was featured in a recent XQ Super Schools film called "The First Class." Learn more at <https://xqsuperschool.org>.

due to its strong reputation among families with SWDs and MLLs. The per-pupil funding at Capital City was \$30,706 in 2023–2024 (compared with the district’s per-pupil funding of \$27,730). School leaders acknowledged that reliance on a steady enrollment of SWDs can be tenuous and is seen as a risk. However, since coming back from the COVID pandemic school closures, which devastated many families with SWDs, school leaders are committed to full inclusion and co-teaching approaches to improve the quality of instruction for students with learning differences. In its early years, Crosstown High also received additional financial resources through the XQ Super Schools competition and continues to receive some philanthropic support for its model. Crosstown’s per pupil expenditures for 2023–2024 was \$17,114, compared with an average of \$15,795 for Memphis-Shelby County Schools. Unlike Capital City, Crosstown’s staffing for special education is not dramatically different from that of other public high schools, but the school has found ways to reallocate staff so that they are able to provide co-teaching and push-in supports strategically in specific classes.

CONCLUSION

In these case studies, we describe five different facets of inclusive learning environments that our two case study schools have intentionally designed and sustained through strategic enrollment, staffing, and resource allocation. These two schools have both produced outstanding academic and well-being outcomes for Black and Latine SWDs and MLLs. There is no single solution or intervention that by itself results in such outcomes. Rather, the various features of the comprehensive school designs represented in these case studies interact to create the conditions for SWDs and MLLs to fully access core content learning, social integration, and social-emotional well-being.

When we paid close attention to the features of the school and classroom learning environments that were discussed again and again by Black and Latine SWDs and their caregivers as supportive of their learning and well being, we found that the following aspects emerged as factors of particular importance:

1. An inclusive culture that uplifts students and family voice. This was made manifest in the ways SWDs described their growing confidence in their ability to advocate for themselves, make choices about how they learn and demonstrate their learning, and pursue interests and passions of their own. Caregivers also expressed satisfaction with the ways the schools communicated with them and

involved them in their children’s learning plans and behavioral supports. Students’ voices were also elicited and centered during IEP meetings, and through alternate forms of assessment such as project-based learning/expeditions, student-led conferences, and presentations of learning.

2. A culture of relationships that supports student belonging and well being. SWDs and their caregivers at both schools describe their school as having a “family-like” culture, mainly through the caring and supportive adults in the school who serve as advocates looking out for them. These relationships do not arise by happenstance - they are fostered through inclusive systems and supports such as crew/advisory, a SEL curriculum, low staff to student ratios, MTSS/SST, and restorative justice practices that restore relationships instead of punitive measures that result in further alienation.

3. Consistent, schoolwide application of inclusive practices. SWDs described how they were supported in their learning of challenging academic content through the support of their inclusion teachers (special education co-teachers), the choices they had for how they learned and demonstrated their learning through varied modalities (with choice for graduated release of scaffolding and specialized support), and the way they were provided opportunities to pursue passion projects, learn about careers through electives, internships, or work-based learning classes. Though students did not directly discuss culturally responsive teaching, we observed instances in which students’ cultural and linguistic assets were affirmed and treated as strengths. Last, we saw many examples of teachers’ efforts to differentiate and personalize instruction and provide options for demonstration of mastery.

Another important commonality that we saw across both case study schools is that these inclusive learning environments would not be possible if not for their collaborative cultures, in which all teachers take responsibility for the learning of all students, including SWDs and MLLs. Perhaps because of their small size and independent governance as charter schools, these two schools were founded with the premise that all students are welcome in general education courses, that there is to be no tracking or segregation of students into different academic pathways. In order to make this possible, it was necessary for the special education department and general education staff to collaborate to ensure quality instruction for all students. This means sharing and coordinating staff, time, and resources so that all students have access to the supports they need to be successful.

This culture of cross-departmental collaboration is atypical in secondary schools, where department-level staffing,

resource allocation, and decision-making often remain siloed, leading to feelings of inadequate preparation by general education teachers to meet the needs of their SWDs (Mitchell, 2019) and the experience of special educators being treated as “assistants” in general education classes (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; DeWitt, 2019; NCLD & Understood, 2019). This siloed culture is mirrored in teacher education programs, where general educators preparing to teach have few opportunities to learn from and collaborate with special educators (Stoltz, 2021).

What would it take for a school that does not currently have a fully inclusive learning environment to become fully inclusive? Is it feasible? Moving toward more inclusive schools first requires that departmental leaders and school leaders commit to true collaboration with equity of voice and mutual respect for expertise. This reinforces findings from the Marshall Street 2024 publication *Opening Doors to Collaboration*, which shares findings from an evaluation of activities in which a network of districts (“networked improvement community”) committed to pilot a variety of planned interventions, and illustrates several different types of educator collaboration that make a difference for SWDs. Supporting cross-departmental collaboration, specifically between general education and special education teachers, is an important step toward shaping an inclusive school environment where school staff learn from each other and build their own capacity to plan for inclusive instruction and assessment in ways that value and honor the diversity of their students.

We acknowledge that there are likely to be resource constraints to adopting some of the features of inclusive learning environments that we described in these case studies—staffing, time, and additional financial resources needed to commit to co-teaching. We do not argue that a school must adopt all features of the fully inclusive learning environment represented in this study to begin shifting toward more inclusion. There are different levels of implementation that require different commitments of resources. For example, at Crosstown High, co-teaching was implemented in only two core subjects—ELA and math—and one additional course—AP U.S. History & Government—with a more limited number of special education staff. In other contexts, schools provide time for co-planning and collaboration between special education and core content staff to enhance general education teachers’ capacity to use inclusive instructional practices without any co-teaching. It is likely that for most large comprehensive secondary schools, a more graduated approach will be needed. But as noted above, leaders can take a significant step toward more inclusive schools by re-allocating existing resources (time, staffing, finances) and by restructuring school governance to make cross-departmental collaboration possible.



APPENDIX A

ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

This research project was conceived and directed by principal investigator Dr. Ruth Chung Wei, director of research and innovation for Envision Learning Partners (the consulting division of Envision Education, Inc.), with the advice and support of higher education partner Dr. Ilene Ivins, special education faculty at Alder Graduate School of Education and an expert advisory panel. Envision partnered with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR), led by Senior Fellow Heather Lewis-Charp and Associate Nikkolette Hunter, to design and conduct the case study research, which was ultimately completed in two schools. SPR was responsible for collecting and analyzing data and writing the case study on Crosstown High (Memphis, TN), while Envision Learning Partners (Ruth Wei and Roilyn Graves) was responsible for Capital City (Washington, DC). The school boards of both schools agreed to allow researchers to publicly name their schools in the research findings.

Our Research Question

What structures, systems of support, cultures, and practices create the conditions for Black and Latine students with learning differences to accelerate their learning and thrive in secondary schools?

Research Methodology

We conducted case studies of two secondary schools with demonstrated effectiveness in supporting the learning and well being of Black and Latine SWDs in order to more deeply understand the way inclusive structures, systems of support, school cultures, and instructional practices interact to create learning environments that are associated with positive learning experiences and success for students with learning differences.

School Samples. Through an exploratory research study (May–August, 2023), we identified four school candidates for case study research that have demonstrated success in supporting Black and Latine students with learning differences such as high persistence and graduation rates, high levels of completion of courses required for college application, high rates of participation in advanced or career pathway courses, comparable rates of attendance and suspension as for students without learning differences, and high rates of successful transitions to college or other postsecondary training or employment. The schools were also initially screened for at least 10% students with learning differences (SWDs and/or MLLs) and at least 25% Latine or Black students. From these four candidates, we selected two case study schools. Data collection on these two schools was conducted from September 2023 through June 2024.

Theoretical Framework Guiding Our Research

The project's research staff (comprised of researchers from Envision Education, higher education advisor Dr. Ilene Ivins, and researchers from Social Policy Research Associates) consulted with an expert advisory panel to begin drafting an Effective Learning Environments for Learning Differences framework that draws upon existing research, expert practitioner knowledge, and exploratory data collection on four schools that we had identified as effectively supporting the success of Black and Latine students with learning differences. The framework identifies and describes high-leverage structures, systems of support, cultures, and practices that have been found to be associated with positive learning and well-being outcomes for students with learning differences. This framework began with a lengthy list of characteristics that were narrowed down as we conducted more in-depth study of the two case study schools. The final theoretical framework is found in **Figure 1** in the body of the *Executive Summary: A Synthesis of Findings*.

Data Collection Strategies. We gathered the case study data during two multi-day site visits to each school in the fall of 2023 and spring of 2024, which included a tour of the school (student-led tour at Crosstown), and the following activities:

- Interviews of at least four school leaders and staff (virtual and/or in-person)
- Interviews with eight teachers (co-teachers of four classes), pre- and post-observation
- Interviews with seven to eight pairs of students and their caregivers (in person or virtual) in each school
- Two student focus groups grouped by grade ranges (e.g., 5–8, 9–10, 11–12) comprising 6–10 students in each group, including SWDs, MLLs, and general education students. There was no overlap between focus group students and SWDs who were interviewed at Crosstown, while there was a bit of overlap between focus group students and SWDs who were interviewed at Capital City.
- Existing surveys completed by students and caregivers
- Site visits that included classroom observations of at least four inclusive classrooms (and additional classes such as advisory, student grade-level meetings, resource classes, inclusion office hours, English language development classes, and electives) and observations of other school events such as staff meetings (e.g., inclusion roundtable, SST meeting for restorative justice at Crosstown), public exhibitions,

professional development meetings, and students' presentations of learning.

- Documents (e.g., school websites, program descriptions, professional development agendas/materials, instructional observation tools, curriculum planning tools, accreditation documents, school report cards)
- Data summaries relevant to students with learning differences and all students (existing data shared by the schools)

Data Analysis. We analyzed qualitative data by reviewing the entire corpus of data (e.g., interview and focus group transcripts, observation notes, survey responses) to determine where there may be connections between characteristics of the school learning environment and the student learning and well-being outcomes that we observed in schools. We used an inductive grounded analysis methodology to code for themes that emerged from the qualitative evidence. At the same time, we also applied specific lenses to examine data on instructional practices (classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews) that emerged from our theoretical framework.

During classroom visits, we made open-ended notes about what we observed. Following our visits (usually the same day), we also applied a Universal Design for Learning checklist that was developed and shared by our higher education advisor (Dr. Ilene Ivins) and an Authentic Intellectual Work checklist that was adapted from an existing tool ([From: Authentic Intellectual Work Institute](#)) to code lessons for robust academic learning opportunities. (We did not rate the instruction using the criteria. Rather, we used the criteria to organize qualitative notes relevant to the criteria.) Researchers conducting classroom observations and completing the coding using these checklists were first trained and calibrated on using these tools to code their observations before applying them to classroom observation data. The rationale for applying the AIW framework to examine instructional practices was that we believed it is just as important for students to have access to robust disciplinary learning opportunities as it is for instruction to be designed for greater accessibility for students with learning differences. If lessons are not robust for general education students, then providing greater accessibility will not make a difference for students with learning differences. We analyzed the codes on the two checklists and open-ended class visit notes using a grounded analysis approach to examine what themes emerged from these data.

The AIW Institute's framework¹⁰ is grounded in research that had previously found that students engaged in more cognitively complex and authentic, real-world relevant assignments have higher achievement on both traditional and non-traditional assessments.¹¹ We used this adapted checklist to qualitatively examine the learning activities and materials that students engaged with in their classes. The AIW framework is organized around three dimensions: a) construction of knowledge; b) disciplined inquiry; and c) value beyond school. The analytic questions that guided our observations included:

Construction of Knowledge

- Does a task ask students to create new knowledge that demonstrates higher-order thinking (e.g., analyzing, organizing, interpreting, evaluating, synthesizing)?
- Does a task ask students for coherent clarifications, explanations, or arguments?

Disciplined Inquiry

- Does the lesson build upon a prior knowledge base often grounded in an academic or applied discipline (e.g., knowledge base of facts, vocabulary, concepts, theories, algorithms, methods/processes in the field)?
- Does the lesson strive for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness (e.g., by engaging students in using methods and processes of a discipline

to look for, imagine, propose, and test relationships among key facts, events, concepts, rules, and claims in order to clarify a specific problem or issue)?

- Does a task ask students to develop and express their ideas and findings through elaborated communication to conduct their work and present its results (e.g., using verbal, symbolic, graphic, and visual tools—to provide qualifications, nuances, elaborations, details, and analogies woven into extended narratives, explanations, justifications, and dialogue)?

Value Beyond School

- Do students apply knowledge to solve problems outside of school (i.e., it has meaningful utilitarian, aesthetic, or personal value, or has an impact on others and is not just about certifying one's success in school)?

In order to test the directionality of relationships between school design features and students' well being and academic outcomes, we asked interview respondents (school staff, students, caregivers) what they see as the source or the reason for the types of outcomes they report (e.g., if a student reported having a sense of self-determination, we asked them to identify school experiences that contributed to that sense of self-determination). We asked similar questions of school staff and caregivers to triangulate student reports with staff and caregiver reports.



¹⁰ <https://aiwinstitute.org/learn-more/the-framework>

¹¹ <https://aiwinstitute.org/learn-more/research>



APPENDIX B

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON INCLUSIVE SETTINGS AND PRACTICES

As noted above, our *Effective Learning Environments for Learning Differences* framework is informed by existing research on inclusive classrooms and practices that have been found empirically to be associated with improved outcomes for students with disabilities. We provide a review of some of that research base, which continues to evolve and grow. We hope to contribute to the research base, with a focus on whole-school designs that benefit Black, Latine, and multilingual students with disabilities.

Research on Inclusive Classrooms and Co-Teaching

Inclusive classroom settings are positively correlated with higher rates of enrollment in postsecondary education and employment outcomes for SWDs (Haber et al., 2016). Baer et al. (2003) found that students in special education who participated in general education curriculum and settings were nearly two times more likely to participate in postsecondary education than students who were in specialized classrooms away from their nondisabled peers. Fuchs and colleagues (2025) provide a critique of prior research on inclusive classrooms that compared students in general education and self-contained classrooms because of the inherent differences in students who can be placed in general education classrooms versus those who need specialized instruction in self-contained contexts (e.g., those with intellectual

disabilities and health impairments). They argue that the evidence base for placing most SWDs in general education classrooms is thin and of low quality, while there is stronger evidence for intensive instruction in specialized settings. The authors acknowledge that most of the studies they examined were focused on elementary contexts and on traditional academic measures.

There is also a surprising paucity of definitive research on the benefits of co-teaching (with special education teachers or English language development teachers partnering with general education teachers in inclusive settings), with most of the literature being descriptive or prescriptive. Jones and Winters (2024) used longitudinal administrative data from Massachusetts to examine the causal connections between co-teaching and students' test scores. They found that the condition of students having multiple teachers assigned to teach a single class was associated with small positive statistically significant improvements in test scores. However, the authors acknowledge their findings are limited by the lack of information about the type and intensity of implementation of co-teaching practices used in classes with multiple teachers.

In this research project, we applied a “bright spots” approach to selecting public schools that had demonstrated track records of supporting successful school outcomes for their Black, Latine, and multilingual SWDs. We then exam-

ined their approaches to supporting the learning of SWDs, the settings where SWDs were doing their learning and the specific instructional models that were used in their schools.

Research on Inclusive Instructional Practices in Classrooms

While physical inclusion of students with learning differences in general education classrooms can be impactful, equally important is providing the targeted student subgroups with access to rigorous curriculum and engaging learning experiences. Oftentimes, school staff teaching SWDs in general education classrooms are underprepared to adapt their instruction in ways that provide access to the core curriculum for SWDs (Mitchell, 2019). Even in classes where there are “push-in” supports (e.g., individualized instructional aides), these specialized staff are often relegated to serving as assistants, with little to no input in how instruction is delivered (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; DeWitt, 2019; NCLD & Understood, 2019).

This research project sought to better understand the types of instructional and assessment practices that provide helpful supports for Black and Latine SWDs to be academically successful. We looked specifically at practices that may uniquely support Black and Latine SWDs, including those grounded in **Universal Design for Learning principles, culturally responsive teaching practices, and English language development supports** (supporting those dually identified as multilingual learners with disabilities). We also sought to understand how schools created a learning system that equipped and empowered school staff to learn and build their capacity for creating inclusive classrooms and applying inclusive teaching strategies.

The principles embedded in the **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework** (a research-based pedagogical approach for addressing learning differences; CAST, 2018) are well established as important practices to provide students with learning differences multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. UDL practices seek to maintain the rigor of students’ academic learning while making room for personalization by widening the array of ways in which students access and engage with academic content, as well as demonstrate their learning. Two meta-analyses of research studies on UDL found positive impacts on SWDs’ engagement, access to the general education curriculum, and academic and social outcomes (Capp, 2017; Ok et al., 2017). For this reason, we see application of UDL as a key element in our **Equitable Learning Systems for Learning Differences**

framework that will potentially contribute to student engagement, access to core academic curriculum required for postsecondary opportunities, and academic and social-emotional outcomes for Black, Latine, and Latine multilingual SWDs. An updated version of the UDL framework (3.0; CAST, 2024) was recently released and explicitly integrates culturally responsive pedagogical principles and practices by adding student identity as a layer of learner variability.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) principles and practices are a second set of inclusion approaches that we theorize are especially relevant for creating learning conditions in which Black, Latine, and Latine multilingual SWDs can be more engaged in their learning, improve academic outcomes, and thrive with respect to their identity development and social-emotional well being. CRT principles are centered around seeing, valuing, and building on the cultural and linguistic assets of culturally and linguistically diverse students, making meaningful curricular connections to students’ cultures and lived experiences, and developing students’ ability to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems that result in societal inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2020; Paris & Alim, 2017). Several studies have shown that implementing CRT results in positive influences on learning and well-being outcomes for culturally diverse students, including increased motivation, persistence, self-efficacy, attendance, and achievement (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). This case study research provides an opportunity to examine how use of CRT principles and practices may contribute to learning conditions for SWDs (through intermediate indicators of access and engagement) and how they may be connected to their learning and well-being outcomes.

A third inclusion practice that we theorize influences learning conditions and outcomes for dually identified multilingual learners with disabilities is **English language development (ELD)** instructional practices. Access to complex texts (rather than overly simplified materials that reduce their content rigor), co-development and integration of a student’s heritage language in the learning process (translanguaging), opportunities to use and develop academic language and speaking and listening skills through purposeful interactions with peers and instructors, and opportunities for building meta-linguistic awareness are now seen as effective strategies for promoting the language and content learning of multilingual learners across the content areas (Council of the Great City Schools, 2016; Lee et al., 2013; Kibler et al., 2015; Menken, 2013; Moschkovich 2012, 2015; Walqui & van Lier, 2010; Zwiers, 2014; Zwiers et al., 2017). We theorize that

integration of ELD strategies in general education content courses will benefit all students in classes in which these strategies are applied, but especially students dually identified as SWD and MLL, who often do not receive specialized language instruction due to shortages of teachers with the requisite certifications and skills (Park & Thomas, 2012). Application of ELD strategies in general education classrooms increases students' access to the core curriculum as well as language development, improves engagement and social integration of Black, Latine, and Latine multilingual SWDs with their general education peers by encouraging authentic interaction, and supports their access to and participation in postsecondary opportunities.

We theorize that the combination of these three instructional approaches—UDL, CRT, and ELD—when implemented in general education classrooms that are co-taught by a teaching team that includes general education, special education, and ELD-bilingual teachers, influences learning conditions for Black, Latine, and multilingual SWDs in a way that improves their access to the core curriculum, increases their engagement and persistence, and supports their feelings of belonging and connection in school. These learning conditions for SWDs in turn influence their learning and well-being outcomes (e.g., increase their completion of core courses needed for graduation and eligibility for postsecondary opportunities, increase their self-efficacy and optimism).

Research on School Cultures and Behavioral Supports for Students With Learning Differences

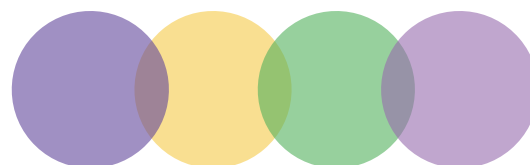
Demographic evidence on school suspensions and expulsions finds that Black and Latine SWDs are more often subjected to out-of-school suspension and expulsion for behavioral infractions than other racial groups (U.S. General Accountability Office, 2018). Exclusion from classrooms through behavioral penalties further marginalizes Black and Latine SWDs and reduces their access to the core curriculum. This exacerbates rates of absenteeism for SWDs. We theorized that schools that effectively manage behavioral incidents could increase SWDs' learning time and create a learning environment that is more inclusive and welcoming for Black and Latine SWDs. This project examined the ways that schools create school and classroom cultures that promote positive behaviors, a sense of belonging, and supportive relationships.

Research on Authentic, Competency-Based Learning and Assessment

We define authentic assessment as a demonstration of learning that engages students in real work in the real world, both in the assessment and the learning journey. Competency-based assessment provides learners with a more personalized pathway to achieve learning goals (rather than through seat time or through on-demand tests) and the opportunity to make choices about how they engage in the learning process, when and how to demonstrate their learning, and even the topics of inquiry (e.g., passion projects). Authentic and competency-based assessments center student voice in documenting their learning (e.g., through portfolios, student-led conferences, presentations of learning), and encourage persistence by providing feedback and opportunities for students to revise and resubmit until they are satisfied with their performance.

The Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform for Youth with Disabilities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studied four secondary schools in which students with learning differences had access to authentic learning practices—such as the use of inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, and construction of knowledge—paired with developmentally and individually appropriate accommodations and supports. When given authentic, teacher-developed tasks in lieu of standardized assessment, 62% of SWDs produced work that was the same, or higher, in quality than that produced by their nondisabled peers (Allen Phelps, 2003). Other researchers have more recently found that authentic learning experiences and assessments such as project-based learning benefit all students, and in particular low-performing and low-income students (Parker et al., 2011, 2013; Duke et al., 2020). This project's principal investigator and colleagues (Deutscher et al., 2021) found that MLLs participating in a project-based science curriculum outperformed a comparison group of MLLs on the state English proficiency test.

Our study builds on this prior research by focusing specifically on how the use of authentic and competency-based assessment influences learning conditions and outcomes for Black, Latine, and Latine multilingual SWDs.



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