



# **A Blueprint for Community Inclusion Strategies**

**for Youth with Developmental Disabilities  
in Washington, DC**

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Prepared for the Washington, DC  
Developmental Disabilities Council (DDC)

Prepared by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

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Adler and Goggin (2005) describe civic engagement as a mix of community involvement, political involvement, community service, and volunteering. Strong civic engagement in communities is vital to the economic health and quality of life within a democracy. Community civic engagement and partnerships can identify local challenges and create solutions that represent that community's values and interests.

Historically, barriers to civic engagement have prevented people with disabilities, especially people of color with disabilities, from engaging in the public conversation about policy, rights, and access, which leads to decreased influence on policy decisions that directly impact their lives (Ho, Eaton, and Mitra, 2020). These barriers may be legal, physical, attitudinal, and informational in nature that prevent full participation in politics and community service.



# About the Blueprint

In the fall of 2020, IEL set out to learn more about the civic engagement interests and barriers to engagement and policy influence among DC residents who reflect the community. IEL reached out to a cross-section of residents who represented culturally and linguistically diverse young people with disabilities and their families. Through group listening sessions and one-on-one conversations, IEL gathered the perspectives, priorities, areas of interest, and observations from representatives of the highest poverty wards of DC (Wards 5-8), to ensure that the voices of those from marginalized communities were reflected in this document in order to create meaningful recommendations.

*A Blueprint for Community Inclusion Strategies for Youth with Developmental Disabilities in Washington, DC* provides a summary of comments and common themes among DC youth with disabilities and their families. This includes their top priorities, solutions to pressing issues, and ways that allies (individuals and organizations) can better support them. These priorities are foundations for a framework for policy and action steps that leaders, public institutions, and others can take to better engage and serve youth with disabilities in the District.

This Blueprint is also a call to action—for policymakers, policy influencers, and policy implementers to prioritize changes that will support all District residents, including those with disabilities. This must include expanding the conversation about policy and practice to include disability advocates and the general public.

## TOP PRIORITIES FOR YOUTH WITH I/DD IN THE DISTRICT

1. Learning about community issues using more artistic, accessible, and non-traditional means of expression
2. In-home support systems
3. Meaningful inclusion
4. Resource networks
5. Support for youth employment opportunities

# Civic Engagement Priorities and Barriers for DC Youth with Disabilities

Youth civic engagement is defined as “working to make a difference in the civic life of one’s community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Youth.gov, n.d.).

Beginning with this broad concept, we asked youth and their families about their priorities for civic engagement.

## Engagement Priority Areas and Barriers

Overwhelmingly, youth were enthusiastic around learning about community issues using more artistic, accessible, and non-traditional means of expression. Many youth and families described how students with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) often were left out of traditional education



on classroom civic topics such as policy, politics, and voting. One participant noted, “I am not excited about politics, I am not taught how to be a part of it. I learn through dance, freedom, using my sketchbook to tell a story.” Others pointed to creative outlets such as art, dance, and free expression as ways to engage in civic activities. For example, Rikki, enjoyed communicating “through her artwork and dance to illustrate joys, tell her story, and as an outlet for expression.” Another participant noted that verbal conversation and video discussions became “an overstimulation barrier” that limited the young person’s ability to participate in verbal

communications about topics of discussion. Rather, youth who prefer to use various art forms to engage and participate in civic engagement require accommodations and support.

“Engaging our youth in meaningful and safe opportunities [that] will fit their interests outside the school settings, with support and inclusion, are very important. Without parents’ presence, my son can’t be included.” Family members noted that in-home support systems are vital to ensuring that youth are heard and that they received necessary accommodations for full participation in civic activities. One parent pointed to “environmental factors and sensory sensitivities” (for example, potential wireless connectivity issues, or inability to sit still for long periods of time) that must be considered when engaging youth with disabilities. Parents and families are key to ensuring that youth have access and opportunity for civic engagement and community activities.

“Our youth need not only to be included, but meaningfully included. Sometimes this means involving more of the family or parent in the process, to make sure there is adequate support.” To ensure meaningful community engagement, activities such as volunteering, campaigns, and activities should engage and inform parents and youth with disabilities to clarify the expectations of their participation. This “helps our youth build trust in their ability to be included in exactly how they need and could build more trust in community leaders to provide those inclusive spaces”. Another parent added that “more training on accommodation strategies is always needed” for this consistent inclusion and role clarity to occur.

**“Nothing About Us Without Us”** points to the difference between joint decision-making and passive consultation. See **Texas Network of Youth Services’ Ladder of Youth Engagement** for a framework that can be used by parents and others to ensure authentic engagement and inclusion.

Parents and families echoed similar challenges that included resource network scarcities, i.e., a lack of ways to find more civic engagement options, programs, or groups. They also pointed out that many medical providers in the DC area are potential resource partners to help close this network gap. For example, parents noted that the referrals for inclusive community programs often come from healthcare systems or individual providers in the area. As a result, parents were most often referred to programs that offer accommodations in segregated settings or programs that only serve youth with disabilities. The result is that both youth with and without disabilities lack the opportunity to engage together in after-school programs and those programs fail to achieve full integration.

Lastly, family members identified the need for increased supports for youth in employment opportunities. As one parent noted, “creating a path to employment is key, so you can see where you start and need to end up from community opportunities.” This pathway can come in the form of mentoring. “Providing mentoring connection to civic engagement work is important, so that youth can see that these skill gains don’t have to be so isolated and can develop through relationships.”



# Policy Recommendations

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The listening sessions involving youth with disabilities and their families pointed to specific barriers to civic engagement in DC and relevant priorities to address. In consideration of those barriers and priorities, IEL recommends the following policy ideas to supporter greater civic engagement of DC youth.

**Recommendation 1.** Ensure all civic engagement programming is fully accessible to all youth, including youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD), whether it takes place in school buildings or in other public spaces. This may include an audit of public facilities (physical access), programs offered by the city (programmatic access), and outreach to youth and families across all DC Wards (communication access). Related to physical access, proactively identify and allocate spaces in these buildings for stimulation support to enable people with I/DD to relax and regulate stimulation.

**Recommendation 2.** Ensure staffing that provides safe and meaningful inclusion of I/DD students in after-school programs related to civic education. Meaningful inclusion requires going beyond compliance to ensure a sufficient ratio of staff to student support and a requirement that staff are credentialed. Provide robust training on disability awareness and inclusion for all staff to support I/DD students both to ensure safety and accommodations and to maximize students' experiences in programming.

**Recommendation 3.** Start civic education with preschool-age students and require an interdisciplinary approach that integrates civics into the arts and core subjects. Expand funding for inclusive models of enrichment programming like Sesame Street™ during and beyond the school day to supplement children's formal civic education experience in school. Apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to all programming and curriculum in school and after school.

**Recommendation 4.** Support parents and families of young people, including those with I/DD, so they can support their children in civic engagement activities. This can include civic education for parents and families, mental health care, and other supports as identified by the parents/families. Reserve a percentage of funding dedicated to youth civic engagement or youth programming more broadly to meaningful support and engage the families of



youth with disabilities. Identify and leverage existing eligible sources of federal, state, local and private funding for parent and family support and engagement in order to better support their children and youth with disabilities.

## LEARNING RESOURCE MODELS

- **CAST's UDL Guidelines** provide a model for ALL learners, and the organization also provides **customized solutions**.
- The **Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities** shares **resource documents** specific to UDL for online learning for students with disabilities.
- **Sesame Street** offers games, videos, and art to support inclusive strategies in teaching.



# Call to Action

In addition to policy recommendations, we propose a Call to Action for DC residents, public entities, and service providers to ensure that youth with disabilities are fully connected through all civic engagement activities across the city.

## Parents and Caregivers of Children and Youth with Disabilities

Reach out to school leaders and after-school providers to share your challenges with inclusion of children and youth with disabilities. Offer to collaborate on finding solutions; share your expertise and wisdom to problem solve together. Encourage children and youth with disabilities to self-advocate, and model advocacy for them through your engagement with schools, service providers, and the general public.

For more on self advocacy check out the [411 on Disability Disclosure](#).



## **DC Developmental Disabilities Council**

Continue to lead advocacy for residents of DC through a city-wide approach to inclusion.

- Create opportunities for learning and the advancement of disability inclusion through training and guidance to DC agencies. Create a guide to inclusion in plain language for DC agencies and residents to use in communicating about and advocating for disability inclusion.
- Promote civic engagement opportunities to everyone who is eligible, including youth with I/DD and their parents and families. Ensure programs and communication are fully accessible, including different languages and Braille, and promote opportunities through a broad dissemination effort (e.g., flyers, emails, social media, and public service announcements).

## **DC Public Schools (DCPS) and DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB)**

- Conduct annual town hall conversations and/or focus groups with children, youth, and adults/families with disabilities to gain insights into strengths, challenges, and solutions for inclusive programming and services.
- Create Professional Development programming (training of trainers) for all schools and staff to raise awareness of disability inclusion and practices to engage children, youth, and adults/families with disabilities. Clarify that special education is specific learning supports, while disability inclusion reflects the needs of all students and is a responsibility shared by all school staff and administrators.
- Review curricula from pre-K through 12 to reflect civic engagement activities and positive disability images; remove negative disability images and language that promotes stigma and exclusion of disability; add disability history to the school curricula.
- Review all after-school (out-of-school time) programming with a disability inclusion lens. Ensure that activities are designed, implemented, and communicated with youth and families with disabilities in mind.

## DC Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)

Conduct training for vocational rehabilitation staff and community rehabilitation providers on youth and family engagement strategies. Include training for staff, vendors, and contractors to support youth and families with an emphasis on employers and other workforce providers as partners. Expand access to work-based learning experiences for youth and young adults with disabilities throughout all wards of the city.

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“In my current PhD internship at RSA, I’d like to provide youth and families with more community referrals for pre-ETS [pre-employment and training services] and activities within civic engagement, and I’ve never been able to find anything for them. What do you do when you want to help youth find these opportunities that might lead to employable skills in DC?” – **Family Member**

## DC Department of General Services, Facilities Management Division

Conduct a thorough review of public spaces to rate their accessibility for youth and adults with disabilities. Prioritize accessible spaces through new work orders and revised policies for new construction in public spaces.

## DC Office of Unified Communications

Create a communications campaign on civic engagement. Ensure that youth and adults with I/DD and families are included as advisors on the content and dissemination strategies.

More on [Family Engagement Strategies](#) here.

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“Engaging our youth in meaningful and safe opportunities that will fit their interests outside the school settings, with support and inclusion, are very important. Without parents’ presence, my son can’t be included.” – **Parent**

## **DC Mayor's Office**

Establish an interagency committee chaired by the DC Developmental Disabilities Council (Mayoral cabinet level position) with required representation across city offices to create a city-wide plan to ensure disability inclusion in all areas of government and public interest. Set a city-wide goal of disability inclusion in all aspects of civic life.

## **All DC Residents**

Continue to use your voice to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities across the city and seek opportunities to change outcomes for people with disabilities in the District and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

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Every person in the District has a role to play in ensuring full access and participation of youth with disabilities. The responsibility does not fall solely on youth with disabilities and their families. Access to opportunities is a right and access to civic engagement is a right of all youth with and without disabilities.

We are indebted to the youth and families who have informed this Blueprint and who have worked with us over the years to inform us about the needs of youth with disabilities in Washington, DC. We appreciate this opportunity to share ideas from the community to create a city-wide culture of inclusion for all residents.

## **Appendix A. About Washington, DC Residents**

Washington, DC is comprised of a diverse population of citizens and residents that reflect the increasing diversity of the country. In DC, 45.5% of residents are Black or African American, 42.5% are White, 11.3% are Hispanic or Latino, 4.1% are Asian, 0.3% are American Indian and Alaska Native, and 7.7% represent other or two or more races (DC State Data Center, 2019). In addition, 12.1% of DC residents are foreign born, 16.1% speak a language other than English at home, 8% of those under age 65 years have a disability. Despite a per capita income of \$59,808, 13.5% of DC residents live in poverty (ibid).

Youth and young adults with disabilities ages 14-24 comprise 6.5% of the population in Washington, DC (Cheng & Shaewitz, 2020). Eighty-three percent of those youth complete high school, compared to 91% of their peers without disabilities (ibid). They are less likely to enroll in college (39.7% compared to 55.3%), less likely to complete a 4-year degree (15.6% compared to 23.2%), less likely to be employed (30.2% compared to 38.7%), and they are more likely to be disconnected from both school and work (20.3% compared to 6%) (ibid).

## **Appendix B. About Our Approach**

IEL conducted a series of individual and group listening sessions with I/DD youth in 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these sessions were held virtually. In these sessions, IEL staff gathered input from youth and young adults with I/DD and their families, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, on the civic engagement process to identify barriers they faced. IEL listened to youth and family members through casual, engaging discussions to identify the strengths that youth brought to civic engagement and the benefits they recognized in greater participation in political and community life,

In the virtual listening sessions, youth with disabilities spoke to IEL in several group and one-on-one sessions spanning the course of several months. As session scheduling began, the barriers to participating in a focus group format for many local I/DD youth were compounded by environmental limitations, logistics support, and virtual scheduling overlap with family life during a pandemic. Many youth with I/DD expressed the need for additional supports in order to participate in the virtual sessions, which took place at times between their online classes, in-home therapies, and other usual routines. Most of the youth asked to be supported by a family member or staff during the sessions, during which youth participants' stories, priorities, and individual passions came to light. In group discussions youth often echoed similar barriers to full communication and inclusion and recommended significant changes to remove those barriers.

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