

**Cultivating Anti-Ableist Practices in K12 School Systems**

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### **Cultivating Anti-Ableist Practices in K12 School Systems**

As schools across the globe work to create inclusive and equitable educational settings, the concept of ableism, or discrimination against individuals with disabilities, remains a systemic barrier to school-wide inclusion (Artiles et al., 2011; Lalvani & Bacon, 2018; DeMatthews, 2019). School personnel and practitioners have varied understandings and experiences with ableism, often formed through their own identities at the primary intersections of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Disability has historically been missing as a topic of conversation in society, and this absence is reflected in our schools. The limited interaction between individuals with and without disabilities, driven by societal and educational stigmas, has led to a gap in open dialogue and understanding about the diverse lived experiences of people with disabilities. While this scenario has opened up possibilities for potential interactions, it has not encouraged a deeper engagement with the concept of disability. As a result, it has perpetuated a lasting legacy of exclusion for people with disabilities in educational and professional settings (Lalvani & Ballieri, 2020). The historic and disproportionate exclusion of students with disabilities from general education, instructional, and social opportunities is even more pronounced for students of color compared to their white peers with disabilities in the United States, making this work not only necessary but urgent (DeMatthews, 2020).

A commitment to anti-ableist practices system-wide is essential in K-12 settings in order to identify and break down both overt and invisible (in)action that isolates and segregates disabled students socially and physically (specifically students of color), leads to academic underperformance, and limits access to equity and dignity (Beneke et. al, 2024).

In the United States, at least 15% of all K–12 students (and about 6.4 million public school students) are considered persons with disabilities because they receive services under the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Though policies like IDEA in the Global North promote and outline equity, classroom practices across the U.S. continue to expose entrenched patterns of segregation for students with disabilities, which are even more pronounced for students with perceived more “severe” disabilities and students at the intersection of race, gender, and class (Acevedo et al., 2024). The Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) frames a global concept of inclusion, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms that eliminate exclusionary practices, and advocates for educational systems that embrace and value diversity:

Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. This includes disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups (UNESCO, 1994).

Even when students have access to general education classrooms, they can experience exclusionary practices due to ableism. Yet, classrooms are the spaces where we can shape society’s introduction to and interactions with disability. When students are taught at a young age to view disability as a natural form of human variance, they bring these values to their communities and into adulthood (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). This tool offers considerations for school practitioners to analyze and address factors contributing to ableist practices.

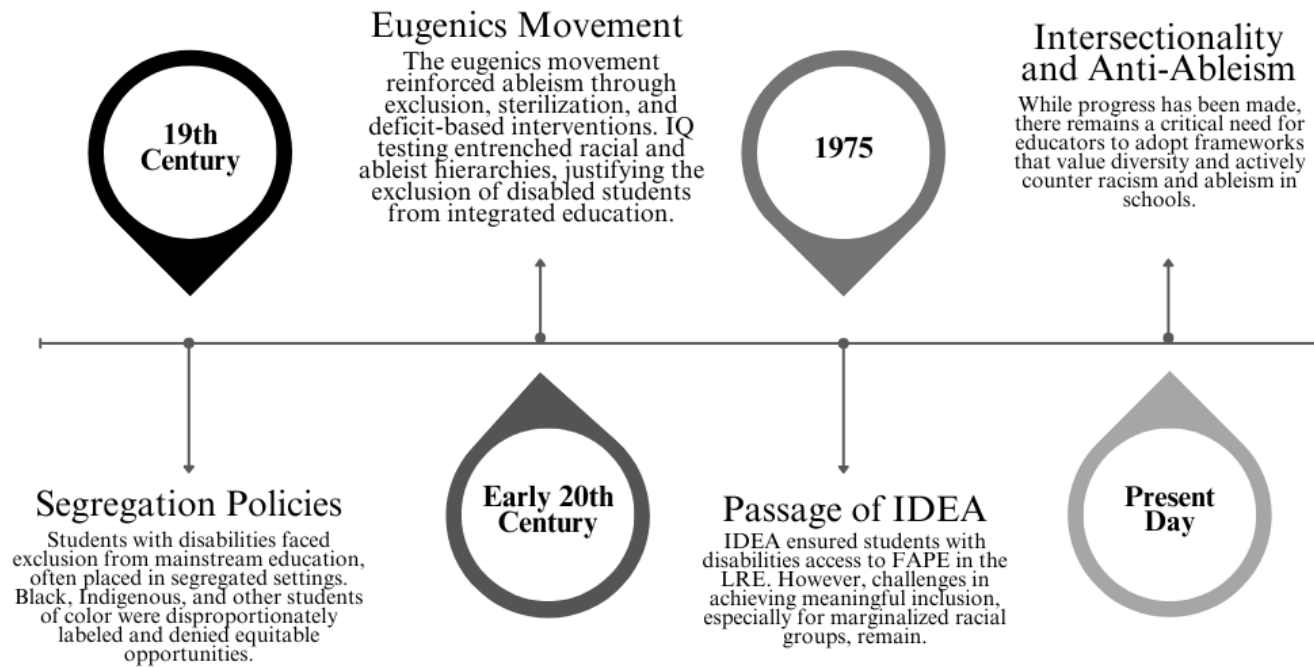
In the following sections, we begin with a brief timeline that situates our exploration of (anti-)ableism. We then provide a brief overview of what we know about ableism in schools. We then ground this work with a framework we created for working toward anti-ableist practices through the 3 Ps framework—*Ponder*, *Practice*, and *Promote*. Finally, we provide practical

recommendations and resources to support the implementation of anti-ableist practices and drive meaningful change across the K-12 school system.

### **Ableism: A Brief History**

Ableism in K-12 education stems from long-standing societal and institutional practices that position disability as a defect to be isolated and "corrected" (Lalvani & Baglieri, 2020). Early educational research models of disability focused on medicalized views, seeing individuals as "problems" to be fixed through intervention or segregation (Lalvani & Baglieri, 2020). The medical model approaches overlooked other aspects of disability tied to culture, social groups, and political contexts. Instead, seeing disability through a medical lens promoted deficit-based narratives that saw disability as incompatible with educational success (Lalvani & Baglieri, 2020). Figure 1 presents a timeline outlining how current ableist practices are deeply rooted in the long history of exclusion faced by students with disabilities.

**Figure 1:** *A brief history of ableism in the US: a timeline*



### **What Does Research Say About Ableism in Public Schools?**

Ableism in public schools is a pervasive issue, operating similarly to other forms of systemic oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism. According to Baglieri (2020), ableism stems from the belief that dominant, non-disabled groups are inherently superior to those with disabilities. This belief shapes educational practices, often leading to the marginalization of students with disabilities. Hehir (2005) describes these beliefs as believing “it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids” (p. 15). These beliefs shape school practices in ways that create barriers to learning and limiting beliefs about who is considered “good,” “bad,” “smart,” and “not smart,” which have long-lasting negative effects on the academic and life outcomes of students with disabilities.

When ableism goes uninterrogated, students with disabilities must conform to conventional norms of participating, communicating, and displaying their learning in very specific ways in order to succeed (Acevedo et. al, 2024). This constrains the path to belonging and academic success for students with disabilities, and consequently, they are often excluded from general education settings under the belief that they need to be segregated in order to develop these "necessary" skills. Excluding students further reinforces their marginalization and results in poor academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Lansey et. al, 2023). Connor (2014) argues that despite good intentions embedded within the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), students with disabilities continue to face poorer outcomes than students without disabilities.

Fortunately, there are many ways to disrupt ableism via anti-ableist practices in K12 schools. All school staff can make shifts in understanding disability as a part of identity instead

of a condition that needs to be cured (Baglieri, 2011; Waitoller and Thorius, 2020). For example, school leaders play key roles in shaping school policies and practices that benefit all learners (DeMatthews, 2020). Teachers alongside students can rethink common beliefs about disability and normalcy through open dialogue and posing questions that shine light on power dynamics, such as *why is special education separate* and *who benefits from this separation* (Lalvani & Baglieri, 2020).

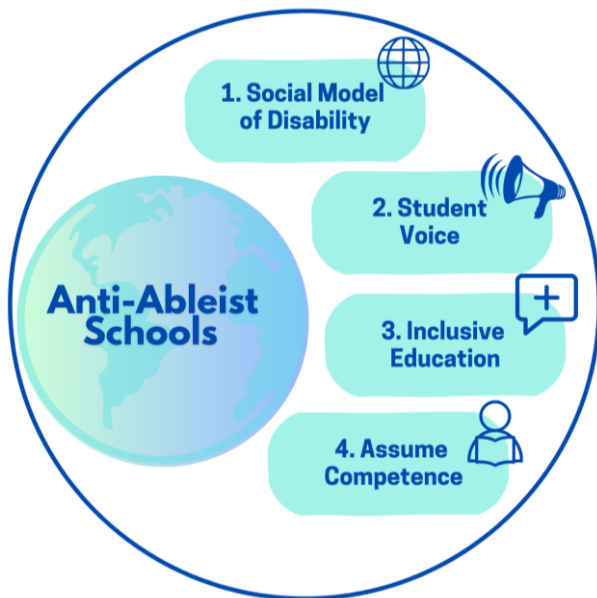
In sum, the literature highlights that ableism is entrenched in public schools through policies, instructional practices, and attitudes that uphold segregation and lower expectations for students with disabilities. However, there are multiple avenues for disrupting and changing school systems through adopting anti-ableist practices at multiple levels. Educators and school leaders can help foster more inclusive, equitable educational environments for all students.

#### **An Anti-Ableist Framework for Educators**

We invite you to get curious about disability. Oftentimes, teachers and school leaders are trained to think of disability in ways that may perpetuate ableism. For example, many of us were trained through what has been called a medical model approach to disability. This approach sees disability as something within individuals, normally framed as something undesirable and to be remediated or fixed. This way of thinking about disability focuses our attention on individual students. Another way to think about disability comes out of a field of study called Disability Studies in Education, or DSE.

A DSE approach to understanding disability draws on the social model of disability. This model recognizes that students may have impairments but society decides what is far enough away from typical that constitute a disability, and society's reaction to those differences is disabling. School staff that use the social model of disability seek to remove barriers to the

environment instead of seeing barriers in the student. Additionally, a DSE approach to disability recognizes the importance of student voice, inclusive education, and assuming competence (Connor et al., 2008). We unpack these tenets of DSE to provide a practical framework for school staff to create an anti-ablest school. We draw on the work of Connor et al. (2008) and represent their four tenets for educators, leaders, and related school personnel. Figure 1 provides a conceptual model for understanding how to create an anti-ablest school using the re-presented four tenets of disability studies in education (Connor et al., 2008).



**Figure 1:** The Four Tenets of Disability Studies in Education: A Model for Anti-Ableist Schools and the four re-presented tenets(Connor et. al, 2008).

***Tenet 1: Social Model of Disability***

The first tenet we use in our model to combat ableism in schools is the Social Model of Disability as a way to understand disability. The social model approach argues that it is essential

to remove all obstacles in society, especially in educational contexts, that may be barriers to students with disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011). Also, as teachers and principals, to promote anti-ableism practices, DSE shifts our attention to educational environments rather than focusing exclusively on fixing problems within individual students. DSE expands our focus to address the systemic barriers to inclusion and to break down ableism within educational institutions.

***Tenet 2: Student Voice***

Creating anti-ableist schools requires the involvement of students with disabilities in the development of educational policies and decisions that affect their lives (Stansberry Brusnahan et al., 2022). Their voices should be agentic in schools. This involvement can manifest through their active participation in decision-making processes, such as in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Additionally, educators and administrators can prioritize the experiences of these students to improve and refine school policies and teaching strategies.

***Tenet 3: Inclusive education***

Inclusive education is at the heart of anti-ableist schools, highlighting the significance of meaningful participation in the general classroom setting for all students, especially those needing extensive support (Connor et al., 2008). Schools that embrace an anti-ableism framework, guided by a DSE perspective, focus on reshaping classroom structures to foster belonging for every student and to improve the overall success of all learners.

***Tenet 4: Assume competence***

Assuming competence requires educators to view all students as knowledge holders and capable (Connor et al., 2008). All students including students with disabilities have thoughts, opinions, and desires that they can communicate in the general education setting if the

curriculum is presented in a way they can access. Instead of thinking a student cannot do something, assuming competence calls for teachers to believe that students are capable.

### **Anti-Ableist Schools: Putting the Framework into Action**

Creating anti-ableist schools requires deliberate action informed by reflection, practice, and advocacy. Rethinking disability with the four-part framework (see Figure 1), can support educators and administrators in establishing more inclusive environments where all students thrive. Through the action lens of the 3 Ps—**Ponder, Practice, and Promote**—educators and administrators can challenge ingrained ableist beliefs and implement systemic changes to support every learner.

**Ponder** *deep reflection is the foundation of anti-ableist practices. To dismantle ableism, educators must critically examine their own beliefs, biases, and school structures. Consider these guiding questions to spark meaningful discussions and encourage introspection:*

- How do our current policies and practices reinforce deficit assumptions about disability in our school?
- In what ways might we unintentionally communicate that some students are less capable than others?
- How do we define "success" for students, and how might those definitions exclude students with disabilities?
- Are we creating opportunities for students with disabilities to lead and advocate within our school community?
- How do we ensure that our classroom environments and curricula affirm the identities and strengths of all students?

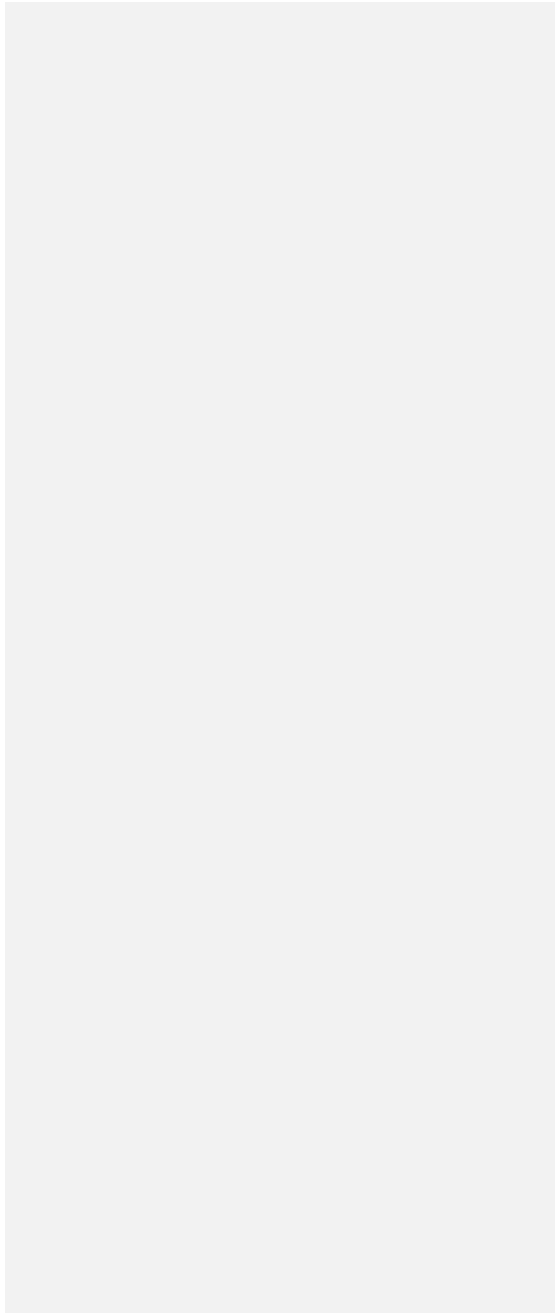
By pondering these questions, educators can begin to uncover systemic barriers and explore possibilities for transformation. Once these critical reflections are underway, the focus shifts to putting inclusive and anti-ableist practices into action.

**Practice** *emphasizes implementing strategies that align with anti-ableist principles. These strategies are grounded in the tenets outlined earlier—embracing the social model of disability, amplifying student voices, fostering inclusive education, and assuming competence.*

Table 1 provides an overview of actionable practices tailored to different roles within the school system, illustrating how educators, administrators, and support staff can use the tenets from the anti-exclusionary framework in their day-to-day work. We draw on practices that many schools may already use but provide hyperlinks to provide school staff with more information. By reflecting deeply and taking deliberate action, educators lay the groundwork for anti-ableist schools.

**Table 2:**

*Role-specific practices for advancing anti-ableist education*



<b>Tenet 1: Social Model of Disability</b>				
The social model of disability reminds us that we all create disabling environments and can employ specific practices to remove barriers				
<b>Special education teachers</b>	<b>General education teachers</b>	<b>Related service providers</b>	<b>Paraprofessionals</b>	<b>Administrators</b>
Conduct professional development sessions at the school to address misconceptions about students with disabilities and how educators can remove barriers to learning environments in order to build inclusive practices across the school.	Use flexible classroom arrangements such as standing desks or wobble seats and <u>UDL principles</u> such as multiple engagement methods to support all learners.	Write assessments, evaluations, IEP goals, and therapy targets using language centered around student's strengths and potential (e.g., what the student CAN do)	Collaborate with teachers by sharing observations on students' strengths.	Work with a leadership team to review policies and practices that may exclude or disadvantage students with disabilities
<b>Tenet 2: Student Voice</b>				
Student voice is not just listening to students but giving them decision-making power that impacts their lives at school				
<b>Special education teachers</b>	<b>General education teachers</b>	<b>Related service providers</b>	<b>Paraprofessionals</b>	<b>Administrators</b>
Create opportunities for students to lead discussions during IEP or team meetings, fostering their self-expression.	Allow students to choose how they will demonstrate their knowledge such as through writing a story, drawing a comic, or creating a podcast.	Actively listen to students' communication attempts, regardless of the way they express themselves. Provide age-appropriate, affirming responses that validate their	Ensure that if students have communication tools, such as Augmentative-Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, picture exchange	Ensure representation from students with disabilities in leadership meetings

		contributions to the interaction/conversation.	systems, or communication boards, these are readily available and consistently integrated into daily routines and activities to support both expressive and receptive communication.	
<b>Tenet 3: Inclusive Education</b>				
Inclusive education is grounded in the idea that all students, regardless of disability, are valued members of the school community and that the general education curriculum is the curriculum for <i>all</i> students.				
<b>Special education teachers</b>	<b>General education teachers</b>	<b>Related service providers</b>	<b>Paraprofessionals</b>	<b>Administrators</b>
Partner with general educators to co-teach academic classes.	Create visual schedules and provide alternative formats (e.g., digital, large print) to ensure all students can access the material.	Integrate goals and instruction into general education environments rather than isolated therapy or clinical settings.	Facilitate introductions and teamwork during activities to encourage peer connections.	Provide professional development on culturally responsive and inclusive practices to ensure educators are equipped to meet diverse needs.
<b>Tenet 4: Assumed competence</b>				
When we assume competence, we view all students as knowledge holders and capable learners				
<b>Special education teachers</b>	<b>General education teachers</b>	<b>Related service providers</b>	<b>Paraprofessionals</b>	<b>Administrators</b>

<p>Make the <a href="#">least dangerous assumption</a>, meaning make decisions that will have the least dangerous effect on student's lives when making instructional decisions</p>	<p>Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding in ways that highlight their strengths. For example, providing students the opportunity to create visual presentations, engage in hands-on projects, or verbalize their thoughts and ideas to demonstrate understanding—particularly if they struggle with written expression</p>	<p>Encourage active participation by respecting choices and preferences in the decision-making process by assuming students have meaningful thoughts, ideas, and contributions, even if they are communicated in unconventional ways. These modes may include vocalizations, body movements, or other forms of AAC.</p>	<p>Support independence by providing the least amount of prompting necessary to complete a task</p>	<p>Model inclusive language and actions reflecting high expectations for all students</p>
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With reflective practices in place and actionable strategies being implemented, the final phase, **Promote**, ensures that these efforts extend beyond individual classrooms to influence the broader school culture. This phase involves advocating for systemic change, fostering collaborative efforts, and celebrating the success of inclusive practices. It calls on educators to champion anti-ableism by sharing their experiences, mentoring peers, and influencing policies that support all learners. By promoting these values, schools can become beacons of equity and inclusion, paving the way for sustainable transformation.

Together, the 3 Ps—**Ponder, Practice, and Promote**—offer a roadmap for building anti-ableist schools where every student is valued and empowered to succeed.

### **Conclusion**

We hope this tool will be used to implement anti-ableist practices grounded in the social model of disability, student voice, inclusive education, and assuming competence. These principles can enable all students to meaningfully engage in their school environment alongside peers with and without disabilities. In addressing anti-ableist practices, we must also address our own positionality and recognize ways in which we may have contributed to ableism. As former special educators and practitioners who have engaged extensively with K-12 school systems, we are acutely aware of the necessity and challenges of implementing anti-ableist practices.

Our collective understanding is informed by diverse personal experiences in the field and shaped by our positionality as four scholars—two from the Global North and two from the Global South. These geographic and cultural perspectives have profoundly impacted our educational experiences, research approaches, and commitment to equity. This diversity encourages us to continually reflect on and challenge the biases and assumptions that inform our work. We

identify as doctoral scholars committed to transforming educational systems and practices. We recognize that ableism is systemic and believe that every person has the power to either perpetuate or challenge its existence. It is in the capacity of every educator, leader, and school staff member to embrace anti-ableist practices, creating inclusive environments where all students thrive and reach their full potential.

## Appendix

To provide context for our readers, we present several basic and fundamental concepts that will assist in understanding and contextualizing the topic presented in this brief (see Table 1):

### Table 1:

#### *List of Key terms*

**Commented [1]:** moved to appendix based on Dr. G comment that key terms can be in the appendix

<b>Terms</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Ableism</b>	<p>“Ableism is the belief that individuals with disabilities must be “fixed” to belong in society” (Stansberry Brusnahan et al., 2023, p. 303).</p> <p>Ableism includes the practices, beliefs, and systems that disadvantage individuals with disabilities. It frequently reflects the view that being non-disabled is a more favorable state than living with a disability (Gonzalez et al., 2017).</p>
<b>Anti-Ableist pedagogies</b>	<p>Anti-ableist pedagogies refer to teaching methods that aim to promote the inclusion and belonging of disabled students and to challenge the exclusion of disabled students (Nieminen &amp; Pesonen, 2022).</p>
<b>Inclusion</b>	<p>All students (with and without disabilities) are able to participate fully in life and work in shared classrooms and schools with appropriate support for their needs. (Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education (CSIE), 2002).</p>
<b>Inclusive Education</b>	<p>Inclusive education is concerned with “the transformation of school cultures to (1) increase <i>access</i> (or presence) of all students (not only marginalized or vulnerable groups), (2) enhance</p>

	school personnel's and students' <i>acceptance</i> of all students, (3) maximize student <i>participation</i> in various domains of activity, and (4) increase the <i>achievement</i> of all students (Artiles et al. 2006, p.3)."
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