

# FORWARD TOGETHER

## Actions for Impact: Policy Leaders



In the United States, 1 in 5 students have learning and attention issues. This includes those with identified specific learning disabilities, diagnosed ADHD, or related disorders that impact learning. State and national assessments show that the majority of the “1 in 5” perform at below basic levels. Yet, many have average or above average intelligence—and all have untapped potential and strengths that *can* be unlocked with the right strategies.

While schools have largely delivered on IDEA’s promise of the “least restrictive” learning environment—with the majority of the 1 in 5 spending most of their time in general education classrooms—student achievement data reveals that inclusion in the general education classroom alone is not equating to increased access and equitable opportunity to learn the general education curriculum. Research by [NCLD](#) found that most states do not articulate the specific skills, knowledge, or training general educators should have for working with the 1 in 5. Almost every state has failed to bring their licensure or certification standards in line with reality that every general educator will surely have students with disabilities in their classroom.

NCLD and [Understood](#) sought to understand how to better train and support general educators. We asked teachers to share their experiences and insights. And we identified evidenced-based actions that you can take to ensure aspiring teachers step into full-time positions with the necessary skills and knowledge for successfully teaching the 1 in 5 learners—and all students.

*Teachers are clear: They need to be better prepared before they are in the classroom full-time. And once they’re there, they need to be better supported so they can better reach and teach the 1 in 5.*

There are many paths to becoming a teacher, and some preparation programs are more comprehensive and rigorous than others. However, since most states do not articulate the specific skills, knowledge, or training general educators should have for working with students with learning and attention issues, many general educators report that they did not take courses applicable to teaching the 1 in 5. If they did, most did not find them beneficial or relevant once in the classroom. The majority of teachers cited “on-the-job training and trial-and-error learning” as the ways they learned to teach the 1 in 5. Of teachers surveyed:

- 17%** feel very well prepared to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.
- 30%** feel strongly that **when they try their best, they can be successful with the 1 in 5.**
- 50%** feel confident in their **ability to implement an IEP or a 504 plan.**
- 50%** feel strongly that the **1 in 5 can reach grade-level standards.**
- 56%** believe **IEPs provide value to students.**
- 38%** believe **IEPs help them be a better teacher.**

Yet, teachers emphasized that they want to learn more to help their students and improve their practice.

*We can all do better together—and there is proof we can.*

As a policy maker, you are critical to setting the expectations and supports necessary for developing the expertise of all general educators in teaching the 1 in 5. To move forward together, NCLD and Understood conducted a literature review of empirically driven studies—and engaged Understood’s Educator Advisory Council, NCLD’s Professional Advisory Board, and other experts—to identify and capture evidence-based [critical mindsets and key practices](#) from the field that help improve the learning and achievement of the 1 in 5—and all students!

[Understood](#)



### Ongoing classroom struggles create a devastating ripple effect for the 1 in 5

The 1 in 5 are more likely to repeat a grade, be suspended, and drop out of school as compared to their peers—and the consequences are compounded for individuals of color, low-income students, English language learners, and students who have additional needs.

-  They enroll in college at **half** the rate as peers
-  **4 in 10** who attend college complete it
-  **50%** are unemployed
-  **1 in 2** have been involved in the justice system

**Just flip the page to access resources and find out more. ▶**

# Actions you can take today to help *all* students:

**Build a deep understanding of the science of learning and what learning and attention issues are.** Understood.org and NCLD provide [resources](#) and [tools](#) that build [empathy](#) for all learning differences, and make accessible the complex findings from learning science on how the 1 in 5 and *all* students learn. [Stay up-to-date](#) on the most recent information.

**Learn and promote critical mindsets and evidence-based strategies.** There are [three critical mindsets and eight key practices](#) that can inform policies that better support reaching and teaching the 1 in 5.

**State licensure and certification bodies:** For principals, enact certification and licensure policies that require the knowledge necessary to meet the needs of the 1 in 5. Be sure to promote meaningful systems of support, evaluation, mentoring, and coaching for principals that emphasize the instructional and distributive leadership practices for effective inclusive schools. For teachers: Enact policies that require teachers to have specific training and practical experience in working with the 1 in 5 before entering. Here's how to begin:\*

- **Develop or revise teaching standards for teacher candidates** to include competencies related to instructing the 1 in 5. Utah and New Mexico currently have the most comprehensive standards.
- **Strengthen course requirements** so that aspiring teachers have the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the 1 in 5 before they enter the classroom. Only a few states are currently doing this work: Connecticut and Illinois.
- **Require teacher preparation coursework to incorporate evidence-based instruction.** For example, Arkansas requires aspiring teachers to learn how to use [Universal Design for Learning](#) and Tennessee requires general educators to learn and use [response to intervention](#) framework for literacy.
- **Redesign clinical preparation requirements** so that every general educator gains experience teaching students with learning disabilities, attention issues, and other disorders that impact school performance. New Jersey, for example, requires at least one clinical experience in a special education setting.
- **Incorporate a competency-based component into the licensure and certification renewal process.** As teachers gain experience in the classroom, states should expect them to demonstrate their skills through performance assessments and competency-based learning.

**State education agencies: Provide targeted assistance and support to schools and districts.** For example:

- **Issue guidance, provide additional funding, or offer technical assistance** to schools and districts as they aim to deliver more and higher quality professional development related to serving the 1 in 5.
- **Encourage districts in their ESSA planning process to focus on and invest resources** in professional development, teacher preparedness to serve the 1 in 5, and schoolwide strategies to support all learners.

**Federal and state legislatures:**

- **Increase funding and resources available to districts to support effective teacher professional development** to better serve the 1 in 5. In addition to the small sums of money available to districts through Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act, competitive grants should be made available to support high-quality professional development, particularly in [multi-tier systems of supports](#) and [Universal Design for Learning](#)—two approaches that ensure all students have opportunities to learn and the supports needed to do so.
- **Build systems to collect and analyze data** on the professional development provided to teachers to direct districts to professional development that is effective and increase its availability.
- **Increase investment in grants and other programs that improve teacher preparation and incentivize teaching in high-need areas.** For example, the Teacher Quality Partnership Grants under the Higher Education Act support the preparation of general educators to be able to instruct students with disabilities and English language learners effectively by investing in strong clinical preparation, including one-year residency programs. In addition, the TEACH Grants provide up to \$4,000 a year to students to complete coursework required to begin teaching in a high-need field such as ELL or special education.

## Policy Leaders



### Our approach

NCLD and Understood set out to unpack and address the challenges facing the 1 in 5 in the general education setting, in partnership with Lake Research Partners, SRI Education, and EducationCounsel.

**1,350** teachers surveyed

**13** teacher focus groups conducted in California, Ohio, and North Carolina

**150** academic, empirically driven articles reviewed

**50** states researched for teacher certification requirements

With input and pressure testing by Understood's Educator Advisory Council, NCLD's Professional Advisory Board, and other experts

\* For a more extensive discussion of how to strengthen educator preparations, see the report released by the CEDAR Center and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), [Promises to Keep: Transforming Educator Preparation to Better Serve a Diverse Range of Learners](#).

For more information and to access the full report, visit:

[ncld.org/forwardtogether](https://ncld.org/forwardtogether)

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