



Shaping theFuture

September 2026 ■ 26-9

Lutheran Education Association ■ lea.org

Seeing and Serving Students
as Unique Learners

Starting the New School Year: Seeing and Serving Unique Learners

by B.J. Wiemer, PhD.

The beginning of a new school year is both exciting and challenging. It also provides educators with a wonderful opportunity to recognize, understand, and nurture each child's individual strengths, needs, and God-given potential. The first weeks of school are a time to move beyond first impressions and begin with curiosity rather than assumptions.

The goal is to create a classroom culture where every student feels known, loved, and valued for who they are as individuals created by God to learn and grow.

"I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well."
Psalm 139:14 (ESV)

Every Student Is a Unique Learner

Every student enters the classroom with their own distinguishing story—a combination of strengths and challenges, interests, experiences, and potential. Students of the same age may be at very different developmental

levels and can differ significantly in social-emotional development, communication, [sensory preferences](#)¹, and [processing speed](#)².

**Begin with
curiosity
rather than
assumptions.**

Consider the student who has an exceptional memory for facts when information is presented aloud but struggles to remember details from written passages read independently. Or the student who is challenged by basic math facts but can articulate the most minute details of a hybrid engine—and not to forget the one who runs the fastest around the track but has difficulty remembering to raise his hand.

These differences do not define students' potential. They are simply a reminder that learning does not look the same for every child.



©Stock/JX99-Elijah Low

Learning does not look the same for every child.

Get to Know Your Students

Before students can be taught effectively, take the time to get to know them well. Who are these students? What motivates them? What makes them laugh? What are their interests? How do they communicate? What makes learning challenging for them?

Look for opportunities to engage students in brief, informal conversations by asking questions such as:

- “What’s your favorite thing to do when you’re not at school?”
- “What’s something you’re really good at doing?”
- “What’s something you wish your teacher knew about you?”

Younger students might draw a picture and describe it, while older students could complete a brief [interest inventory](#)³.

Then, look for ways to incorporate those interests into instruction—such as a writing prompt about video games, math problems involving favorite sports, or taking a moment to ask students about the music they enjoy.

These small interactions communicate an important message: “I see you as more than just a student who needs to complete schoolwork. I want to get to know you.”

“I want to get to know you.”



©iStock/People Images

Start with Strengths

Every student has areas of strength as well as areas that need additional support.

Begin by recognizing what students **can do**, asking them to identify something they believe they do well. Look beyond academics by noting their creative, athletic, relational, and problem-solving abilities.

Understanding a student’s strengths provides an important foundation for addressing areas of potential difficulty. Students who struggle academically may be excellent artists, speakers, or organizers. A student who has difficulty sitting still might demonstrate remarkable creativity and enthusiasm during hands-on activities. Look for classmates who naturally show compassion towards others.

Students who recognize their own God-given abilities are more likely to approach challenges with confidence and perseverance.

Recognize what students can do well.

“Every good and perfect gift is from above.” James 1:17 (NIV)



©iStock/BartCo

Establish the Belief that Every Child Belongs

What does it mean to have a classroom where every child is known and loved?

It means that students feel understood as learners. They know they can make mistakes and still be respected, and that asking for help is not a sign of weakness. They understand their teacher believes they can learn and grow.

Everyone learns in their own way.

This kind of trust begins with small, intentional actions: learning to pronounce students' names correctly and personally greeting each one every day. Listen to what they have to say and notice when something seems different about their day.

Set the tone by communicating that everyone learns in their own way and that everyone belongs in your classroom. Classrooms built on acceptance and grace benefit every student—not just those who receive specialized services.

Everyone belongs.

Observe Before Filling in the Blanks

The first weeks of school provide invaluable opportunities to observe students in a variety of situations. Notice how they approach new tasks, respond to correction, interact with their peers, manage frustration, and recover when things do not go as intended.

Pay attention to when your students are most engaged and successful. What supports help them begin a task, stay focused, or re-engage after distractions or frustrations?

Look for patterns rather than drawing conclusions based on a single incident. There is an important difference between a student who *doesn't want to* do something and a student who *has not yet learned how to* do it successfully.

Approach challenging moments with curiosity: “What is getting in the way of this student’s success?”

What is getting in the way of success?



©iStock/Sturti



©iStock/J. Bryson

Normalize Different Ways of Learning

Why wait until a student has an identified disability or formal accommodation to introduce flexibility into the classroom?

Applying the principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#)⁴ (UDL) can make instruction more accessible to everyone. Present information in multiple ways—visually, verbally, through demonstrations, and hands-on experiences. Provide clear verbal directions while displaying written or visual prompts. Whenever appropriate, allow students to manipulate materials, move their bodies, collaborate with peers, or choose from various ways to demonstrate their learning.

Some students work best independently, while others benefit from having a partner or being in a small group. Some prefer writing, whereas others demonstrate understanding through speaking, creating, modeling, or using technology.

Offering a variety of options and opportunities creates a classroom where flexibility is simply part of the learning process—not something “special” reserved for certain students.

Introduce flexibility into the classroom.

Fair Doesn't Always Mean Equal

A key principle of affirming classrooms is “[equity over equality](#),”⁵ which recognizes that fairness does not always mean the same thing for every student. Jesus illustrates this in His Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), where He provides each worker according to their own need rather than treating everyone the same. Just as the workers in Jesus’ story had different circumstances, students also have diverse needs.

Imagine administering a science test to every student using a 12-point font. One student has a significant visual impairment and cannot adequately read the questions. If that student performs poorly, did the test measure their understanding of science or their inability to read the small print?

Providing a large-print copy or an audio format would not give the student any advantage, but it would remove a barrier to accurately measuring what the student knows.

Fairness does not mean the same thing for every student.



©iStock/Ad Shooter

Accommodations Do Not Lower Expectations

Sometimes, teachers worry that accommodations lower the bar or give students an unfair advantage. An appropriate and well-designed accommodation simply removes a barrier while maintaining the learning expectations.

What is the true objective?

A question that needs to be asked is: What is the true objective of this lesson?

If the goal is to demonstrate understanding of a history concept, requiring a student with significant written expression difficulties to produce a lengthy written response may measure writing ability more than content knowledge. Depending on the student's educational plan, an oral response, graphic organizer, speech-to-text technology, or another approved method may provide a more accurate representation of the student's knowledge.

Likewise, if a student accurately completes the first five long-division problems but then begins making numerous errors, consider whether the difficulty lies in the long division process itself or in sustaining attention and effort over a lengthy task. Breaking an assignment into smaller portions may provide valuable insight into the student's actual understanding.

The goal is to make learning accessible.

The goal is not to make learning easier. The goal is to make learning accessible.



©Stock/Martin Edouard

Behavior Is Communication

Challenging behavior can be difficult to manage, especially in the midst of a busy classroom.

Instead of asking, “How do I stop this behavior?” consider asking, “What is this behavior telling me?”

“What is this behavior telling me?”

A student who refuses to work, leaves their seat, acts unusually silly, argues, or repeatedly asks to leave the classroom may be communicating a genuine need. The underlying message could be:

- “This is too difficult.”
- “I don’t know where to begin.”
- “I’m overwhelmed.”
- “I need a break.”
- “I don’t understand what is expected.”
- “Something else is making it difficult for me to focus.”

This does not mean that inappropriate behavior should be ignored. Rather, it means looking beyond the behavior to understand its triggers and determine how the student can be helped to respond more appropriately.

Recognize Neurodivergent Students as Individuals

A diagnosis or an individualized learning plan (e.g., ISP, accommodation plan) provides important information but does not tell us everything about a student.

One student with ADHD sits quietly at his desk, is slow to get started, and frequently forgets to turn in assignments, while another student with ADHD is loud, constantly moving, and interrupts every discussion. Two students with autism may have dramatically different interests, communication styles, sensory preferences, and levels of independence.

We want to avoid allowing a diagnosis to define the whole child. Instead of thinking, “This is an LD student, so I know what this student will be like,” consider, “This is a student with a learning disability. What do I need to learn about this individual?”

The student provides the rest.

The diagnosis tells part of the story. The student provides the rest.

“What do I need to learn about this individual?”

Protect Students’ Dignity

Teachers need to be especially mindful of how accommodations and learning differences are addressed in the classroom. There is rarely—if ever—a need to disclose why a student is receiving a specific support.

Instead, speak privately and naturally when discussing accommodations. Avoid using sarcasm or making comments that could embarrass students who are struggling. Some students, particularly those who interpret language literally, may find sarcasm confusing or even hurtful.

All students benefit from a grace-filled classroom where they feel safe to take risks, make mistakes, and ask for help.

Be Intentional about Language

Language shapes the culture of the classroom.

Instead of reducing a student to a diagnosis—saying, “He’s special ed”—consider saying, “He is a student who receives special education support.” Put the person before the challenge.

Likewise, apply [growth mindset](#)⁶ principles by replacing statements such as, “She can’t do that” with, “She can’t do that yet.” Instead of asking, “Why won’t she do this?” ask, “What might be preventing her from doing this successfully?”

Small changes in our thoughts and words can influence how we perceive students—and how their classmates perceive one another.

Put the person before the challenge.





Every child is more than a test score, diagnosis, behavior, or area of difficulty.

Begin the Year with Curiosity

Viewing students as unique learners is not about having all the answers. It is developing the perspective that every student is worth knowing and understanding.

As the school year begins, resist the temptation to make quick judgments based on first impressions, school records, diagnoses, or even a difficult first week. Instead, observe, ask questions, listen, notice each student's strengths, and be open to trying different approaches. Work collaboratively with families, previous teachers, special education staff, and other members of the student's support team. Most importantly, remember that every child who enters our classroom is more than a test score, diagnosis, behavior, or area of difficulty.

"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28 (ESV)

Every child is a unique learner, wonderfully created with strengths, possibilities, and God-given potential

When students feel seen, loved, and valued, they are better positioned to develop confidence, take risks, and engage fully in the learning process. Teachers can then begin creating classrooms where every student has the opportunity to be known, to grow, to succeed, and to hear the Good News of God's grace, love, and purpose transforming their lives through Jesus Christ.

Endnotes (and Resources)

1. Sensory Preferences

<https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/sensory-needs-in-the-classroom/>

2. Processing Speed

<https://www.idonline.org/ld-topics/teaching-instruction/understanding-and-addressing-processing-speed-deficits-classroom>

3. Interest Inventory

<https://doc2form.dev/blog/student-interest-survey-questions/>

4. Universal Design for Learning

<https://www.everway.com/blog/7-udl-strategies-and-examples-for-every-classroom/>

5. Equity over Equality

<https://www.schoolsthatlead.org/blog/equity-vs-equality-in-education>

6. Growth mindset

<https://creditsforteachers.com/top-8-resources-on-the-growth-mindset-in-the-classroom/?srsltid=AfmBOoqcs09kt9nemXspfdgwBTbV6aRE-t1ofTmlx8g3KZoqDr8pdKC>

Review, Reflect, Resolve

Review

Why does beginning with a student's strengths provide an important foundation for learning?

Reflect

Do my classroom routines and instructional practices communicate that everyone belongs and everyone learns differently?

Resolve

What is one classroom practice I can change to provide more than one way for students to access information or demonstrate learning?



Dr. B. J. Wiemer is the Program Administrator for LASE Specialized Education in St. Louis, MO. She holds degrees in elementary and special education, family counseling, and educational studies in curriculum and instruction. Celebrating 50 years in special education, she has been an adjunct instructor in special and early childhood education at Missouri Baptist University and a national teacher trainer.

Quoted Scripture: ESV® and NIV



Shaping the Future is published monthly by Lutheran Education Association and distributed to members of LEA. All material included in **Shaping the Future** is the property of Lutheran Education Association and may not be reproduced without permission.

Copyright © 2026 Lutheran Education Association, 7400 Augusta Street, River Forest, IL 60305-1499

Website: www.lea.org **Email:** lea@lea.org

Executive Director: Thomas Wrege, Ed.D.
Executive Director Emeritus: Jonathan C. Laabs, Ed.D.
Editor Emeritus: Ed Grube
Director of Educational Resources: Denise Rice
Director of Member Services: Julie Klopke
Technology Project Director: Paul Piel
Design: Kathryn Brewer

To submit copy, letters to the editor or media for review, contact Paul Piel at pfpiel@gmail.com.

We look forward to hearing from you! Send your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions for future STF topics to lea@lea.org. LEA does not endorse articles cited in **Shaping the Future**. We provide links to connect members with information they might find useful.