

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Intellectual Disabilities in Your Classroom: 9 Tips for Teachers

More than 445,000 students with intellectual disabilities receive special education and related services in our public schools. Perhaps you're one of their teachers. If you have a student with an intellectual disability in your classroom, you already know that he or she has special learning needs. But how do you address those learning needs in positive and effective ways that really help the student learn? This issue of NASET's Practical Teacher series was written by Lisa Küpper and Kori Hamilton. It will provide you 9 tips and connect you with a wealth of additional information.

About Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability is a term used when a person has certain limitations in cognitive functioning that affect attention, memory, and the ability to think abstractly and make generalizations from one setting to another. These limitations will cause a student to learn more slowly than others and to have difficulty with adaptive behaviors such as grooming, dressing, safety, school rules, understanding social rules, and seeing the consequences of their actions.

Down with the R Word

Intellectual disabilities have long been referred to as mental retardation. Not anymore! Rosa's Law, which Congress passed in 2010, amended IDEA and other federal laws to replace the term mental retardation with the term intellectual disabilities.

This, of course, changes neither the special learning needs of students with intellectual disabilities nor the crucial role that schools and teachers play in helping students succeed in school and prepare for adult life.

Practical Tips

So—how do you address the learning needs of your students with intellectual disabilities? Here are 9 suggestions that you can use right away in your classroom and multiple links to more information.

1 | Recognize that you can make an enormous difference in this student's life!

Learn more about intellectual disabilities in general and your student in particular. Create opportunities for success by emphasizing the strengths and interests of the student. Also learn where the student needs particular supports, and provide them (see #3 below).

2 | Be an active participant in the student's IEP team.

Each student in special education must have an individualized education program (IEP) that lists learning goals for the student, the services the school will provide to support that learning, and much more. The IEP is developed by the student's parents and school personnel—and, often, the student, too. As this student's teacher, you have a great deal to contribute to what's included in the IEP, including supports for you as the teacher.

3 | Provide accommodations and supports that help students with intellectual disabilities.

Given that intellectual disabilities affect learning, providing supports to students with ID in the classroom is a must. Accommodations are often made in five main areas:

- scheduling (e.g., giving the student extra time to complete an assignment or test);
- setting (e.g., having the student work in a small group or with a partner);
- materials (e.g., providing the student with teacher notes or taped lectures);
- instruction (e.g., breaking a lesson up into smaller parts, having the student work with a tutor); and
- student response (e.g., allowing the student to respond orally or on a computer).

4 | Be as concrete as possible.

Students with intellectual disabilities learn best when instruction involves concrete, observable information rather than the abstract. An effective teaching method is to demonstrate what you mean in addition to giving verbal directions. With new information shared verbally, also show a picture. And rather than just showing a picture, provide the student with hands-on materials and experiences and the opportunity to try things out.

5 | Go step by step.

Break longer, new tasks into small steps. Demonstrate the steps. Have the student do the steps, one at a time. Provide assistance, as necessary. Give the student multiple opportunities to practice each individual step by itself and all the steps together.

6 | Give immediate feedback.

As a teacher, you know the value of feedback. With students who have intellectual disabilities, that feedback should be immediate, not delayed. Immediately providing feedback helps the students make a connection between their answers, behaviors, or questions and the information you're presenting as the teacher.

7 | Help the student learn life skills.

By definition, intellectual disabilities affect the learning of adaptive behavior skills, which are the skills of daily living that underpin independence. Schools play an important part in helping students with ID learn these life skills, which include health and safety, personal hygiene, manners, getting along with others, basic math and reading, money management, and skills for the workplace.

8 | Address the social aspects of school.

Students with intellectual disabilities often have trouble with social skills, which can make it difficult for them to interact appropriately with their peers and become involved in the social activities going on at school. They are also often a target for bullying, which simply cannot be allowed. Teachers can play a positive role in supporting the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in classrooms and throughout the school.

9 | Communicate with your student's parents.

The parents of your student with intellectual disabilities are a rich source of information about your student's likes, dislikes, talents, challenges, and learning at home and in the community. You, in turn, are a rich source of information about how their son or daughter is doing at school. Regularly exchange information with parents and work with them (and other members of the IEP team) to create and implement an IEP tailored to meet the student's needs.

As the teacher of a student with intellectual disabilities, please know that you have the power to make an enormous difference in that student's learning today and his or her life in the future.