

Prepared for: Board Committee Meeting, June 2025

Prepared by: USEAP

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MEMORANDUM

To: Leah Voorhies, Deputy Superintendent of Student Achievement
From: Utah Special Education Advisory Panel (USEAP)
Subject: Tools to Improve Disability Awareness
Date: May 5, 2025

USEAP is tasked with recommending and commenting on USBE policies that improve the educational system for students with disabilities. In our role as an advisory panel, USEAP determined a range of priority topics for the 2024-25 year and narrowed one topic to focus on evaluating tools and data to educate stakeholders on the importance of disability awareness.

Disability awareness is critical because of the sheer numbers of individuals involved. We know that in the 2024-25 school year there are 88,462 K-12 students with an IEP, 13.25% of the total population of K-12 students. However, this number doesn't include students served under a 504 plan, those with disabilities not yet identified, or students with disabilities who are not eligible for special education services. As the USBE has acknowledged, data show that students with disabilities have better outcomes when they are included with their peers and USEAP appreciates the work done by USBE on that issue. As these efforts result in more interaction between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers, USEAP is concerned that all stakeholders have access to adequate disability awareness resources to navigate these interactions and promote best practices.

USEAP invited speakers from partner organizations with well-developed programs addressing disability awareness, compiled resources from the USBE as well as members' individual expertise and networks, and shared personal stories of successful (and troubling) experiences related to the topic.

USEAP's review revealed gaps in available resources geared toward educating elementary-aged students about disabilities and how to appropriately interact with disabled peers. USEAP also identified that while many resources and program options exist for secondary students and LEAs, the availability of such options varies greatly across regions and individual schools often relying on individual educator or parent champions.

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Based on our review, USEAP provides the following input and recommendations for your consideration.

- ***Recommendation #1: Develop a Disability Awareness Toolkit for Stakeholders***

USEAP recommends that the USBE direct staff to develop a disability awareness toolkit that could be used by a range of stakeholders such as administrators, educators, parents, and students. For example, the toolkit could both promote administrator and educator understanding of how different disabilities impact educational experiences and also be used by parents or certain student populations to facilitate greater understanding of how to develop positive peer relationships.

We envision that such a toolkit could start with a compilation of existing resources, emphasizing best practices supported by research and data. Ideally, the toolkit would include a variety of resources such as curricula, training available from partner organizations and example of support groups, peer clubs and sports organizations. We further recommend that the toolkit go beyond a listing of resources and include specific case studies and examples of successes.

We appreciate and recognize the great effort that has been put into providing helpful resources for educators, students, and families. We have sadly observed that many of these great tools have not yet made it to the awareness of intended stakeholders who could benefit from them.

We, therefore, strongly recommend that after the toolkit is developed, careful and thorough consideration be given as to how to share this toolkit and as to which outreach channels could be leveraged for maximum exposure.

- ***Recommendation #2: Augment Resources for Elementary-Age School Children***

USEAP recommends that USBE direct staff to do additional research and development for tools that are designed for the audience of elementary-aged school children addressing issues such as:

- Explaining different types of disabilities (e.g. visible versus invisible disabilities)
- How to promote shared experiences and increase understanding between students with disabilities and nondisabled students.
- Introduction to self-advocacy for students with disabilities, such as asking

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for help and accommodations.

If this project is supported, USEAP members would be pleased to provide additional input to USBE staff as it develops final products. During discussions on this topic, members of USEAP identified several examples of helpful tools and successful programs that could be used as case studies to augment any list of resources with personal stories showcasing the benefits of implementing some of these ideas.

Thank you for your time in considering our recommendations. USEAP appreciates all of your efforts on behalf of children with disabilities throughout the State of Utah.