# Supporting Learning Differences and Disabilities

Recognizing unidentified learning needs and building inclusive, trust-based classrooms in carceral settings.

Many students who are incarcerated were never formally identified with a disability, or were misidentified earlier in life. What faculty see first is behavior, not a diagnosis. Curiosity matters more than assumption, and support works best when it is trust-based, strengths-focused, and respectful of privacy.

## KEY CONCEPTS

### 1 Disability shows up as behavior, not diagnosis

Learning disabilities, ADHD, autism spectrum traits, trauma-related impacts, and mental health needs rarely announce themselves. They surface as missed deadlines, inconsistent participation, or difficulty with multi-step tasks.

### 2 Identification barriers are systemic

Carceral systems make assessment, documentation, specialist access, and accommodation processes harder to coordinate, so many students arrive without any formal identification of their learning needs.

### 3 Disclosure requires trust

Students may be cautious about sharing a diagnosis or learning need. No one should have to disclose private information to receive support.

### 4 A strengths-based lens buffers trauma

Behaviors misread through a deficit lens look like disengagement. Hope, self-efficacy, and belonging are strengths that buffer trauma and support re-engagement in learning.

## WHAT YOU MAY SEE IN THE CLASSROOM

- Difficulty with attention or organization
- Struggles with reading or writing tasks
- Slow processing speed or memory gaps
- Missed deadlines, inconsistent participation
- Trouble with multi-step tasks
- Shutdown, irritability, or hypervigilance
- Perfectionism, avoidance, or fatigue
- Sensory or emotional regulation challenges

## STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE

### Start with relationship, not diagnosis

When a student appears disengaged, begin with informal conversation about what helps them learn best. Then adjust pacing, structure, and learning modality so the environment fits the student, rather than treating the student as the problem.

### Offer multiple ways to engage

Provide visual, auditory, and discussion-based options for engaging with material and demonstrating learning whenever possible, so no single format becomes a barrier.

### Use strength-based check-ins

Ask students what helps them learn, what they are proud of, and what support improves their focus and confidence. This surfaces needs without requiring disclosure.

### Normalize support for everyone

Provide clear structure, predictable routines, and flexible teaching practices for the whole class. Open each workshop with a community-building activity to ground students and foster a safe environment where everyone participates.

## QUICK CHECKLIST

- ☐ Open each session with a brief community-building activity
- ☐ Provide clear structure and predictable routines
- ☐ Offer at least two ways to demonstrate learning
- ☐ Ask students what helps them learn best
- ☐ Respond to missed deadlines with curiosity, not assumption
- ☐ Never require disclosure as a condition of support

## KEY TERMS

**Strengths-based lens** • Focusing on hope, self-efficacy, and belonging rather than deficits.

**Deficit lens** • Misreading behavior as personal failure rather than an unmet learning need.

**Accommodation** • An adjustment to instruction or environment that removes a learning barrier.

**Hypervigilance** • A heightened state of alertness, often trauma-related.