

## Using Hopeful and Respectful Language When Talking about Students with Disabilities

### **Words are powerful and important tools in shaping ideas, perceptions and attitudes.**

Consider your choice of language when talking about students with disabilities with school staff, parents, other students, and the students who have disabilities themselves. In many instances it may be unnecessary to refer to disabilities and may be more helpful to describe what the student needs, in the kind of everyday language you would use for any student.

### **Demonstrate a positive attitude**

One of the barriers for individuals with disabilities is negative attitudes. Thoughtful choice of words when sharing information about students with disabilities can be instrumental in overcoming these kinds of negative attitudes and in shaping positive ones.

### **Be sensitive to the feelings of individuals with disabilities (and their families)**

Hopeful and respectful language around disabilities demonstrates a sensitivity and awareness of the feelings and comfort level of individuals and/or their families.

### **People first, then the disability**

Words such as “learning disabilities” and “disability” are adjectives, not nouns. Use terms such as “a child with a disability” rather than “a disabled child”. Remember: it is people first, then the disability.

### **Acknowledge the diversity of individuals with disabilities**

It is important to acknowledge that there is a wide range of variance in the characteristics, strengths, needs, and life circumstances of individuals with disabilities. Avoid language that encourages stereotypes such as “All children with disabilities ...” or “Disabled children are...” Avoid labels that put people into categories such as “the disabled” or “the handicapped.”

### **Be non-judgmental**

When talking about life with a disability, choose words that are non-judgmental, non-emotional and are accurate descriptions. Avoid words and images designed to evoke pity or guilt such as “afflicted with”, “stricken with”, “struggles with”, “suffers from”, “handicapped”, “burden”, “victim” or “tragedy of...”.

### **Use everyday language**

As much as possible, use everyday terms rather than medical terminology. For example: rather than “patient” use words like “individual”, “child”, “adult” or “students.” Rather than “disease” or “impairment” use words like “condition”, “traits” or “difficulties with...”

### **And remember, a student is a student.**

The answer to the question “How should I treat a person with a disability?” is simply, “Like a person.” People with disabilities are first and foremost people, and have a range of strengths, needs, interests and experiences, just like everyone else.