

Incorporating Disability Into the Classroom

It's not only important to make sure that your classroom is accessible to disabled students, but also that all students see disability represented in the curriculum. This document provides suggestions for incorporating disability into computer science and design thinking, visual and performing arts, English language arts, and social studies classrooms, as well as general resources. Corresponding New Jersey Learning Standards are listed for each activity, but they can be adapted for a variety of ages. All of these activities also help fulfill N.J. Stat. § 18A:35-4.35, which requires instruction on the political, economic, and social contributions of disabled people to the United States.

Computer Science and Design Thinking

- K-2: Share photos of historical wheelchairs from the exhibit [The Wheelchair in Canada: Accessibility, Technology, and Society](#). Ask students to identify how each successive chair helped meet users' needs. (8.2.2.ITH.1: Identify products that are designed to meet human wants or needs.)
- 3-5: Using the guidelines from [Mapping Access](#), create a classroom building map focused on restrooms, doors, and elevators. Start with the ADA standards and one or two others that encourage a critical view of accessibility beyond physical disability, such as all-gender restrooms. Debrief with suggested discussion questions. (8.1.5.DA.1: Collect, organize, and display data in order to highlight relationships or support a claim.)
- 6-8: In small groups, read about an example of disability technology like [sign language gloves](#), [climbing wheelchairs](#), and [Dyslexie](#) and discuss their reactions to the product. Then, as a class, review the article "[Disabled people don't need so many fancy new gadgets. We just need more ramps.](#)" Ask each group to apply at least one of those critiques to the product they were assigned. (8.2.8.EC.1: Explain ethical issues that may arise from the use of new technologies.)
- 9-12: Ask students to review [#CripTheVote Frequently Asked Questions](#) and select a Twitter/X post using the #CripTheVote hashtag that interests them. Discuss the issue that the post addresses, why it is important to disabled people, and how it could impact their decisions. Additionally, discuss the format of #CripTheVote: why hold these conversations through Twitter/X? What are the benefits and disadvantages of this platform, particularly for disabled communities? [#CripTheVote](#) (8.1.12.IC.1: Evaluate the ways computing impacts personal, ethical, social, economic, and cultural practices.)

Visual and Performing Arts

- K-2: Watch Infinity Dance Theater's performance of [OceanChild](#), and discuss using [active dance response questions](#). (1.1.2.Cn10b: Use an inquiry-based set of questions to examine global issues, including climate change, as a topic for dance.)
- 3-5: Listen to the song [Choices and Rights](#) by Johnny Crescendo and provide the [printed lyrics](#). Analyze the song using [TeachRock's Listening Analysis Guide](#). (1.3A.5.Re7a: Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, purposes, or contexts.)

- 6-8: Examine Ngozi Ugochukwu’s photos in [The Stairs Project](#) without context and note the messages, ideas, and mood communicated. Read about the context of the project as a whole and Ugochukwu’s intention for each image, then discuss if the techniques she employed were effective. (1.5.8.Re8a: Interpret art by analyzing how the interaction of subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, use of media, art making approaches, and relevant contextual information contributes to understanding messages or ideas and mood conveyed.)
- 9-12: Break students into groups and assign each group an element of theater technical design (costumes, lighting, sets, etc.). Define the element, then watch Sins Invalid’s performance of [Listen, Speak](#) while taking notes on that element. Summarize notes and share with the class, then discuss how all the elements combine to tell a story or evoke an emotional response from the audience. (1.4.12prof.Cr3c: Explore technical design choices that support the story and emotional impact of a scripted or devised theatre work.)

English Language Arts

- Read [What Happened to You?](#) and/or [You’re So Amazing](#). Prompt students to summarize the message of the book(s) and how they can apply those messages in conversations with disabled people. (RL.CI.2.2. Recount a text in oral and written form and determine central message in literary texts.)
- Read [Wink](#) by Rob Harrell. Split students into groups and assign each group a different comic from the book. Ask students to identify the tone and meaning of their comic, and explain why they think the author included it in the book. Does it have a similar tone and meaning to the main plot? (RL.MF.5.6. Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text.)
- Read [Aniana del Mar Jumps In](#) by Jasminne Mendez and “When You Are Waiting to Be Healed” by June Eric-Udorie from [Disability Visibility](#). Using a Venn diagram, compare and contrast elements of these two texts (genres, themes, etc.). Then develop notes into a short written response that compares and contrasts the texts, quoting from both to support points. (RI.IT.8.3. Analyze how particular elements of a text interact across multiple text types, including across literary and informational texts.)
- Read [The Degenerates](#) by J. Albert Mann. Summarize the text and how disability and race are portrayed as intersecting identities. Discuss the author’s note, which talks about the book’s historical background, and relevance today, and locate examples of contemporary accounts, either literary or informational, that discuss the intersections between race and disability. (RL.CI.11–12.2. Determine two or more themes of a literary text and analyze how they are developed and refined over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account or analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.)

Social Studies

- K-2: Review images of the Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy National Parks sites and ask students to identify what messages the sites communicate about the United States. Then share the information about [Presidents and Disability](#), and invite

students to determine whether this changes their opinion about the sites' messages. (6.1.2.CivicsDP.3 Explain how historical symbols, monuments and holidays reflect the shared values, principles, and beliefs of the American identity.)

- 3-5: Create a timeline of disability activism, color-coded based on factors such as types of disability activism (physically disabled people's activism, disabled veterans' activism, etc.) and techniques for disability activism (government lobbying, sit-ins, etc.). Suggested texts to use for this activity: [A Disability History of the United States](#) or [A Brief History of Disabled People's Self-Organization](#). (6.1.5.CivicsDP.2: Compare and contrast responses of individuals and groups, past and present, to violations of fundamental rights (e.g., fairness, civil rights, human rights).)
- 6-8: Assign each student a primary source from the Antebellum period about treatment of disabled people and direct them to identify the main argument of the source. Suggested sources: [First Annual Report Of The Trustees Of State Lunatic Hospital](#), "[A Chapter on Idiots](#)" from Harper's Magazine, "[Education Of The Blind](#)" by Samuel Gridley Howe, "[The Moral Treatment of the Insane](#)" by Amariah Brigham, "[Astounding Disclosures! Three Years In A Mad House](#)" by Isaac H. Hunt, [The Opal](#) by patients of the Utica State Lunatic Asylum, [Dorothea Dix papers](#). Pair up students and ask them to write a dialogue between the authors of their different sources in which each asserts their perspective and identifies their similarities and differences. (6.1.8.CivicsHR.4.a: Examine sources from a variety of perspectives to describe efforts to reform education, women's rights, slavery, and other issues during the Antebellum period.)
- 9-12: Watch the documentary [Crip Camp](#) and facilitate a discussion using Crip Camp's [Curriculum](#) on one of the documentary's themes: media literacy, power and disability justice, power and civil rights, strategic use of privilege and power, and ableism, language, and power. (6.1.12.HistoryCC.13.d: Analyze the successes and failures of women's rights organizations, the American Indian Movement, and La Raza in their pursuit of civil rights and equal opportunities.)

General Resources

There are many disabled figures who you may already teach about. Consider addressing the disabilities of well-known figures or disabled members of social movements that you teach about, such as socialist activist Helen Keller, abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, suffragist Rosa May Billingham, civil rights and women's rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, Black Panther Brad Lomax, physicist Stephen Hawking, inventor Thomas Edison, geologist John Wesley Powell, writers Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde, composer Ludwig van Beethoven, painter Frida Kahlo, photographer Dorothea Lange, mathematician John Nash, and plaintiff in *Buck v. Bell*, Carrie Buck.

[Building an Anti-Ableist Pedagogy](#) by Suzanne Stolz

[Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms](#) by Susan Baglieri and Priya Lalvani

[How to Talk to Kids About Disabilities](#) by Caroline Bologna
[Disability in Kidlit Honor Roll](#)