



Parent Toolkit:

How to Ask for Schoolwide Teacher Training to Help Kids With Learning & Attention Issues

Easy-to-use resources to help you make the case for why your child's school needs more teacher training in four key areas—strengths-based IEPs, multi-tier system of supports, personalized learning and Universal Design for Learning—each of which can help kids with learning and attention issues thrive.



Table of Contents



3 Introduction



6 FAQs About Professional Development for Teachers



7 Strengths-Based IEPs

- Fact Sheet
- Letter Template
- Talking Points for Parents



10 Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS)

- Fact Sheet
- Letter Template
- Talking Points for Parents



13 Personalized Learning

- Fact Sheet
- Letter Template
- Talking Points for Parents



16 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- Fact Sheet
- Letter Template
- Talking Points for Parents



19 School Board Advocacy: 5 Tips for Parents



20 About This Toolkit



Introduction



As a parent, you may not be aware of the kind of training your child’s teachers have received. They may have taken many courses on how to teach different kinds of learners. Or they may not be familiar with some best practices for teaching struggling students.

Either way, it’s important to know that your child’s school provides opportunities throughout the year for teachers to learn new skills. This type of teacher training is referred to as professional development (PD).

In this toolkit, you’ll learn how to advocate for teacher training that can help your child’s school better support the 1 in 5 kids with learning and attention issues.

The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) makes it possible to include teacher training in an [Individualized Education Program](#) (IEP). But that’s a child-by-child, year-by-year decision. This toolkit takes a broader approach that encourages schoolwide teacher training to help *all* kids with learning and attention issues.



PD in four key strategies

The toolkit begins with a quick primer on PD. What is it? How much training do teachers get each year? Who decides which topics they focus on? And which funding sources help schools pay for PD?

This toolkit has several resources to help you advocate for PD in four key strategies. These strategies are designed to bring about system-wide changes that can help kids with learning and attention issues thrive. You may want to choose a favorite strategy and focus on that. Or you may decide to advocate for PD in all four:



[Strengths-based IEPs](#) can help shift the mindset of every member of your child’s IEP team. This approach can help the team start thinking about how to leverage your child’s abilities. Training can help the team develop IEP goals that use strengths to address a particular need.



[Multi-tier system of supports](#) (MTSS) can help schools improve the performance of all students by identifying needs early and modifying instruction quickly. It can also reduce disciplinary incidents. But many schools need more training on how to collect, interpret and respond to student progress data.



Introduction



[Personalized learning](#) aims to customize education. The what, when, where and how of learning are tailored to each student's abilities, needs and interests. If done well, it can help students take ownership of their learning and meet rigorous standards. If not done well, struggling students can fall further behind.



[Universal Design for Learning](#) (UDL) is a framework for how to optimize teaching and learning for all students, not just those who struggle. UDL is based on insights from the science of how people learn and helps teachers instruct a diverse group of learners by providing different ways for students to access the material, engage with it and show what they've learned.

Training in these four areas is vital for general educators as well as for special educators. Why? Because most students with learning and attention issues [spend most or all of the day in general education classrooms](#).

Your child's school might already have PD initiatives in one or more of these four areas or in other areas that are important to them. (Examples might include bringing [social-emotional learning](#) into the classroom and providing structured literacy instruction, like [Orton-Gillingham](#), to struggling readers.) The four topics in this toolkit will complement ongoing efforts and help improve outcomes for all students.

Easy-to-use resources

For each topic, this toolkit provides three easy-to-use resources:



Fact sheet. You can give this to your child's principal or to a member of your local school board or to a local teachers' group. (All three can influence which training your child's teachers receive.) This one-pager makes clear why general educators and special educators need more training to support the 1 in 5.



Letter template. This can help you reach out to school officials about PD. You can edit the text in this template and then copy and paste it into an email.



Talking points for parents. This one-page "cheat sheet" can help you during conversations with people like the principal or a member of your local school board. It includes questions to help you dig deeper. And there are sample responses you can use if you're told things like "There isn't enough money to do this."



Federal funding for PD

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, sets aside funding for PD for all states and local districts. (Pro tip: ESSA is pronounced *Ess-uh*.) This federal law has two funding streams that can be used to help teachers learn new skills:

- Title II covers PD in general.
- Title IV is flexible funding that can be used for things like helping teachers learn how to create safer learning environments and use new technology.

One more ESSA detail to share with principals and other school officials: Schools don't have to receive Title I funding to be eligible for Title II or Title IV funding.

The toolkit ends with tips for parents about school board advocacy. These tips fill you in on what a school board does. The tips can also help you make inroads that could influence the training not only at your child's school but in your whole school district.

All of these tools will get you ready to use the most powerful tool: your voice. Concise information and passionate parents can make a big difference in encouraging your child's school or district to provide more support in these areas. So dive into all or part of this toolkit and start advocating!

Keep us posted

We'd love to hear from you. After you talk with school officials about PD, please update us by filling out a short form at u.org/pd-advocacy. Your feedback can make our resources better and help more parents help more kids. Thank you!



FAQs About Professional Development for Teachers



Continuing education is part of every profession. Understanding how professional development (PD) works for teachers can help you ask for more teacher training in areas that can be especially helpful for your child. To help you get your bearings, here are answers to some common questions about PD.

What is professional development?

PD is ongoing education that enhances teachers' skills throughout their careers. It can be as short as a one-hour seminar or as long as a multi-year Ph.D. program. Teachers enroll in courses or programs. But they also receive PD at the schools where they teach. Your child's school most likely provides PD on several topics throughout the year. Examples include social-emotional learning, classroom management, instructional technology and analyzing student assessment data. PD can be embedded in teachers' jobs. It may include things like instructional coaching and professional learning communities (PLCs), where groups of teachers meet regularly to learn with each other.

Are teachers required to get professional development?

Nearly all states require teachers to complete a certain number of credit hours every few years to renew their teaching license. PD can also help some teachers qualify for salary increases.

How much professional development do teachers get each year?

The answer varies from state to state. Some states require 20 hours every two years, while others require 180 hours every five years. PD also varies from district to district. Boston requires 18 hours a year. Los Angeles sets aside time nearly every Tuesday for teachers to receive an afternoon of PD.

Why is professional development so important?

PD helps teachers use best practices to enhance classroom instruction. PD also helps schools better support the "whole child" so each student feels safe, supported and challenged.

Who pays for professional development?

The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, provides funding to states and school districts to support teachers. PD funding can also come from state and local funding or private grants. And teachers pay for some PD. (Pro tip: ESSA is pronounced *Ess-uh*.)

Who decides what teachers learn through professional development?

Some decisions are made at the district or state level. Some are made by the principal. Some are made by teachers. And parents like you can help influence these decisions at every level.



Strengths-Based IEPs: Fact Sheet



A strengths-based IEP is...

- ✓ An approach that leverages a student's abilities to help work on weaknesses.
- ✓ A way to combine standards-based IEPs with a [growth mindset](#) that helps students believe they can improve their abilities.
- ✓ A process that can lead to more self-awareness and self-advocacy.

A strengths-based IEP is *not*...

- ✗ A superficial look at strengths. Abilities are thoughtfully woven into IEP goals.
- ✗ An adults-only process. Students are encouraged to help identify strengths and actively participate in IEP meetings.
- ✗ Just about strengths and weaknesses. It also focuses on interests and preferences.

This new kind of IEP reframes how IEP teams talk about—and use—strengths

Too often, IEP teams discuss a student's strengths by saying things like "What I like about this student is...." These comments can be hard to connect to the rest of the IEP in actionable ways. But IEP teams can reframe the strengths discussion so it focuses on abilities: "*What does the student do well?*"

For example, for students who struggle in math, what do they do well in that subject? Are they good at using a calculator? Do they prefer to work independently or in groups? Strengths-based IEPs aim to start with a strength for each of the skill sets described in the student's present level of performance.

Teacher training in strengths-based IEPs can help schools work on...

Using **strengths finders** to identify abilities, interests and preferences

Preparing students to participate in **IEP meetings** and self-advocate

Helping weave strengths into **IEP goals** as a way to set high expectations

Expanding **IEP templates** to focus on strengths, interests and preferences

Spotlight: Student-led IEPs

Student participation in IEP meetings can deepen the discussion about strengths, interests and preferences. It can also help students set ambitious goals and meet them. That's what happened at Georgia's [Rutland Middle School](#), where student-led IEPs have had a big impact on kids with dyslexia and other learning issues. These students not only learned about their strengths and weaknesses. Several kids set a goal of no longer needing special education in high school—and a handful reached this goal by the end of the first semester of ninth grade.



Strengths-Based IEPs: Letter Template



You can start to tailor this letter by clicking anywhere on the text below. You may want to create different versions to send to your child's principal, a school board member or a local teachers' group. When you're done, paste the text into an email. Before sending, remember to (1) attach the strengths-based IEPs fact sheet, (2) adjust the words in brackets, (3) remove the brackets.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for pasting the letter template text.



Strengths-Based IEPs: Talking Points for Parents



These points can help you talk with your child's principal, a local school board member or a local teachers' group about the need for professional development (PD) in strengths-based IEPs.

☰ “I’d like our school/district to get PD in strengths-based IEPs because...”

- Strengths-based IEPs use students’ abilities to help work on their weaknesses, but teachers need time and support to learn how to develop IEP goals that leverage student strengths.
 - The process of identifying strengths, interests and preferences helps increase self-awareness, which can also lead to more self-advocacy.
 - Emphasizing strengths as a way to work on weaknesses not only sets a positive tone—it helps teachers see how to help kids like mine make progress toward their goals.
 - *Describe a recent situation at your child’s school and how a strengths-based IEP might have improved your child’s experience:* _____
-
-

☰ “Has our school/district provided teacher training on...”

- Strengths-based IEPs?
- Identifying strengths? Helping students actively participate in IEP meetings? Addressing parent concerns about student participation?
- Growth mindset? Strengths-based IEPs fit perfectly with that model.

☰ “Strengths-based IEPs aren’t a big drain on school budgets.”

- Strengths-based IEPs don’t require any technology purchases.
- Our school/district may already have access to a strengths finder. If not, there are free strengths assessments online.

☰ “ESSA provides funding for PD.”

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, sets aside funding for PD for all states and local districts. (Pro tip: ESSA is pronounced *Ess-uh*.)
- Schools don’t have to receive Title I funding to receive Title II PD funding or Title IV funding, which can be used for PD in technology that involves personalized learning.

☰ “I want to ask about the PD planning process.”

- How much control do you have over the school’s/district’s PD? Who else do you recommend I contact about this?
- When are decisions made about PD?
- Some districts are already making strides in implementing student-led and strengths-based IEPs. How can we make this a priority for our school/district?



Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS): Fact Sheet



MTSS is...

- ✓ A framework that helps schools improve the performance of all students by identifying needs early and modifying instruction quickly.
- ✓ A comprehensive system that screens all students and provides interventions that can be intensified if needed.
- ✓ Real-time support, not wait-to-fail.

MTSS is *not*...

- ✗ Just help with academics. Behavioral and social-emotional support are included.
- ✗ The job of a few specialists. General educators play a key role in helping assess students and plan interventions.
- ✗ An excuse to delay or deny a special education evaluation. Parents can request an evaluation at any time.

Many schools use some elements of MTSS

Response to intervention (RTI) focuses on academics and provides increasing levels of support to struggling students. In most districts, Tier 1 is classroom-wide support for all students, Tier 2 is small group interventions, and Tier 3 is intensive, individualized support.

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) is similar to RTI but focuses on establishing behavioral expectations and providing tiered supports to help students meet those expectations.

Teacher training in MTSS can help schools work on...

Assessing the needs of **all students**, not just those who are outwardly struggling

Monitoring **student progress data** and using this data to make decisions

Expanding **access to specialists** who typically work with kids with disabilities

Faithfully following **intervention timelines** and other key aspects of MTSS

Spotlight: Integrated MTSS

MTSS can be phased in. For example, Kansas started using it in 2005 in one content area like math or reading. Since then, it has been integrated into all content areas, behavior and social-emotional learning. Survey respondents at more than 500 Kansas schools said MTSS helped by:

- ↓ Decreasing discipline referrals (77% of respondents)
- ↓ Decreasing special education referrals (63% of respondents)
- ↑ Increasing student proficiency (70% of respondents)



Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS): Letter Template



You can start to tailor this letter by clicking anywhere on the text below. You may want to create different versions to send to your child's principal, a school board member or a local teachers' group. When you're done, paste the text into an email. Before sending, remember to (1) attach the MTSS fact sheet, (2) adjust the words in brackets, (3) remove the brackets.



Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS): Talking Points



These points can help you talk with your child’s principal, a local school board member or a local teachers’ group about the need for professional development (PD) in MTSS.

“I’d like our school/district to get PD in MTSS because...”

- MTSS helps schools improve the performance of all students by identifying needs early and modifying instruction quickly. But many schools struggle with key aspects of MTSS, like faithfully following timelines for interventions and frequently monitoring student progress.
- If done well, MTSS can increase academic achievement and decrease disciplinary incidents.
- More training could make a big difference in my child’s education.
- *Describe a recent situation at your child’s school and how getting more support sooner might have improved your child’s experience:* _____

“Has our school/district provided teacher training on...”

- RTI (response to intervention) or PBIS (positive behavioral interventions and supports)? PD can help make these elements of comprehensive MTSS more robust and effective.
- Scheduling interventions to help ensure that struggling students don’t miss core instruction?

“MTSS doesn’t cost a lot, but it does take time to learn.”

- MTSS doesn’t require expensive technology. But teachers need time to learn how to provide these supports. PD can be a big help here.
- PBIS.org provides free, in-depth resources and is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). (Pro tip: OSEP is pronounced *Oh-sep*.)

“ESSA provides funding for PD.”

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, sets aside funding for PD in all states and local districts. (Pro tip: ESSA is pronounced *Ess-uh*.)
- Schools don’t have to receive Title I funding to receive Title II PD funding or Title IV funding, which can be used for PD to help create safe learning environments.

“I want to ask about the PD planning process.”

- How much control do you have over the school’s/district’s PD? Who else do you recommend I contact about this?
- When are decisions made about PD?
- ESSA and several states are encouraging schools to use MTSS. How can we make this a priority for our school/district?



Personalized Learning: Fact Sheet

Personalized learning is...

- ✓ An educational approach that tailors the what, when, where and how of learning to meet each student's abilities, needs and interests.
- ✓ A customized process that includes giving students a say in how they learn and in how they demonstrate their learning.
- ✓ A potential game-changer. If done well, students are more engaged and get help as soon as they need it. If not done well, struggling students can get left behind.

Personalized learning is *not*...

- ✗ All about technology. Tech is helpful but not required. The big resource teachers need is time to learn new skills and time to plan and strategize on a regular basis.
- ✗ An excuse to lower expectations. Kids may learn some skills at different paces, but all are held to rigorous standards.
- ✗ Just for students with IEPs or 504 plans. But it can reduce stigma by giving options to everyone instead of singling out the few who receive formal accommodations.

Teacher training in personalized learning can help schools work on...

Guiding students as they make **more choices** and take a bigger stake in their education

Tracking **student competencies** in the knowledge and skills all kids are expected to learn

Using data to monitor **progress** and inform instructional strategies

Starting out with **accessible learning strategies**, not adding them as an afterthought

Helping all kids develop the **executive functioning skills** needed for this kind of learning

Spotlight: Extended Learning Opportunities

An extended learning opportunity (ELO) is a type of personalized learning that lets students earn credits for learning that happens outside the classroom. To do this at New Hampshire's Sanborn Regional High School, teachers received training in how to use the school's [competency-based learning](#) system. This enabled a 12th grader with dyscalculia to weave a math ELO into her internship at a boutique. Teacher and student worked together to align the ELO's goals with the school's math standards.

The student got to learn math in the context of a job she enjoyed. She also got to practice using those skills in real-world activities such as determining price markups and making a profit. The ELO helped her meet the standards for graduation. It also helped her graduate on time.



Personalized Learning: Letter Template

You can start to tailor this letter by clicking anywhere on the text below. You may want to create different versions to send to your child's principal, a school board member or a local teachers' group. When you're done, paste the text into an email. Before sending, remember to (1) attach the personalized learning fact sheet, (2) adjust the words in brackets, (3) remove the brackets.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for users to paste their personalized letter text.



Personalized Learning: Talking Points for Parents

These points can help you talk with your child’s principal, a local school board member or a local teachers’ group about the need for professional development (PD) in personalized learning.

☰ “I’d like our school/district to get PD in personalized learning because...”

- It has the potential to transform education for all students and especially for the 1 in 5 kids with learning and attention issues.
- More training could make a big difference in my child’s education. Kids with learning and attention issues could fall further behind if teachers don’t know how to meet their needs.
- *Describe a recent assignment and how a more personalized approach might have improved your child’s experience:* _____

☰ “Has our school/district provided teacher training in...”

- Personalized learning?
- Helping students with disabilities fully participate in personalized learning? This kind of training is important for general educators and special educators.

☰ “Personalized learning doesn’t have to cost a lot, but it does take time for teachers to learn.”

- It’s a myth that personalized learning is all about technology. Tech is helpful but not required.
- Personalized learning may sound daunting, but our school may already have some elements in place. PD could help integrate these practices into a more robust and effective system.
- Teachers need time (which is a huge resource) as well as support to learn how to phase in this approach to education. Federal law sets aside funding specifically for PD. And schools may be able to access various state and local funding sources for PD in personalized learning.

☰ “ESSA provides funding for PD.”

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, sets aside funding for PD in all states and local districts. (Pro tip: ESSA is pronounced *Ess-uh.*)
- Schools don’t have to receive Title I funding to receive Title II PD funding or Title IV funding, which can be used for PD in technology that involves personalized learning.

☰ “I want to ask about the PD planning process.”

- How much control do you have over the school’s/district’s PD? When are decisions made about PD?
- ESSA and several states are encouraging the use of personalized learning. How can we make this a priority for our school/district?



Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Fact Sheet



UDL is...

- ✓ A way to optimize teaching to effectively instruct a diverse group of learners.
- ✓ Based on insights from the science of how people learn.
- ✓ Flexible in how students access material, engage with it and show what they know.

UDL is *not*...

- ✗ A curriculum or technology platform.
- ✗ One method of teaching all students. A variety of methods are used to give all students an equal opportunity to succeed.
- ✗ An “us” vs. “them” resource. UDL benefits all kids, not just those who struggle.

UDL’s three core principles help optimize lesson plans for all learners

- 1 **Representation:** Provide information in more than one format—like audio, video and hands-on learning—to help students access material in ways best suited to their learning strengths.
- 2 **Action and expression:** Offer flexibility in how kids interact with the material and show what they’ve learned, such as choosing to take a test, give an oral report or do a group project.
- 3 **Engagement:** Look for different ways to motivate students and sustain their interest, like letting them make choices and giving them assignments that feel relevant to their lives.

Teacher training in UDL can help schools work on...

Providing **more than one way** to interact with material and express knowledge

Using **technology platforms** and other materials that align with UDL principles

Making assessments accessible to all and providing **timely interventions**

Maintaining **high expectations** for kids with IEPs and English language learners

Spotlight: Transitioning to UDL

UDL involves educators learning new skills and collaborating. Here are some ways New Hampshire’s [D.J. Bakie Elementary School](#) started transitioning to UDL in 2009:

- Made time for teachers to work together to identify which skills they want to target
- Piloted different presentation formats and different options to demonstrate learning
- Enabled teachers to meet regularly to help evaluate and refine these approaches



Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Letter Template



You can start to tailor this letter by clicking anywhere on the text below. You may want to create different versions to send to your child's principal, a school board member or a local teachers' group. When you're done, paste the text into an email. Before sending, remember to (1) attach the UDL fact sheet, (2) adjust the words in brackets, (3) remove the brackets.



Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Talking Points for Parents



These points can help you talk with your child’s principal, a local school board member or a local teachers’ group about the need for professional development (PD) in UDL.

☰ “I’d like our school/district to get PD in UDL because, if done well, UDL can...”

- Optimize lesson plans for all students, not just those who struggle. UDL may be especially helpful for English language learners and the 1 in 5 kids with learning and attention issues.
- Increase student engagement—as kids go from passively receiving knowledge to making choices that help them “own” their learning—and decrease disciplinary incidents as kids better understand their own learning needs and advocate for themselves.
- *Describe a recent assignment at your child’s school and how more flexibility might have improved your child’s experience:* _____

☰ “Has our school/district...”

- Provided teacher training in UDL and/or in making assessments accessible so all students can demonstrate what they’ve learned?
- Encouraged strong professional learning communities that give teachers time to learn from each other?

☰ “UDL doesn’t have to be a big drain on school budgets.”

- UDL is not a technology platform. It’s a way of thinking about how to effectively instruct diverse learners.
- Schools can start small by focusing on a few skills in one content area.
- Schools may be eligible for state or local funding to support UDL, and organizations like CAST and Towson University provide free resources to help educators learn how to use UDL.

☰ “ESSA provides funding for PD.”

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, sets aside funding for PD for all states and local districts. (Pro tip: ESSA is pronounced *Ess-uh*.)
- Schools don’t have to receive Title I funding to receive Title II PD funding or Title IV funding, which can be used for PD in technology that involves UDL.

☰ “I want to ask about the PD planning process.”

- How much control do you have over the school’s/district’s PD? Who else do you recommend I contact about this?
- When are decisions made about PD?
- ESSA and several states are encouraging schools to use UDL. How can we make this a priority for our school/district?



School Board Advocacy: 5 Tips for Parents



Your local school board makes many decisions that can affect your child's education, such as approving the school district's budget and allocating state funding for things like teacher training on a specific topic. Parents can influence these decisions by speaking up. Use these tips to get started.

1. Take some time to learn what your school board meetings are like.

Try to go to a board meeting or two so you can see how the meetings are structured. It's also a good idea to sign up for the board's email list. School boards have to post the agenda for each meeting, and knowing which topics will be discussed can help you get ready to speak.

2. Look for an ally on the board.

Before you raise an issue at a meeting, try to find a board member who is especially interested in things like engaging parents or meeting students' needs. (One way to do this is to read news stories about board elections or meetings.) Most districts post each member's contact information online.

3. Look for other parents to join you in speaking up.

Seek out local parents whose kids have similar challenges. Encourage them to join you in speaking up about a particular issue. Here are some groups that could help you find supportive parents:

- Your district's special education parent committee (often called SEPAC, SECAC or SEPTA)
- Local dyslexia support groups
- Parent organizations like your school's PTA or PTO and neighborhood or cultural groups

[Understood's online community](#) may have more ideas on how to find parents in your area.

4. Consider reaching out to a local teachers' group.

Many schools encourage teachers to develop professional learning communities (PLCs). These groups help teachers collaborate and learn from each other. PLCs are likely to be interested in efforts to get more resources or training to help teachers better support their students.

5. Prepare your remarks.

Find out how long you'll get to speak at the meeting, and practice your remarks using a timer. Bring the issue to life by talking about your child. It's also good to try to include a statistic on how many kids are affected. One helpful source of stats is NCLD's 2017 [State of Learning Disabilities](#) report. If you know other people who are planning to speak, you can plan together to make sure key points are covered. Let the board know if anyone needs an interpreter or needs board materials translated.



About This Toolkit



This toolkit was created with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and with insights from these contributors:

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