



Education for Disabled Learners in Schools: Examples of Good Practice for Principals and School Leaders


ERO looked at how well the education system is supporting disabled learners in schools. This guide provides practical advice and real-life examples of good practice that will be useful for principals, senior leadership, and learning support leaders.

How can good education make a difference for disabled learners?

Disabled learners have the same right to receive a quality, inclusive education in state schools as other learners. To thrive, they need to be able to enrol and be fully included in all aspects of education. This might mean the curriculum, teaching, and physical environment need to be adapted. Like all learners, what works best is quality teaching in supportive environments, with strong parent and whānau partnerships.

When disabled learners receive high quality, inclusive education, it makes a real difference. They are more likely to achieve better social and learning outcomes, to complete secondary schooling, and to go on to further study and employment. Research also shows that inclusive practices lead to better social outcomes for their non-disabled peers.

Principals, senior leadership, and learning support leaders have a key role in setting the scene for inclusive practice and creating the conditions for disabled learners to experience real learning success.



*When we talk about **disabled learners**, we mean children and young people with significant needs for ongoing support, adaptations or accommodations to support their education. Not all members of this community might identify with this language. We've used this term because it links to the New Zealand Disability Strategy.*

“I love school, it’s great and my teachers are great. I love being with the other students. I love being treated the same way as them and given the same opportunities. It is important to me to be included in all aspects – not just being present.”

DISABLED LEARNER



How well are disabled learners doing?

Our research found that while many disabled learners enjoy going to school, and are engaged in learning, a significant proportion are still experiencing exclusion, poor experiences, and poor outcomes at school.

- Almost a third do not feel supported to learn in a way that suits them.
- More than a quarter do not feel accepted for who they are.
- Almost a third do not feel they belong at school and do not have good friends.
- Only half of parents and whānau think their disabled child is progressing well as a learner and are happy with how their child's learning is being assessed and reported.
- Only half of parents and whānau are happy with how well the school is supporting their disabled child to be included and to participate in school life.
- Disabled learners with more complex needs have poorer experiences and outcomes.

What makes a difference for disabled learners?

Our research identified four key areas for improving education outcomes for disabled learners.

1. **Effective leadership that has strong expectations for inclusion**
2. Quality teaching (including responsive curriculum and assessment) and supportive environments
3. Strong partnerships with disabled learners, parents, and whānau
4. **Accessibility of school buildings and facilities**

This guide focuses on areas one and four, which have particular importance for principals and school leaders. A separate guide has been developed for teachers, which provides good practice examples for quality teaching and partnerships.

In this guide, we'll briefly summarise what the evidence says about good leadership practices, and provide real-life examples of these practices in action, from leaders that we spoke to. We've also included some reflective questions to support you and your team.

Key area: Effective leadership that has strong expectations for inclusion

What's really important?

School leadership, including learning support leadership, shapes a school's practices and culture. We found six key aspects of leadership practice for supporting disabled learners.

1. A culture of valuing disabled learners
2. Prioritising support for disabled learners
3. Understanding legal obligations and putting them into practice
4. Setting clear expectations
5. Monitoring outcomes

We'll talk about the evidence, give examples of effective practice, and offer reflective questions for each of these.

1. A culture of valuing disabled learners

What does the evidence say?

The knowledge and beliefs of school leadership about inclusion of disabled learners has a strong influence on how disabled learners and their families are welcomed and valued throughout the school. When leaders deliberately model and promote a culture of valuing disabled learners, this has positive impacts on learning and wellbeing outcomes for these learners.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this school, leaders demonstrate a strong culture of valuing disabled learners and their parents and whānau. They also ensure that engagement with whānau is culturally responsive. Dedicated staff with cultural expertise liaise with Māori whānau and Pacific families of disabled learners, and support their participation at IEP meetings.

“We have whānau hui four times a year and parents of disabled learners in the specialist class come in ... There is also a fono for Pacific parents. The key thing is that the specialist class is not separate to the rest of the school. We are one inclusive setting. We build our relationships in those forums. It is also about being visible and approachable.”

PRINCIPAL

Reflective questions: *Is our school inclusive and welcoming for all disabled learners and their parents and whānau? Do our policies, procedures, and local curriculum reflect the diversity of our community – and how do we seek and value their input in developing them?*

2. Prioritising support for disabled learners

What does the evidence say?

Inclusion of disabled learners is not just about enrolling them at the school. It's also about making accommodations and adaptations to ensure full participation, engagement, and achievement across the breadth of the curriculum that is offered to all other learners. Schools also provide better support for disabled learners when they work with other schools to share information, knowledge, and resources.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

A number of schools access specialist teaching expertise from the local special school outreach service. The special school is a part of a Kāhui Ako and participates in their forum for school SENCOs. This supports the sharing of effective practices and has also enabled schools to identify shared needs and issues and to collaborate on solutions. For example, the Kāhui Ako has recently coordinated staff access to Incredible Years training and run a series of parent workshops on strategies to support toileting. School leaders value how this brings a team approach to removing barriers and finding solutions to challenges, supporting each school's inclusivity.

Reflective questions: *How might we grow our collaborative practices to share expertise, resources, and solutions to problems with other schools? How do we create opportunities for our teaching and learning support teams to learn from each other and build their capability?*

At this primary school, the Board regularly discusses the learning and wellbeing outcomes of diverse groups of learners, including disabled learners. This informs their decision-making and prioritisation of support for disabled learners.

Reflective questions: *Do senior leaders support the school Board to understand the benefits of inclusive practices, for all learners? Does the Board receive good information about disabled learners' outcomes, to inform decision-making?*

3. Understanding legal obligations and putting them into practice

What does the evidence say?

It is important to ensure that a school's legislative obligations to disabled learners are not limited to a high-level, 'on paper' commitment in the school charter or strategic plan. This commitment comes to life when it is translated into school policies and procedures, such as for enrolment and transitions, and then embedded into everyday practices.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

This school's commitment to inclusive education for disabled learners is explicit in its charter, as well as its strategic and annual planning. This includes specific goals to:

- support all ORS-funded students to learn alongside their peers as much as possible
- support equitable access to specialist services
- build special education pedagogy and practice school-wide.

Qualified specialist teachers and other specialists review and design the school's curriculum to ensure it is inclusive and responsive to the needs of disabled learners. There is a cross-school focus on creating more inclusive classrooms, for example, recent professional learning for teachers and teacher aides focused on use of core boards to support communication.

Reflective questions: *Do we have a shared understanding about what inclusive education for disabled learners means? How well does our school align with the best practice guidelines of inclusive education for disabled learners? (See the **Useful resources** at the end of this guide for some helpful links.)*

4. Setting clear expectations

What does the evidence say?

It is important for school leaders to set clear expectations for inclusion, wellbeing, and achievement for disabled learners. This includes planning for professional learning opportunities to build staff capability and confidence in implementing those expectations.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Leaders at this primary school are actively building the capability of teachers and teacher aides to deliver more inclusive education throughout the school. Recent professional learning has focused on supporting the communication goals of non-verbal learners, and on using the expanded curriculum framework for Level 1 learners to better support planning and assessment for learning.

“[Time is] put aside for staff to work together on looking at what is needed for learners. Some days the RTL, teacher, team leader, LSC or SENCO will spend time for an hour after school to plan together around a student.”

PRINCIPAL

Teachers and teacher aides prioritise making time to meet together, and with specialists and specialist teachers, to plan how best to meet the needs of disabled learners. The result is that provision of learning support is flexible and responsive, and wider teaching staff are well supported to continually build their capability.

Reflective questions: *Do we have clear expectations around inclusive education for disabled learners as a core competency for all our teaching and support staff? Do we prioritise making time for leaders, teachers, and teacher aides to meet, and to undertake relevant professional learning?*

5. Monitoring outcomes

What does the evidence say?

School leaders should monitor and report on inclusion, progress, and achievement of disabled learners as a priority group. This includes reporting to the school Board, so that members can assess how well the school is meeting its commitment to inclusive education for disabled learners. Regular monitoring and reporting supports schools to evaluate their effectiveness and make targeted improvements to benefit disabled learners.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

Monitoring of outcomes for disabled learners happens at all levels of this school. The views of disabled learners and their parents and whānau are routinely collected and used to inform evaluation and decision-making. Specialist teachers and other specialist practitioners engage in regular review and design of the school’s curriculum to ensure it is inclusive and responsive to the needs of disabled learners. School leaders and teachers regularly report information about outcomes for disabled learners to the Board. The Board’s membership also includes representation of families with disabled children.

Reflective questions: *How well do we collect, understand and report on inclusion, progress, and achievement of disabled learners at our school? How might these practices be more specific or useful, so as to have positive impacts for disabled learners?*

Regular, systematic, internal evaluation in this primary school fosters continuous improvement in education provision for disabled learners. For example, a recent strategic review of systems and practices involving ORS-funded learners identified improvement priorities around roles and responsibilities, transitions into and out of school, assessment and reporting, and teachers’ professional development.

Reflective questions: *Are our decisions about disabled learners’ education informed by robust data and evidence? Are we confident that all disabled learners receive the support they need? What evidence could we gather to evaluate the impact of our practices on disabled learners’ outcomes?*

Key area: Accessibility of school buildings and facilities

What's really important?

When school leaders think about the accessibility of buildings and facilities at their school, there are two key aspects they should consider.

1. Physical accessibility of school buildings
2. Inclusive classroom environments

We'll talk about the evidence, give examples of effective practice, and offer reflective questions for each of these.

1. Physical accessibility of school buildings

What does the evidence say?

The physical environment of a school is critical for enabling disabled learners to have equitable access to all areas and facilities, and to support their learning and social inclusion at school. Making adaptations to support accessibility can have strong positive impacts for disabled learners.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this school, leaders advocate strongly for equity of physical access for disabled learners. This has meant making physical changes to the environment to support the free movement of visually impaired learners.

“We have a couple of students with visual impairment. One of these learners arrived because another principal would not paint yellow lines on their ‘pretty’ buildings. We painted yellow lines on the ground and on posts and buildings. If it is good for one it is good for all. Yellow lines are also wonderful for a five-year-old running around to be mindful of where they are going.”

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Reflective questions: *Is our physical environment safe for disabled learners? Is it designed to provide as much independent access for them as possible? How might we adapt our school and classroom environments to improve access?*

This school has ensured that accessibility for disabled students is considerate of physical safety as well as social and emotional wellbeing. This has meant putting careful thought into not only facilitating access to learning experiences, but social experiences as well.

“We made sure that there is ramp access to all blocks and that consideration is given so that disabled students can access classes and spaces via the same route as their friends, rather than having to go around the back.”

PRINCIPAL

Reflective questions: *How does our school environment impact on our disabled learners' opportunities to connect with their peers and grow their independence and autonomy? What adaptations could we make to create more inclusive learning environments?*

2. Inclusive classroom environments

What does the evidence say?

Having inclusive school environments involves thoughtful rearrangement and adaptation of classrooms, with a focus on the individual accessibility needs of each disabled learner.

Inclusive environments cater for the sensory needs of neurodivergent learners, for example, through provision of low-sensory rooms and sensory resources in classrooms.

Real-life examples: What can this look like in practice?

At this primary school, leaders facilitate times for specialists to work with teachers around how to set up their classroom to meet the needs of disabled learners.

“We use an occupational therapist to advise on adaptation of classrooms. We follow an ecological model, we are not putting support in for the individual child, we are about changing the ecology of the classroom.”

SENCO

Staff shared that making visible, physical changes to their classrooms has the added benefit of sending a strong message of inclusion to disabled learners as well as the wider school community.

Reflective questions: *How accessible and inclusive are our classrooms for all learners? What big and small steps might we take in arranging our classrooms to improve participation and learning of our disabled learners? How are learners supported to regulate sensory overstimulation in open/modern learning environments?*

There are positive impacts when teachers are provided with the necessary resources and training to support learners' sensory and self-regulation needs. In this school, learning support leaders have purposefully built a school-wide understanding of how to use "zones of regulation" with disabled learners, and how teachers can encourage the use of fidget resources, weighted blankets and low sensory spaces for students to self-soothe. Teachers report that building their understanding of these strategies has had a positive impact on disabled learners' independence and resilience.

Reflective questions: *How do we support teachers to use sensory spaces and resources for re-engagement in learning? How can we grow knowledge, understanding, and resources in this area?*

Useful resources

Ministry of Education guidance for school leaders

- Effective governance guide for school Boards: [Effective governance: Building school boards](#)
- Collaboration for success guides: [Collaboration / IEP guidelines / IEP \(tki.org.nz\)](#)
- Ministry of Education's learning support guides and resources: [Learning support – Education in New Zealand \(education.govt.nz\)](#)
- New Zealand School Trustees Association guidance for school Boards and principals: [Help for Boards \(nzstaresourcecentre.org.nz\)](#)

New Zealand legislative and policy guidelines for inclusion of disabled learners

- Information for Boards: Education and Training Act 2020: [The Education and Training Act 2020 \(education.govt.nz\)](#)
- The Learning Support Action Plan, which sets out how learning support is planned and delivered: [About the Learning Support Action Plan – Conversation space \(education.govt.nz\)](#)
- Whaikaha, Ministry of Disabled People, which monitors the disability action plan: [Disability Action Plan 2019-2023 – Office for Disability Issues \(odi.govt.nz\)](#)

Details about the rights of people with disabilities

- [Human Rights Commission \(hrc.co.nz\)](#)
- [United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, Right to Inclusive Education \(ohchr.org\)](#)
- [UNICEF guide to inclusive education \(unicef.org\)](#)

For more on our evaluation of education for disabled learners in schools, check out our website www.ero.govt.nz

- Our full report: [Thriving at school? Education for disabled learners in schools](#)
- Our short summary: [Thriving at school? Education for disabled learners in schools - Summary](#)

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the disabled learners and their whānau, teachers, and leaders who shared with us.



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