

**Wilmette District 39:
Community Review Committee**

**A Culture of Connectedness:
An Empathic and Inclusive Community for Neurodivergent Students**

School Year 2022 - 2023

Report Category: Supportive Community and Student Achievement and Growth

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I. Executive Summary

A. Background

The purpose of the Wilmette Public School District 39 (D39) Community Review Committee (CRC) is to “advise the Board on specific strategies that help fulfill District 39’s (D39) mission.” (Text retrieved April 5, 2022 from [Community Review Committee - Wilmette Public Schools District 39 - \(wilmette39.org\)](https://www.wilmette39.org/community-review-committee)). District 39’s mission states the following: “A Wilmette District 39 education engages, empowers, and inspires students to lead academically successful, socially responsible, compassionate, and purposeful lives.” (Text retrieved April 5, 2022 from [Mission Statement - Wilmette Public Schools District 39 \(wilmette39.org\)](https://www.wilmette39.org/mission-statement)).

During the June 2022 CRC meeting, the incoming CRC Executive Committee, composed of CRC President, Amy Wechsler Ross (Licensed Clinical Social Worker), CRC Vice President, Arielle Ruby (Licensed School Psychologist), and CRC Secretary, Katie Magrino Voorhees (Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor), opened the conversation to possible topics for the 2022-2023 school year and potential ideas were discussed. Through this discussion, the CRC identified a general need for increased support for neurodivergent students. Over the summer, the CRC Executive board continued to discuss potential topic ideas with the District that would best support the growing need within the D39 community. Together, D39 and the CRC determined there was an increased urgency to support the growing prevalence of neurodivergent students within D39, the mental health of these students amidst a post-pandemic environment, and the necessity to better equip teachers with learning-style specific strategies.

In consideration of multiple [Strategic Plan](#) goals, the mission of the District, and the current needs of students and families, the topic of neurodiversity was chosen. The CRC determined the topic would focus on researching how school districts can foster equitable and inclusive school environments and support a connected culture of understanding, acceptance, and appreciation for neurodivergent students within both the general education and special education settings. While the proposed topic was broad at the onset, the first two meetings in October and November helped narrow the scope of the research into a proposed two-year project. Year One would focus on fostering awareness, understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of neurodiversity within an inclusive school environment. Subsequently, Year Two would focus on effective educational practices for supporting neurodivergent students, utilizing each student’s unique learning style.

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that neurological differences reflect normal variations in brain development. The term neurodiversity shifts away from the deficits-based medical model of pathology and towards a strengths-based perspective that emphasizes the inherent strengths, skills, and potential of neurodivergent individuals (Armstrong, 2012). Neurodivergence encompasses any condition in which the brain functions differently from what is considered “typical”. Although not an exhaustive list, examples include anxiety disorders, mood disorders, specific learning disorders, executive functioning differences, sensory processing differences,

dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder, and giftedness (Hamilton et. al, 2023). It is estimated that 15-20% of the general population is neurodivergent (Domrase, 2023).

In this post-pandemic world, the impact on student mental health is being observed in an increasing number of students (Gramlich, 2023). Children who feel an increased sense of belonging are more successful in an academic setting. Alternatively, students who experience a decreased sense of belonging are correlated with higher levels of maladaptive internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Arslan, 2019). While all students are struggling to regain lost academic and social-emotional skills, it is amplified for neurodivergent students due to the differences in the way these students experience the world. The vast responsibility of supporting student mental health, social emotional learning, and accommodating individual learning styles falls on general education teachers to help all students thrive in the school environment, placing an increased burden on the classroom teachers (Westphal et al., 2022).

The purpose of this report is to share foundational information about neurodiversity, present research on parent, teacher, and staff perceptions and understanding of neurodiversity, analyze how local districts are working to create a connected culture for neurodivergent students, and outline national trends in supporting inclusivity for neurodivergent students. The CRC considered all of these areas within the context of both the general education and special education settings. Finally, this report offers recommendations to District 39 to foster an inclusive and empathic culture of connectedness for students, families, teachers, and staff.

It is the CRC's goal to provide recommendations to the District that both educate the community and help foster connectedness that is rooted in inclusivity and support, allowing all students to thrive. This report is written with the intention to uphold the dignity of all students within the District.

B. Process

To best understand how to build an equitable learning environment for neurodivergent students, CRC members extensively researched foundational knowledge, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions on neurodiversity, analyzed resources local school districts utilize to foster an understanding of neurodiversity, and explored national trends for creating an environment of acceptance and appreciation in schools.

The CRC was divided into four subcommittees. Each group conducted in-depth research and determined specific conclusions and recommendations relating to their research.

Group 1 researched foundational knowledge to support an understanding of neurodiversity. Essential terminology associated with neurodiversity was defined, and information was gathered regarding traits, characteristics, and diagnoses included under the neurodiversity umbrella.

Information related to the social-emotional impact of traditional educational practices and neurodiversity-affirming educational practices was also explored. Group members included parent representatives Rachel Gold, Colleen McHugh, Debra Theilig, and District 39 representatives Samantha Marwick, Speech Language Pathologist at Highcrest Middle School, and Karin Bader, Social Worker at Harper Elementary.

Group 2 researched parent, teacher, staff, and student perceptions of neurodivergent students within District 39 by creating a survey to collect qualitative and quantitative feedback. The surveys were sent out to all District 39 families, teachers, and staff, as well as to students in grades 5-8. The surveys were also mentioned in school newsletters, emails from CRC members, and social media. Questions were created based on the knowledge and expertise of Group 2 members which included parent representatives Krista Slepowronski and Rekha Badlani, and District 39 representatives Katherine Michau, Assistant Principal at Central Elementary, Kristin Johnson, Early Childhood Learning Behavior Specialist at Romona Elementary, and Leo Krause, Communications Director.

Group 3 analyzed how neighboring school districts understand neurodiversity and support neurodivergent students. Using a list of comparable districts provided by Dr. Kari Cremascoli (via Illinois School Report Card) as well as districts recommended by District 39 teaching professionals, information was gathered through website review of each of these districts and examined from the lens of the members' professional expertise. In addition, a short survey was distributed to administrators of comparable local districts. Group members included parent representatives Amy Swibel, Aparna Bhaskaran, and Vanessa Fawley, and District 39 representatives Stephanie Boron, Speech and Language Pathologist at Romona Elementary, and Karen Mannerino, School Psychologist at Central Elementary.

Group 4 researched national trends in best practices related to creating supportive and inclusive communities for neurodivergent students. The research was collected from various scholarly journals and educational organizations. Group members included parent representatives Grace Poe and Najah Musacchio, and District 39 representatives Becky Littmann, Principal at Central Elementary, and Tom Hunter, Curriculum Coordinator.

C. Findings and Conclusions

A year-long analysis of research, surveys, and interviews led to the following findings and conclusions:

1. Both neurodivergent and neurotypical children benefit from fostering an inclusive and connected environment.
2. Neurodiversity education and awareness creates an environment of acceptance and empathy for students. Consistent communication, education, and awareness of

neurodiversity promotes understanding and compassion.

3. More than 90% of parent and teacher survey respondents self-report their understanding of neurodiversity as very high. However, based on write-in responses, there is seemingly a discrepancy between *perceived understanding* and *authentic understanding* of neurodiversity and neurodivergent learners. More than 77% of parent and teacher survey respondents self-report high interest in learning strategies to use at school and at home to foster an inclusive environment.
4. 84.5% of parent survey respondents report they believe there are neurodivergent students in their children's school. The majority of parent survey respondents also agree that creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in the general education classroom is important and supports academic success in students.
5. 97.1% of teacher and staff respondents report they believe there are neurodivergent students in their classrooms.
6. District 39 faculty and staff survey respondents report current utilization of strategies to foster tolerance and acceptance amongst students in their classroom. It is unclear how these specific practices directly impact neurodivergent students and foster acceptance and appreciation amongst students in the classroom and school community at-large.
7. District 39 faculty and staff respondents largely agree that creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in the general education classroom is important and supports academic success.
8. Local school districts report current usage of a variety of strategies and initiatives to support Social Emotional Learning standards.
9. Educating students about neurodiversity helps create classroom and school communities that are supportive of all learners, as well as fosters the development of self-awareness and personal agency amongst students.
10. Supportive, respectful, and meaningful relationships between neurodivergent students and their peers, teachers, and staff promote positive educational outcomes, as well as enhance neurodivergent and neurotypical students' sense of empathy and understanding.
11. The physical environment of the classroom can be modified to provide specific

universal supports accessible to all learners. These modifications can both enhance knowledge acquisition and destigmatize varied learning styles.

12. Differentiated, flexible teaching methods (e.g., presenting information in a variety of ways) can improve engagement and learning for all students.

Overall, the CRC finds that creating a culture of connectedness that values awareness, understanding, empathy, inclusivity, acceptance, and appreciation will significantly benefit both neurodivergent and neurotypical students and their families. This will further support mental health, social emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and ultimately academic success.

D. Recommendations for Action

There are many ways to create an empathic and inclusive culture for neurodivergent students. The recommendations in this report include ideas for District 39 to affect change in the way the school community understands, supports, and accepts neurodivergent students within the District. Please see [Appendix H](#) for specific examples for the recommendations below.

Recommendations were broken into three subcategories:

- (1) **Social-Emotional:** Research and implement Social Emotional Learning practices, curriculums, and frameworks that are supportive of the social-emotional development and well-being of neurodivergent students.
- (2) **Fostering Connection:** Provide education and opportunities for connection and understanding between neurodivergent and neurotypical students.
- (3) **Parent Education:** Provide parent education around neurodiversity and ensure neurodivergent students are valued and represented in all parent education and events.

District 39 is encouraged to review and ensure that their policies and practices support all neurodivergent students, taking into consideration the variability of needs, including those who may need additional support to self-advocate.

The CRC recommends the following:

- (1) **Social-Emotional:** Research and implement Social Emotional Learning practices, curriculums, and frameworks that are supportive of the social-emotional development and well-being of neurodivergent students.
 - a. Educate staff on neurodiversity-affirming practices.
 - b. Teach students about neurodiversity.
 - c. Review procedures and ensure all students are taken into consideration.
 - d. Research and implement affirming behavioral frameworks and support strategies for all students.

- e. Research effective sensory and regulatory supports for both neurodivergent and neurotypical students.
- f. Review paraprofessional and assistant teacher staffing to ensure classroom needs are commensurate with available support.

(2) **Fostering Connection:** Provide education and opportunities for connection and understanding between neurodivergent and neurotypical students.

- a. Research ways to celebrate the strengths and interests of all students.
- b. Provide opportunities for relationship building between neurotypical and neurodivergent students.
- c. Increase opportunities for representation and sense of belonging for neurodivergent students through diversification of school materials, school enrichment activities, and school decorations.
- d. Explore methods to promote self-advocacy and decrease exclusivity amongst students through differentiated communication approaches.

(3) **Parent Education:** Provide parent education around neurodiversity and ensure neurodivergent students are valued and represented in all parent education and events.

- a. Research and implement a shared language around neurodiversity that emphasizes affirming practices and promotes inclusivity and support for neurodivergent learners.
- b. Demonstrate neurodiversity-affirming values in school communications.
- c. Increase representation of neurodivergent students in District 39's parent education series.
- d. Partner with external organizations to further collaborate and support parent understanding of neurodiversity.
- e. Explore parent interest in alternative formats for parent education and parent-to-parent community building.
- f. Consider increasing partnership and collaboration with PASS39 to improve communication, engagement, and visibility of PASS39 within the school's parent community.

II. Research Summaries and Strategic Recommendations:

In alignment with District 39's mission, vision, and current Strategic Plan priorities, the CRC considered many ways to create an empathic and inclusive culture for neurodivergent students. The recommendations in this report suggest ideas for District 39 to affect change in the way the community understands, supports, and accepts neurodivergent students within the District.

Our year-long study on neurodiversity has yielded the following research in support of our recommendations:

A. Foundational Conceptual Knowledge

The following information was gathered from a large number of sources. A full resource list can be found in [Section V](#). Specific in-text citations were used when applicable and are referenced in the bibliography in [Section IV](#).

Foundational Terminology

The term **neurodiversity** was first coined by Judy Singer, Australian sociologist, in 1998 to foster equality and inclusion of “neurological minorities”, or those whose brains work in a different way. Using the metaphor of biodiversity, which “refers to the factual reality of biological diversity,” Singer began using the term neurodiversity to refer to the existence of variation in human minds (Dwyer, 2022). During the 1990s, a movement emerged “to increase acceptance and inclusion of all people while embracing neurological differences” (Dwyer, 2022). This eventually led to the **neurodiversity movement**, a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for neurodivergent populations.

Research in this area quickly gained momentum and a new paradigm emerged that opposed the *medical model of pathology* assertion that individual deviation from “normal” is inherently pathological. The **neurodiversity paradigm** suggests that neurological differences are normal and natural and should therefore be understood, respected, and supported rather than viewed as disordered (Dwyer, 2022). This paradigm is based upon the philosophical foundations of neurodiversity, specifically that it is natural and acceptable for people to have brains that function differently from one another. The paradigm asserts there is no one “right” way of thinking, learning, and behaving, differences are not viewed as deficits, and that variation in human development is beneficial to humankind.

The concepts of neurodiversity and neurodiversity-affirming practices are rooted in a **strengths-based approach**. Historically, research around neurodevelopmental disorders has been conducted under the framework of the medical model meaning positive outcomes “transform disabled people into able-bodied and typically developing individuals” (Dwyer, 2022). A strengths-based approach focuses on *ability* rather than *disability* and inherently assumes that each person has the capacity to learn, think, and grow. Within this approach, utilization of an individual’s specific strengths to support their areas of needs is critical.

The terms neurodivergent and neurotypical are essential in understanding neurodiversity. The term **neurodivergent** describes an individual whose mind functions in a way that diverges from societal standards of “normal”. This refers to any person whose brain processes, thinks, and/or learns differently from what is considered “typical”. Neurodiversity is not a term used within the medical model, and no person needs a formal diagnosis to identify as neurodivergent.

Neurotypical refers to a person whose brain operates in a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Core Beliefs and Positions of Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices

Several concepts help define the core belief and positions of neurodiversity-affirming practices (*not an exhaustive list*):

- (1) **Presume Competence:** The belief that people have the capacity to learn, think, and understand.
- (2) **Self-Determination:** The idea that people can make their own choices, set goals, and take action to meet those goals.
- (3) **Self-Advocacy:** The ability to represent one's own needs and accommodations.
- (4) **Body Autonomy:** An individual's right to make their own decisions about their body.
- (5) **Trauma-Informed:** A recognition and understanding of the pervasive and complex nature of trauma and the subsequent impacts on one's life.
- (6) **Personal Agency:** The understanding, capacity, and self-efficacy around the sense of influence over one's own actions and behavior.
- (7) **Valuing Lived Experience:** A recognition and understanding of the individualized perspective and knowledge one gains through personal experiences, particularly in those who have been marginalized or excluded.
- (8) **Anti-Ableism:** The concept of actively working to dismantle ableist (i.e. prejudice and/or discrimination against mentally and/or physically disabled individuals) beliefs and practices while promoting equality, inclusion, and respect for disabled individuals.

Ableism and Anti-Ableism

Ableism refers to discrimination or prejudice against disabled individuals or those who are perceived to have disabilities. Ableist views can influence how educators interact with and perceive their students. When teachers identify students who need support, there is an implied belief that the student is the “problem” with referrals to service providers intended to provide a “fix” or “cure”, instead of offering accommodations or support that could help neurodivergent students thrive. The student is inherently viewed as “deficient” instead of *different* (Manalili, 2021).

Anti-ableism (within the school setting) is the active effort of promoting inclusive, accessible education practices that value and support neurodiversity and challenge ableist beliefs. Anti-ableism promotes the acceptance and celebration of neurodiversity. This includes recognizing the value of differentiated learning styles and perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for policies and practices that prioritize the needs of neurodivergent individuals who may otherwise be marginalized. Central to anti-ableism is the use of accommodations and supports to ensure equitable access and opportunities for learning, thinking, and growth. Adopting anti-ableism as a guiding principle creates a more inclusive and supportive environment for neurodivergent students.

Identifying Language

Identity-first language places the disability and/or condition before the person (e.g. autistic child), prioritizing autonomy and self-determination in choosing how one wants to be referred to. Identity-first language acknowledges that within marginalized communities, specific terms may be preferred and both respect and validate self-identification. Identity-first language is increasingly preferred within the neurodivergent communities. **Person-first language** places the person before their disability and/or condition (e.g. child with a disability). Person-first language emphasizes individuality, respect, and inclusivity by acknowledging the person first. Some neurodivergent communities continue to prefer person-first language.

Preferences vary widely, even within the same community, and it is important to be aware of both the general consensus of the community and check-in individually (Botha et al., 2023). While both types of language share the goal of promoting dignity and respect, identify-first language focuses on honoring self-identification while person-first language prioritizes the person's individuality.

For this report, the CRC has chosen to use identify-first language to honor and respect self-identification and the integral role that disabilities and/or conditions play in shaping self-identity. Additionally, this language was chosen as it is increasingly preferred amongst many neurodivergent communities.

Umbrella of Neurodiversity

Many neurodivergent individuals exhibit traits and characteristics that are specific to the way their brain processes information and/or learns. The umbrella of neurodiversity includes any diagnosis that impacts brain functioning. Some increasingly common diagnoses include autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), giftedness, dyslexia, and sensory processing disorder. However, there are also many additional diagnoses including anxiety disorders (e.g. obsessive-compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, etc.), mood disorders (e.g. depression), and learning disorders (e.g. specific learning disorder) that are under the umbrella of neurodiversity. Additional information on common diagnoses under the umbrella of neurodiversity can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Unique Strengths and Needs of Neurodivergent Individuals

Although every neurodivergent individual is unique, specific characteristics and/or traits can be found across a variety of diagnoses under this umbrella. While not exhaustive or all-encompassing, specific characteristics and/or traits include differences in information processing, sensory processing, communication, social communication, and daily living skills. These areas may impact neurodivergent individuals, particularly within the context of their daily life. Further understanding components of neurocognitive functioning is helpful in appreciating the unique strengths and areas for growth in neurodivergent individuals.

Information Processing

Some neurodivergent individuals process information and exhibit executive functioning skills differently than their neurotypical peers. There are many information processing styles, including visual-spatial (learning through observation), auditory (learning through listening), verbal-linguistic (learning through speaking aloud), kinesthetic (learning through movement), or a combination of multiple information processing styles. Differences in information processing style are often viewed as deficits because they do not align with traditional teaching methods used for neurotypical students in school, work, and daily life. However, these differences are also strengths as they foster unique thinking styles. It is important to recognize and appreciate these differences. Below is a chart that reframes some of these traits and characteristics utilizing a strengths-based model:

<i>The chart below offers a different way to view information processing differences. Additionally, there are alternative ways to write descriptions using strengths-based language within documentation (e.g. an Individualized Education Plan).</i>	
<i>Deficit Model</i>	<i>Strengths-Based Model</i>
<i>Difficulty focusing on topics that are considered boring</i>	<i>Passionate special interests that generate strong knowledge base</i>
<i>Difficulty engaging in learning, tasks, or activities without strong rationale or intrinsic motivation</i>	<i>Increased focus on certain topics of passion, resulting in extensive work production on an interest-based project</i>
<i>Difficulty perceiving the “bigger picture”</i>	<i>Detail-oriented</i>
<i>Difficulty engaging in “surface level” thinking, prioritizing information and work</i>	<i>Deep thinkers who can understand great depth of concepts</i>
<i>Difficulty with traditional executive functions like task initiation, organization, transitions, etc.</i>	<i>Creative approach to tasks and problem solving</i>
<i>Difficulty coping with change and transitions</i>	<i>Excellent at maintaining routines</i>
<i>Difficulty with thinking clearly when overwhelmed, particularly taking in auditory information if facing sensory dysregulation or auditory processing disorder</i>	<i>Strength in taking in and expressing information visually or by other means, such as hands-on activities or when paired with movement or sensory experiences</i>
<i>Rigid, black and white thinking that can cause individuals to get “stuck”</i>	<i>Strong sense of justice, desire to pursue and find truth</i>

Network, A.S.A. (2020)

Sensory Processing

Neurodivergent individuals often experience differences in their registration and modulation of sensory information, which means that they may be under-responsive (i.e. increased sensory input needed to register sensory information) or over-responsive (i.e. decreased sensory input needed to register sensory information) to sensory input. While there are the common five senses of taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight, there are many lesser known senses, including but not limited to, the vestibular sense (movement), proprioceptive sense (body awareness), and interoceptive sense (internal body sensations). Most environments are designed with neurotypical sensory processing profiles in mind, and these environments can therefore be extremely difficult for some neurodivergent individuals to manage. For example, someone who is highly sensitive to bright lights and loud noises may experience difficulty in everyday environments like classrooms, grocery stores, or hospitals. When neurodivergent individuals are flooded with sensory stimuli, it can cause discomfort, distress, distraction, or be perceived as painful. When these differences are not recognized, it can lead to inaccessibility and make it difficult for neurodivergent individuals to function as needed in their educational, occupational, and/or daily living environments.

However, these sensory differences can also be great strengths. For example, hypersensitivity to sensory information allows individuals to make unique observations about the world around them, which can promote skill development that would be difficult for neurotypical individuals to achieve.

Self-stimulatory behaviors, also referred to as “*stimming*”, can be observed in some individuals. While stimming is not solely a behavior of neurodivergent individuals, neurodivergent individuals with sensory processing differences may engage in these behaviors more often and/or more intensely than their neurotypical counterparts. These stimming behaviors may look like hand-flapping or other repetitive hand movements, spinning, rocking, humming or making other noises, or repetitively and/or intensely absorbing auditory or visual information. These behaviors occur as a means to help individuals regulate their senses, regulate or express their emotions, support their executive functioning, and other related purposes.

Communication

Some neurodivergent individuals develop communication skills in ways that are different from their peers. Some neurodivergent individuals may communicate using spoken language or a communication device, some are non-speaking, and others utilize a combination of communication methods. Regardless of the method, *all* neurodivergent individuals communicate. Alternatives to spoken language include the use of **alternative and augmentative communication** (AAC) devices such as speech-generating tablets, sign language, picture exchange methods, written language, or nonverbal communication (e.g. leading someone to an item or activity or showing affection through body language). Additionally, neurodivergent

individuals who use spoken language may use **echolalia** (immediate repetition of speech) or **scripting** (repetition of words, phrases, or sounds from other people’s speech). Most commonly, scripting phrases and sounds are from movies, tv, or other sources like books and/or people an individual interacts with.

Less common forms of expressive communication can create barriers for neurodivergent individuals, often due to a lack of understanding of the communication form. However, even when neurodivergent individuals use spoken language, communication barriers are common due to additional differences in social communication.

Social Communication

Neurodivergent individuals may have **social communication** differences which can result in differences in perceiving, understanding, or following “social rules” (e.g. difficulty reading social cues, perceiving sarcasm, initiating and maintaining conversations). These differences can be understood as either deficits or strengths, depending upon the lens through which these traits are viewed.

The chart below offers a different way to view information processing differences. Additionally, there are alternative ways to write descriptions using strengths-based language within documentation (e.g. an Individualized Education Plan)

<i>Deficit Model</i>	<i>Strengths-Based Model</i>
<i>Rude, aggressive, fails to engage in social pleasantries</i>	<i>Direct, clear, and concise communication that gets to the point</i>
<i>Failure to maintain eye contact, often fidgeting and moving around, so must not pay attention</i>	<i>Focuses best when engaged in movement or stimming behavior and when not preoccupied with maintaining eye gaze.</i>
<i>Displays facial expressions, tone, and body language that imply negative attitude</i>	<i>Emphasis and attention placed upon accurate language use when communicating. Facial expression, tone, and body language are not always easy to control and do not always reflect attitude.</i>
<i>Overly literal communication, fails to understand common sayings or pick up on subtext accurately</i>	<i>Sincere communicator; does not disguise intent</i>

Network, A.S.A. (2020)

It is a common misconception that neurodivergent individuals lack the capacity to feel or express empathy. While it is true that some neurodivergent individuals struggle with understanding how

others feel, it is also common for neurodivergent individuals to be highly attuned to the feelings of others. Sometimes, this can present as an individual easily observing and empathizing with the emotion another person is experiencing (*affective empathy*), but still struggling to understand *why* the person is feeling that way or what can be done to make the person feel better (*cognitive empathy*).

Additionally, neurodivergent individuals may express empathy differently from neurotypical peers. One way neurodivergent individuals express empathy is to explain that they have experienced a similar circumstance or emotion. Neurotypical social culture may consider this rude and insensitive because it takes the focus away from the individual in distress. However, neurodivergent social culture may consider this a way of connecting and accept that this person relates to the situation and can authentically *feel for* the person in distress.

At times, difficulties in communication can arise between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. This dynamic is described by the psychological theory **double empathy problem**, coined in 2012 by autism researcher, Damian Milton (Milton et al., 2022). This theory suggests that the social and communication difficulties experienced by neurodivergent individuals when socializing with neurotypical individuals are not solely due to inherent differences. Instead, communication challenges arise from a reciprocal lack of understanding and bidirectional differences in communication style, social-cognitive characteristics, and experiences between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Many neurodivergent individuals are capable of effectively socializing, communicating, and empathizing with other neurodivergent individuals.

Daily Living

All of the above neurological differences combined can contribute to difficulties with daily living skills and adaptive functioning. The everyday tasks of engaging in our educational, occupational, or recreational activities and tasks in a society built for neurotypical people can tax a neurodivergent individual's executive functioning skills, sensory processing system, and demand significant focus on communication and socialization. Some of these tasks may overload one or more of these domains, which may require neurodivergent individuals to access support or help from others, take breaks to rest and recharge, and/or disengage from certain activities that they do not have sufficient capacity or ability to engage in at the time.

Impacts of Living as a Neurodivergent Individual

Not all neurodivergent individuals experience or express the above neurological differences in the same ways, to the same intensity, or with the same frequency as each other. For many neurodivergent individuals, many of these differences are not easily observed by others, often described as "invisible disabilities". Invisible disabilities have their own associated set of challenges, such as decreased awareness of needs and subsequent lack of support. Alternatively, neurodivergent individuals whose differences are easily observed by others face different

challenges. Their needs can be over-generalized, their abilities under-recognized, and their autonomy compromised.

Masking and Camouflaging

Masking and camouflaging are terms used to describe the process of a neurodivergent individual hiding their actions or characteristics by suppressing their individual needs in social situations in order to conceal their neurodivergence and/or appear neurotypical. Some definitions of masking include displaying socially “expected” behaviors in order to appear neurotypical as part of the definition. Examples include suppressing behaviors that are regulating for neurodivergent individuals such as stimming, rehearsing conversations, planning responses, or fake smiles or other facial expressions. Masking and camouflaging often occur because the neurodivergent person feels unsafe and is trying to avoid social isolation, bullying, or drawing unwanted attention to themselves. Neurodivergent people often experience bullying and isolation significantly more than neurotypical individuals due to being more socially isolated, less accepted and liked by peers, and more often excluded or ridiculed. They often lack the social support networks that typically protect children from the effects of peer bullying (Hoover, 2015). There are many negative effects of masking and camouflaging such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, stress, exhaustion, substance use, and increased suicidal ideation (Hull et al., 2021). The psychological and emotional impact of the daily trauma from suppressing regulatory needs can significantly impact mental health (Miller et al., 2021). There can also be an inherent trauma in feeling different. Neurodivergent individuals may experience consequences when they do not fit into a “societal norm”, resulting in feelings of loneliness and deep misunderstanding.

General Practices in Education that Impact Neurodivergent Students

Traditional educational practices (e.g. overemphasis on traditional assessment and grading measures, inflexible teaching methodologies, extrinsic rewards, behavior management systems) can have particularly harmful implications for neurodivergent students. It is important to note that this overview is not exhaustive and further research is necessary to develop a holistic understanding. Some examples of harmful educational practices include:

- Assuming neurodiversity is tied to IQ (students may not reach their full potential if they are not taught in a way that allows their strengths to be showcased)
- Assuming neurodiversity is tied to laziness (achievement is not a matter of effort but a matter of support, understanding, and accommodations that help students work around challenges)
- Setting lower expectations for neurodivergent students (research shows students are higher achievers when their teachers perceive them as having high-potential and are lower achievers when viewed as having lower potential)
- Thinking a student will “grow out of” their disabilities (neurodiversity is about differences in brain development, not age) (Rentenbach, B. et al., 2017).

- Implementation of behavior management systems that place expectations on students to perform neurotypical behaviors or suppress natural neurodivergent behaviors
- Assuming high frequency extrinsic rewards will lead to intrinsic motivation (research demonstrates extrinsic rewards do not lead to long term changes in intrinsic motivation) (Howard et al., 2021)

Examples of practices that support neurodivergent learners include: (Armstrong, 2012)

- [Utilizing a Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) (a framework that aims to design learning environments that are accessible and effective for all learners, regardless of their individual needs) *in combination* with an inclusion model
- Providing a sensory-friendly environment (e.g. providing a quiet corner, using noise-canceling headphones, reducing fluorescent lighting)
- Allowing for breaks and movement breaks
- Establishing clear expectations and routines that can help neurodivergent students reduce anxiety and promote an increased sense of security (e.g. visual schedules and checklists)
- Utilizing visual aids, such as graphic organizers or videos, for those students who struggle with processing auditory information
- Utilizing multisensory instruction (e.g. incorporating movement, music, or tactile experiences)
- Teaching students strategies for *self-advocacy*
- Providing flexible seating options (e.g. standing desks, wobble stools) to help students with sensory processing differences regulate their energy and attention

It is important for District 39 to develop an environment that is inclusive and nurturing for both neurotypical and neurodivergent learners. Inherent to this is a greater foundational understanding of neurodiversity within the District as a whole. Formal diagnosis is not a “requirement” for neurodivergence which may mean the number of neurodivergent students is greater than previously understood. Although the District is currently using a number of tools to foster an environment that is inclusive, further examination is needed to understand whether those tools are being implemented in a way that supports neurodivergent learning styles.

Creating an affirming school environment for neurodivergent students can help mitigate the negative effects of living in a society that often lacks understanding and acceptance of differences. A school environment that is successful in supporting neurodivergent learners encompasses the following:

- Prioritizes and respects relationships, such as those between teachers and students, among students, between staff and students, and among staff members.
- Engages in open communication about students’ preferences in language that feels identity-affirming and utilizes identifying language based on individual preference (e.g. identify-first, person-first)

- Relies extensively on social emotional learning practices and relationship building in class, enabling teachers to play an active role in cultivating understanding between neurodivergent and neurotypical students
- Encourages discussion of all types of differences (including neurodiversity) in an open and affirming way to help nurture relationships and understanding between students
- Provides supportive communities for parents of neurodivergent learners which includes consistent integration of parent groups within the school community (e.g. PASS39)

A summary of the primary **misconceptions** within our community have been taken from the parent survey sent out in February 2023:

- All neurodivergent students misbehave and/or are disruptive.
- All neurodivergent students slow down the rest of the class.
- All neurodivergent students have violent outbursts that are unsafe in the general education classroom.
- Neurodivergent students in the general education classroom are harmful to neurotypical students.
- Gifted students are not considered neurodivergent.

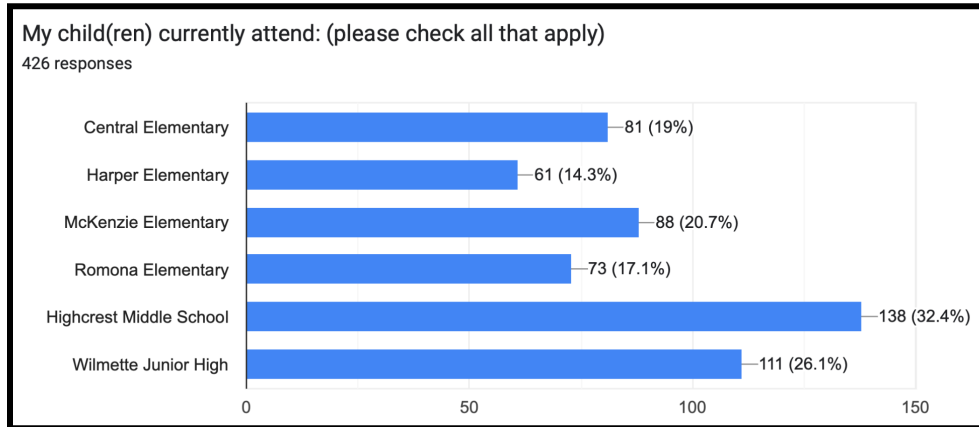
It is important to understand criticisms of the neurodiversity paradigm in order to ensure that the concerns and needs of all individuals in the community are considered. A primary critique is underrepresentation of *all* neurodivergent people, particularly autistic individuals with higher support needs. The neurodiversity paradigm emphasizes the celebration and appreciation of neurodivergent differences. However, some worry that while empowering, this approach could result in inadequate support for individuals with higher needs, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities. It is important to bring awareness to this criticism to help ensure the needs of all neurodivergent individuals are supported. The CRC encourages the District to have open, two-way communication with students, families, and their advocates to best inform future decision making.

It is important to emphasize that all children benefit from fostering an inclusive environment that recognizes and values both neurodivergent and neurotypical students. Neurodiversity education and awareness create an environment of empathy and acceptance for all students. In order to promote understanding and compassion within the district, there needs to be consistent communication, education, and awareness on the topic of neurodivergent learners.

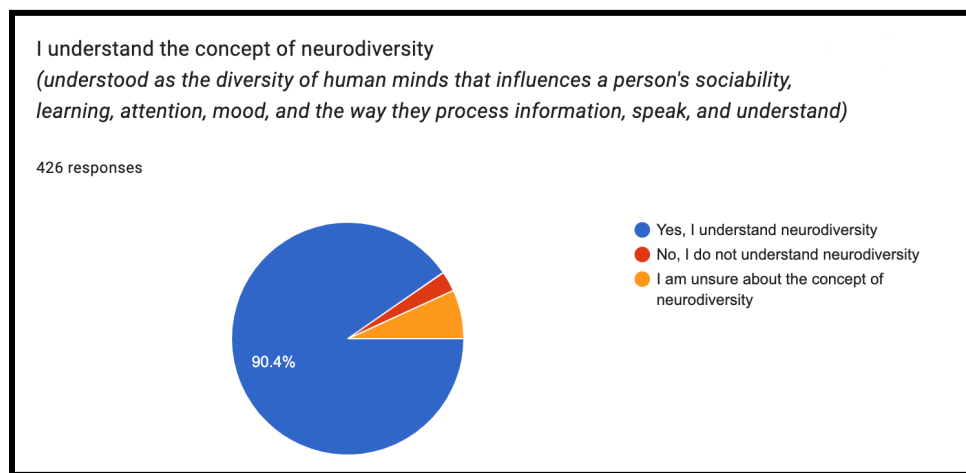
B. Parent, Teacher, and Staff Perceptions

Parent Perceptions of Neurodiversity

To best understand parent understanding and perceptions of neurodiversity, a short survey was developed and distributed to all District 39 families by email and school newsletter. To elicit as many responses as possible, the survey was limited to 11 questions, including a question about which school(s) the respondents currently had children attending.

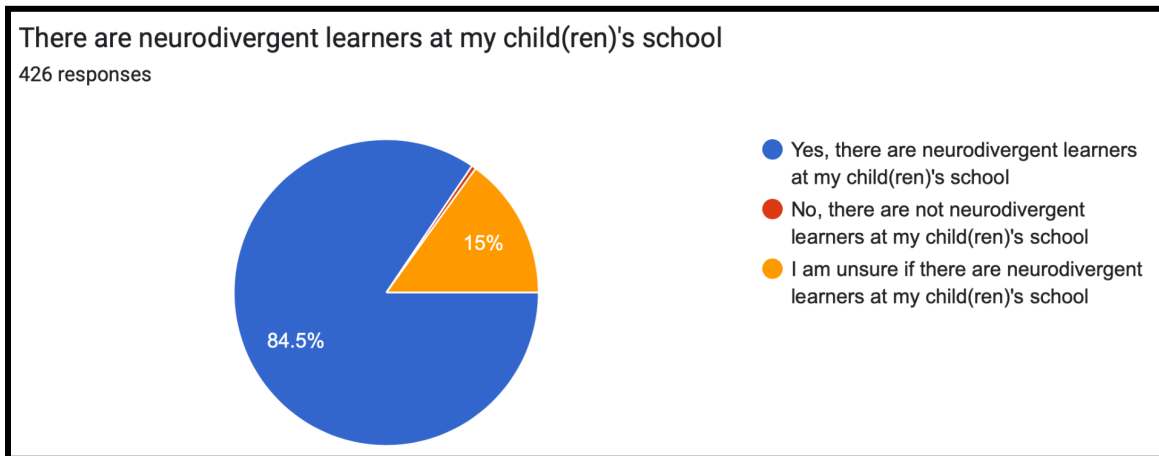


The parent survey received 426 responses that were relatively evenly split amongst all D39 schools. While the survey provides valuable insights, it is important to interpret the results with caution, as the views expressed by the respondents may not fully represent the entire parent population in District 39. It is possible that parents who hold particularly strong opinions about neurodiversity were more likely to participate in the survey, which could impact overall findings.

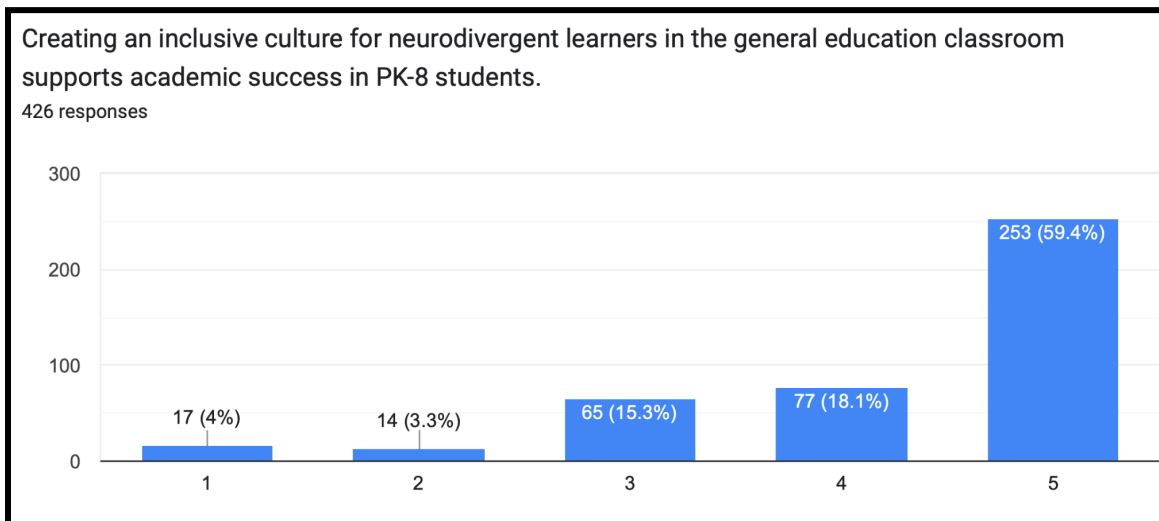


90.4% of responding parents indicate that they understand the concept of neurodiversity as defined in the question and agree that there are neurodivergent learners in their child(ren)'s

school. It is also worth noting that the additional write-in feedback provided by parents in the survey suggests a disconnect between *perceived* and *authentic* understanding of neurodiversity and neurodivergent learners. Many respondents seem to only classify neurodivergent students as those who exhibit challenging behavior in the classroom, rather than those who require a different approach to learning but are not otherwise disruptive.

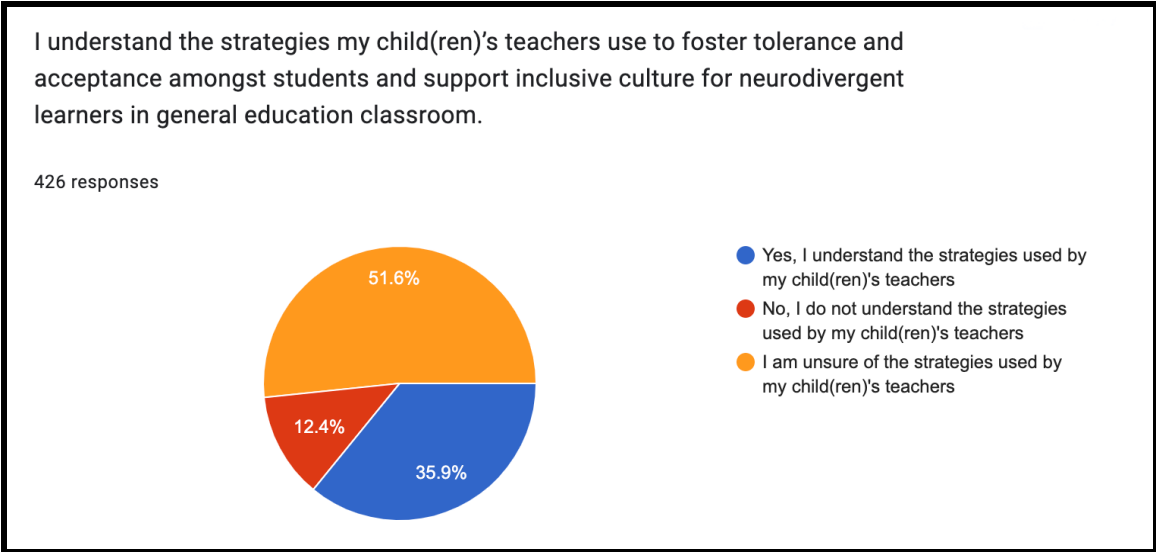


84.5% of respondents recognize that there are neurodivergent learners at their child(ren)'s school, while 15% of respondents are unsure.

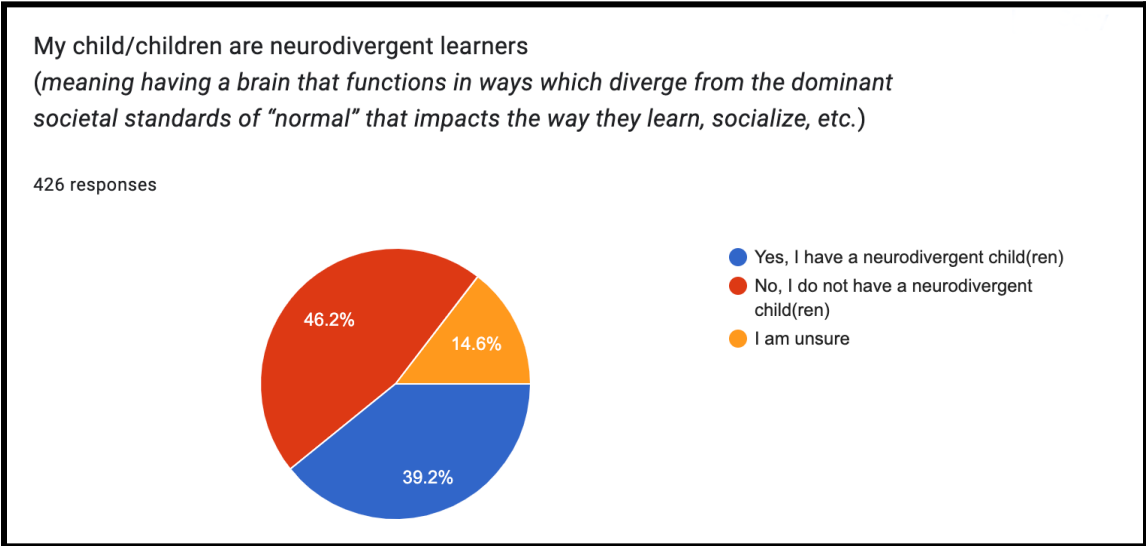


(1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)

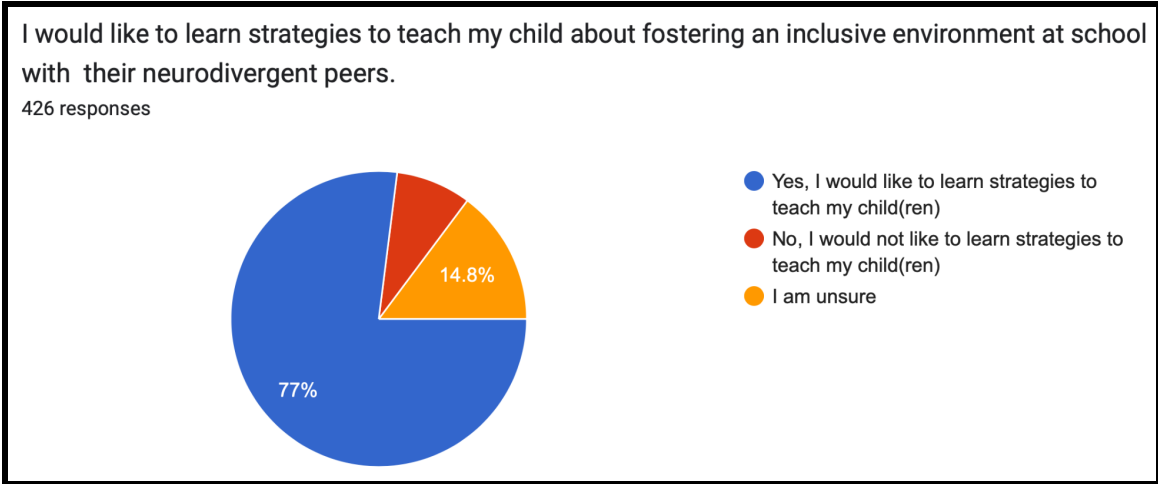
Parents agreed that creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in the general education classroom supports academic success in PK-8 students. This suggests that now is an ideal opportunity to capitalize on parental interest and establish a framework for discussions about neurodiversity.



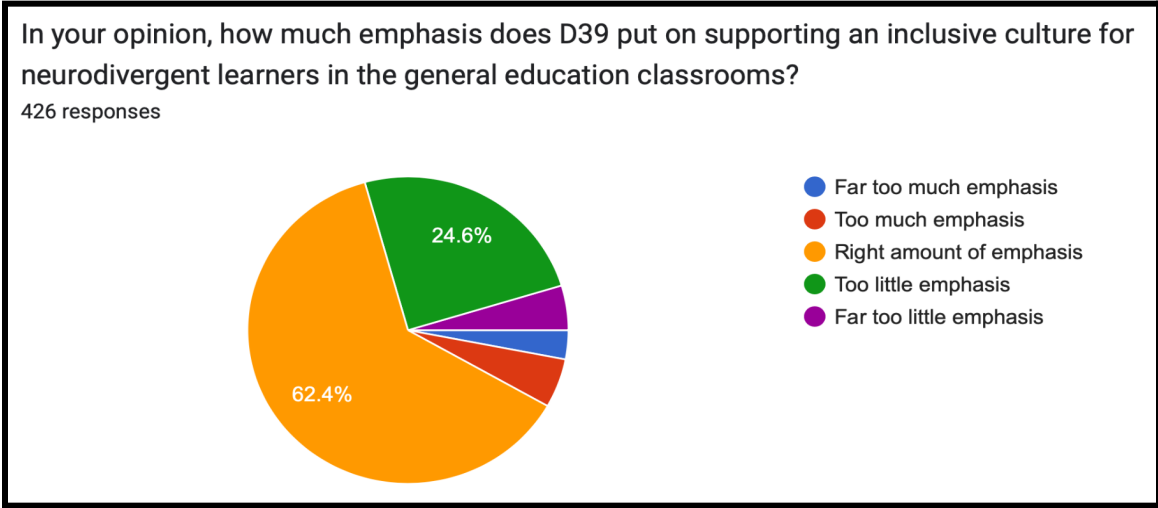
By comparison, only 35.9% of responding parents indicated that they understood strategies used by District 39 teachers to foster tolerance and acceptance amongst students and support an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners. An additional 51.6% of responding parents were unsure of strategies used by District teachers. This suggests that the majority of parents in the District may not understand how to support an inclusive environment and therefore more education is needed.



Less than half of the parents who responded to the survey believe their children are neurodivergent learners.



The vast majority of parents expressed interest in reinforcing the strategies used at school to foster an inclusive environment for neurodivergent students at home. This is an excellent opportunity for the District to build upon the 2021-2022 CRC report on bridging the gap between parent and teacher communication regarding social emotional learning.



A majority of parents (62.4%) generally believe that District 39 places the right amount of emphasis on supporting an inclusive culture for neurodivergent students, but a segment of responding parents remains that believe that greater emphasis should be placed on this topic.

Summary of Parent Write-In Responses

Parent respondents were given the option to write in additional feedback at the end of the survey. Below is a summary of the general themes noted:

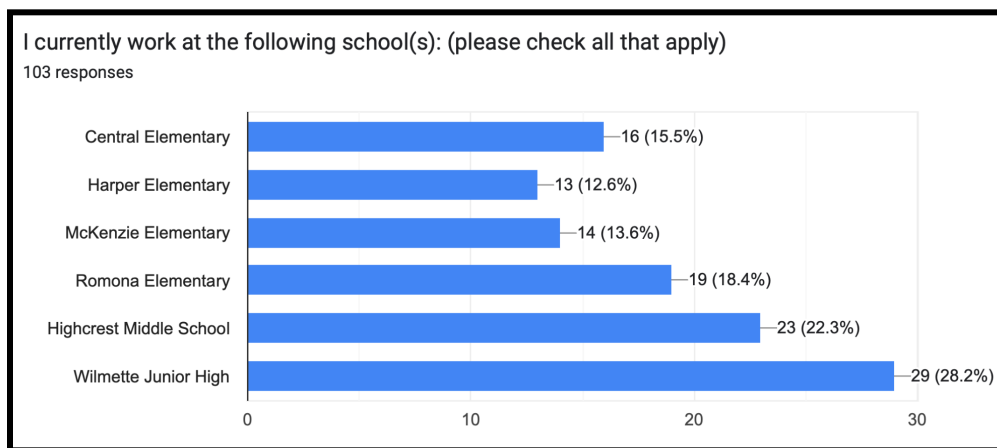
- Parents are interested in learning more about neurodiversity.
- Neurodiversity is an important topic and it is necessary to support both neurodivergent and neurotypical students in the classroom.

- Further efforts are necessary to fully support a connected culture of inclusivity.
- Increased emphasis is needed on educating both teachers and students about interacting with neurodivergent students in a way that demonstrates empathy and understanding.
- Teacher knowledge around how to support neurodivergent students is inconsistent.
- Inclusivity begins with the parents and further parent education is needed.
- Some D39 schools have implemented programming (e.g. RED week) though implementation has been inconsistent across grade levels and schools.
- Increased staffing is needed to best support neurodivergent students.
- Education is needed to dispel the myth that behavior concerns are not synonymous with neurodivergence.
- Additional training is necessary for current staff to effectively support neurodivergent students whose behavior could have an impact on other students.
- Students who witness repeated behavioral issues in the classroom are impacted and need support. Additional personnel in the classroom could help.
- There is confusion about the inclusion of giftedness under the umbrella of neurodiversity and more support services for gifted learners are needed.

It is important to note that some parent respondents indicated their neurodivergent student is well-supported in the classroom, though primarily spoke to their child’s academic needs rather than their social-emotional needs.

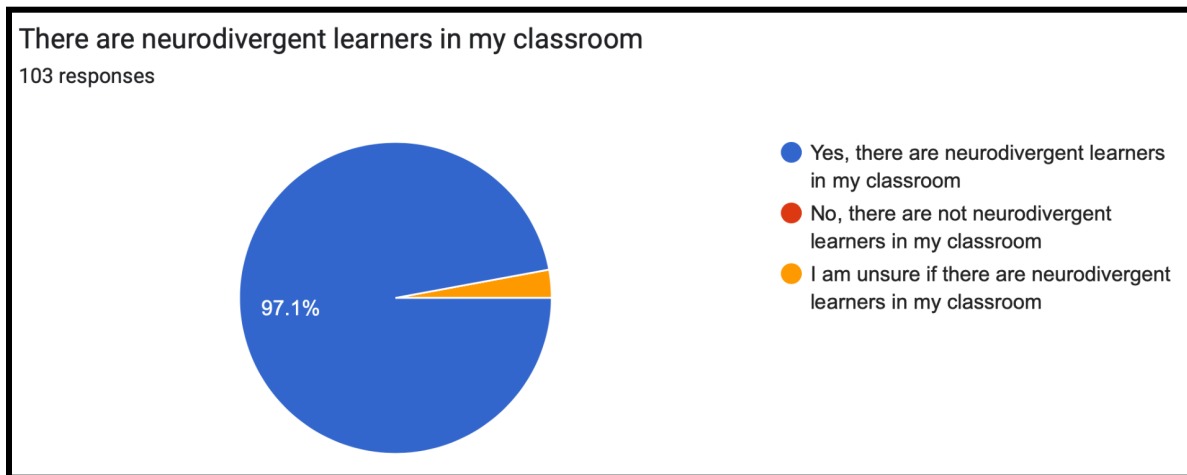
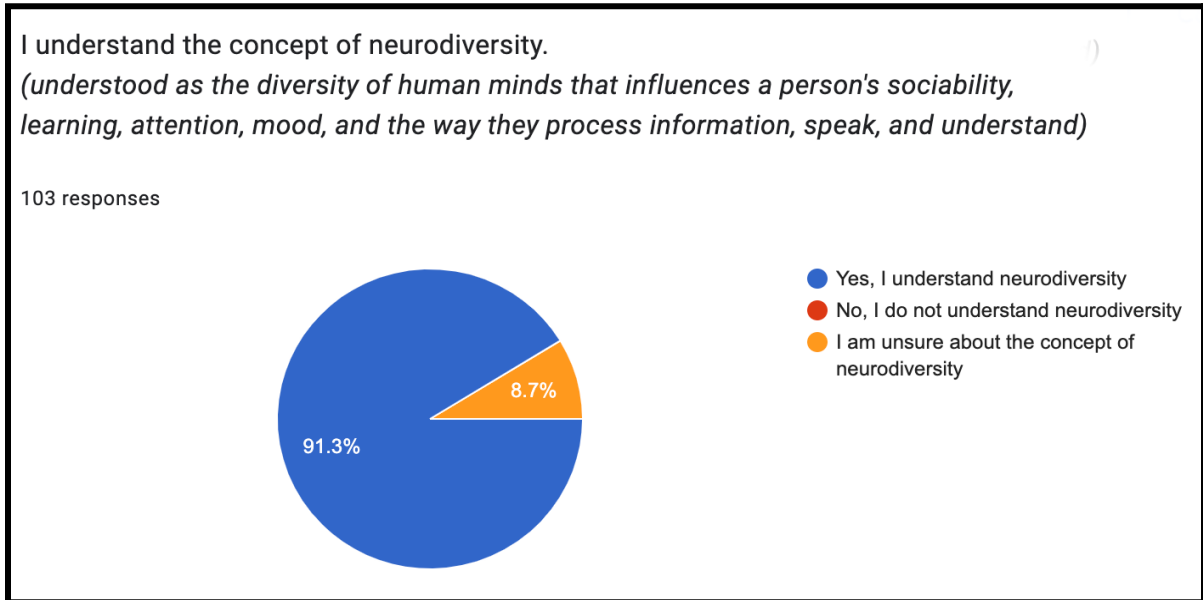
Teacher and Staff Perceptions of Neurodiversity

To best understand teacher and staff understanding and perceptions of neurodiversity, a short survey was developed and presented in District communications and by principals. To elicit as many responses as possible, the survey was limited to 11 questions, including a question on which school(s) were represented in the response.

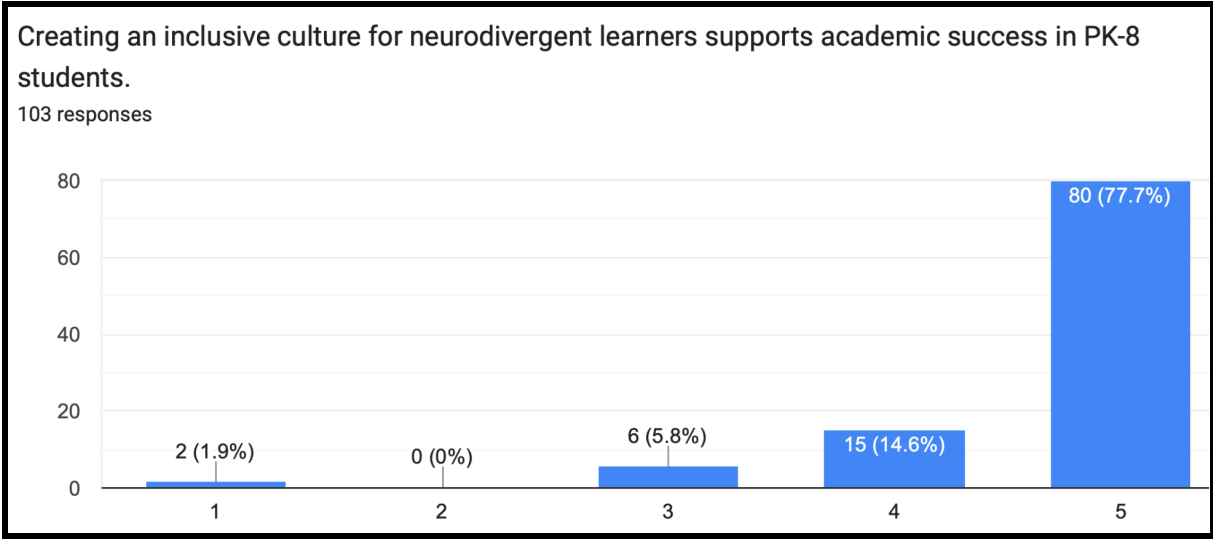


The survey received 103 responses that were relatively evenly split among all District 39 schools. While the survey results should be interpreted with caution due to the limited number

of responses, the information obtained contains valuable insights into the current understanding and perception of neurodiversity amongst school staff and practices to accommodate neurodivergent students already in place in District 39.

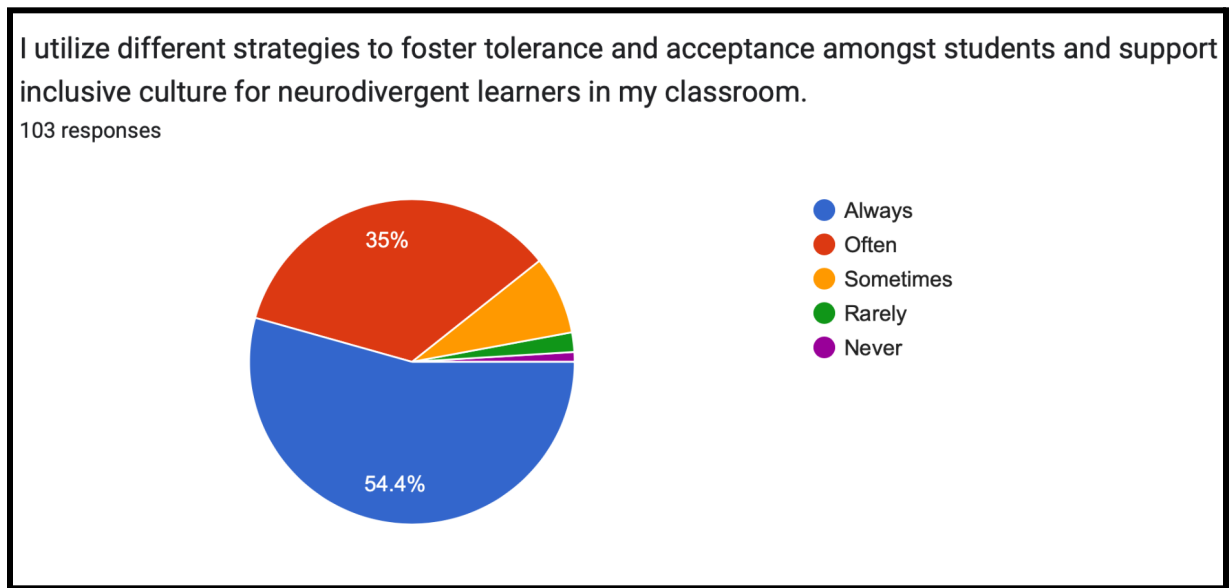


Teachers and staff overwhelmingly indicate they understand the concept of neurodiversity and that there are neurodivergent learners in their classroom. Write-in responses suggest many teachers may be confusing their understanding of social emotional learning with their understanding of neurodiversity.

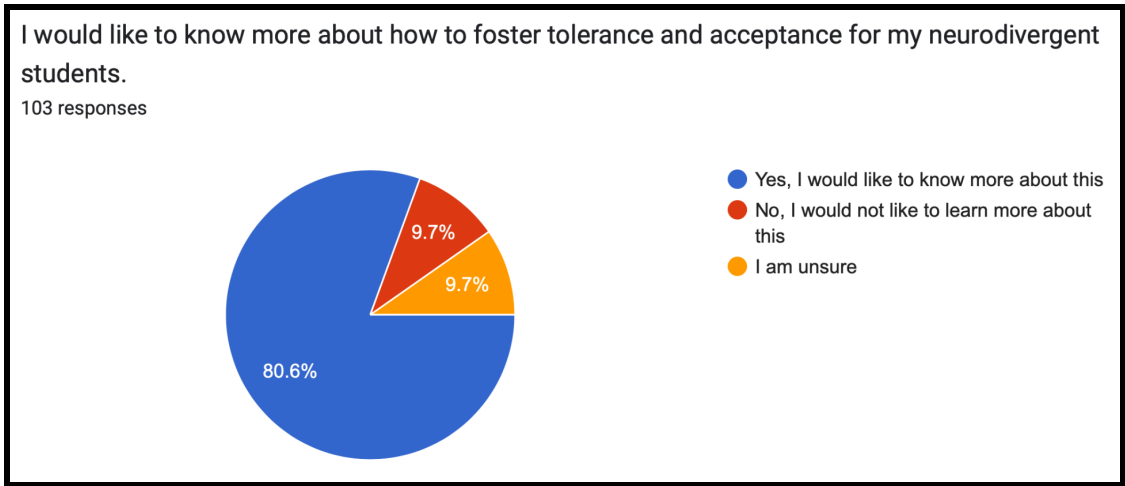


1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

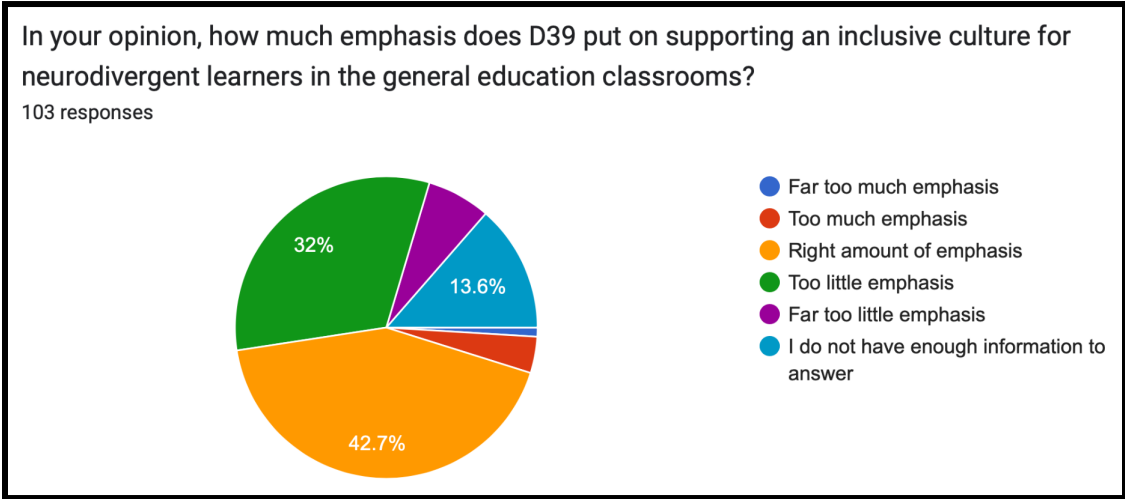
D39 teachers and staff agreed that creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in the general education classroom supports academic success in PK-8 students.



A majority of the teachers and staff report they often or always utilize different strategies to foster tolerance and acceptance amongst students, and support an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners. While some of the strategies suggested are specific to neurodivergent learners (e.g. differentiation, flexible seating, multimodal learning opportunities, non-distracting fidgets, graphic organizers/chunking assignments, whole class movement breaks), the majority of write-in responses referenced SEL strategies indicating a misconception of supports specifically needed for neurodivergent students.



Teachers and staff also expressed interest in learning more about how to foster an inclusive environment for neurodivergent students.



Teachers and staff generally believe that District 39 places the right amount of emphasis on supporting an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners (42.7%) but it is notable that a segment of responding teachers and staff expect greater emphasis. Based on the write-in responses, it appears that many teachers and staff may not fully understand how to support an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners, as survey responses primarily give SEL related strategies.

Summary of Teacher and Staff Write-In Responses

Teacher and staff respondents were given the option to write-in additional feedback at the end of the survey. Below is a summary of the general themes noted:

- More resources and training are needed to create a more inclusive classroom environment.

- There is a need for training across the District, for both staff and students.
- There is a need for a shared language around neurodiversity within the District to promote greater understanding and support for students with differentiated needs.
- The support provided to neurodivergent students in the classroom can be improved by increasing the number of adults present and implementing a broader range of strategies to promote inclusivity.

Survey results revealed similar themes identified by parents, teachers, and staff, highlighting the importance of improving support and education around neurodiversity and promoting a more inclusive school culture. However, some teachers and staff expressed concerns about incorporating neurodiversity material due to the challenging post-pandemic environment they are currently facing, such as implementing new curricula, integrating SEL, and standardized assessments (e.g. MAP and IAR).

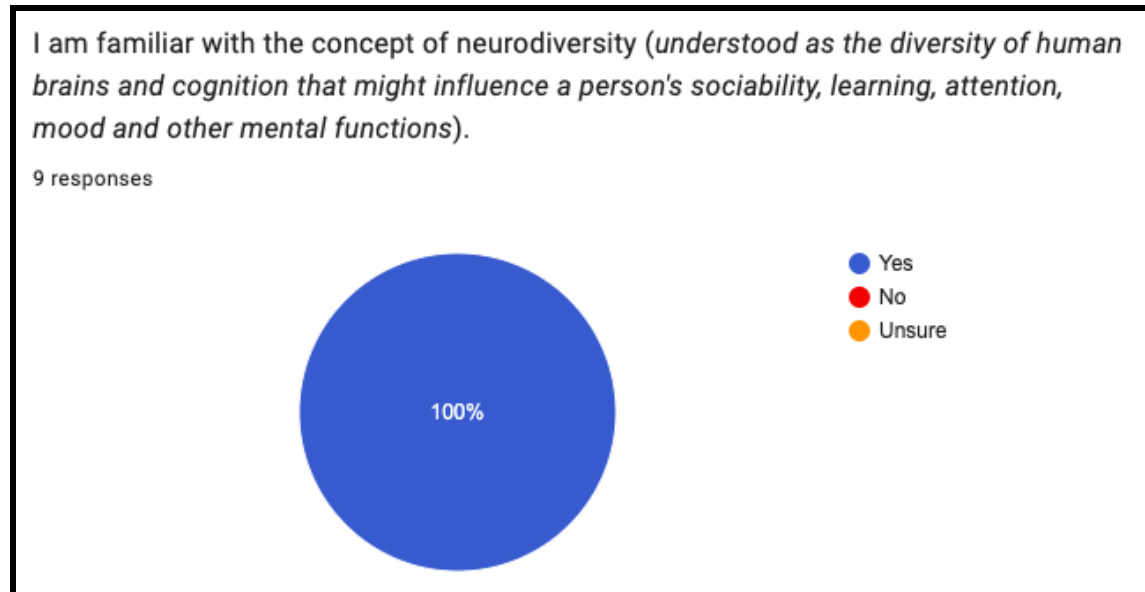
Students' Perceptions of Neurodiversity

To best understand students' perceptions of neurodiversity, a short survey was developed and presented to 5th-8th grade students in the District. The responses obtained indicated that the vast majority of the participants did not understand the concept of the survey. Therefore, the results of the student survey were not taken into account when preparing this report.

C. Local School Districts

To better understand how comparable neighboring school districts surrounding District 39 understand neurodiversity and support neurodivergent students, a comprehensive review of the websites of local school districts was conducted and a short survey was developed and distributed to administrators in local comparable districts. Upon completion of a thorough review of the websites of neighboring school districts, it was observed that none of the websites provided substantial information about or discussion of neurodiversity or neurodiversity-affirming supports.

Representatives from 11 surrounding school districts were given access to the survey via a ListServ group of comparable school districts along the North Shore, and with seven districts responding, there was an overall response rate of 64%. The survey received nine responses. Five of the respondents were school principals, and four were local school district Curriculum and Instruction administrators. Responses were received by administrators from the five New Trier feeder districts (Avoca SD 37, Glencoe SD 35, Kenilworth SD 38, Sunset Ridge SD 29 and Winnetka SD 36), as well as other comparable suburban school districts (Evanston/Skokie SD 65 and Skokie SD 68).

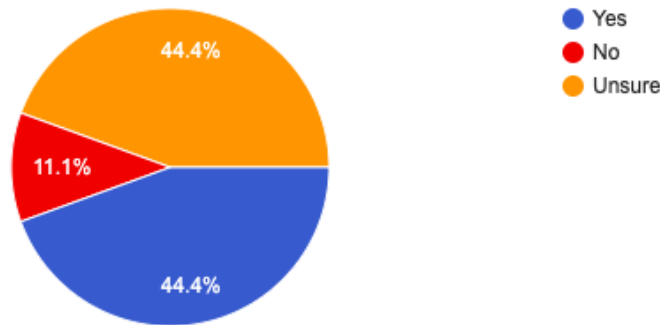


Overall, one hundred percent of respondents reported being familiar with the concept of neurodiversity as defined in the survey. While the survey results should be interpreted with caution due to the limited number of responses, the information obtained contains valuable insights into the local landscape of neurodiversity-affirming attitudes and practices in schools. The respondents were asked what creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners looks like in their district. The answers highlight a variety of strategies and initiatives, although they are *not* specific to supporting neurodivergent learners, and instead are considered best practices in general education and special education, or align with Social Emotional Learning standards. Many of these strategies involve best practices for establishing flexible and accommodating classrooms, such as incorporating inclusive special education models, providing educational and emotional supports, and allowing flexible seating arrangements.

Other initiatives include offering training and professional development to educators, implementing social-emotional learning activities for all students, and creating a culture of acceptance and inclusivity through school-wide conversations. The respondents noted the significance of understanding the various ways in which students learn, but there is a dissonance between what is *perceived understanding* and *authentic understanding* of neurodiversity and neurodivergent learners. Overall, the responses demonstrate a commitment to supporting the needs of neurodivergent learners and promoting inclusion in schools, with room for further understanding of what those initiatives should entail.

Our school/district/organization prioritizes providing professional development for our staff to utilize neurodiversity-affirming strategies to foster understanding and acceptance amongst students and support inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in my classroom.

9 responses



Prioritization of continuing education related to neurodiversity-affirming strategies for school staff is emerging among local districts. Some respondents indicated that training on this topic is beginning to be offered to some staff members, but not to all at a district-wide level.

Overall, the survey results suggest that there is a growing awareness of the importance of creating an inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming culture in local school districts, including District 39. While the responses from comparable districts appear to be an indication that some administrators are becoming familiar with the concept of neurodiversity, they appear to demonstrate a commitment to promoting inclusion in schools. However, inclusion is just one step towards cultivating an affirming learning environment for all students, as understanding, acceptance, appreciation, and sense of belonging must follow.

It should be noted that District 39 offered opportunities for all staff to attend an introductory training focusing on neurodiversity during an institute day (February 2023). While not all staff opted into this training, a group of approximately 80 staff members chose to participate. This training was led by three of the CRC members: Stephanie Boron, Kristin Johnson, and Karin Bader. The focus was on foundational information about neurodiversity and neurodiversity-affirming attitudes including relevant terminology, affirming language, preferred symbols, colors, and support organizations, and the importance of listening to the voices of individuals with lived experience.

During the same institute day, a more extensive training was also provided to the speech and language pathologists in the District, which also addressed foundational information about neurodiversity with additional discipline-specific information. This training was led by CRC president, Amy Wechsler Ross, MSW, LCSW, and her colleague, Ana Burgoon, MS, CCC-SLP,

both from PlayWorks Therapy, Inc.

District 39 has an opportunity to be a thought leader among local school districts in the area of neurodiversity. By prioritizing continuing education about neurodiversity and neurodiversity-affirming practices, local school districts can continue to prioritize the needs of neurodivergent learners and ensure that all students have the support they need to succeed. District 39 is urged to continue to prioritize creating inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming practices through ongoing professional development opportunities for educators and implementation of policies, strategies, and programs that promote a culture of inclusivity and acceptance for all students.

D. National Trends

Nationwide approaches to create an empathic and inclusive community for neurodivergent students were explored by literature review; varied sources included peer-reviewed journals and advocacy group materials. In the educational context, inclusion requires the adoption of policies, values, and practices that facilitate equal learning opportunities and participation for *all* students (Slee, 2019; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). There is a large body of research developed over the last three decades concerning inclusion in the classroom, which has revealed the following three main components of inclusion within a general education setting: (1) inclusion of all students in mainstream classrooms (MacArthur 2009; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020), and the resultant interactions between neurotypical and neurodivergent students; (2) the opportunity to be active participants within a classroom, making such students feel heard, valued, and respected (MacArthur 2009; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020); and (3) recognizing, dismantling, and addressing barriers students might face in an inclusive learning environment (Slee, 2019; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020).

While interactions between neurodivergent and neurotypical children in general education environments promote social inclusion and acceptance of neurodivergent students within the classroom and in society at large (Vignes et al., 2009; de Boer et al., 2013; cited in Babik and Gardner, 2021), neurodivergent students are not always accepted by their neurotypical peers. An effective strategy for changing children's attitudes towards their neurodivergent peers is the implementation of interventions which improve their knowledge about, and provide exposure to, neurodivergent children (Diamond and Carpenter, 2000; Nikolaraizi et al., 2005; Nowicki, 2006; Rillotta and Nettelbeck, 2007; Siperstein et al., 2007; Feddes et al., 2009; Kalyva and Agaliotis, 2009; Gasser et al., 2014; Armstrong et al., 2016; cited in Babik and Gardner, 2021).

Neurotypical children who learn about neurodivergent children are more likely to include and understand their neurodivergent peers (Rentenbach et al., 2017; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020), and to have positive attitudes towards them (Campbell, 2017; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). At the same time, neurotypical peers also benefit academically and socially from classrooms in which neurodivergent students are included (Williams, 2018). School programs emphasizing the similarities between children as opposed to the differences are more effective in

affecting peer perception of disabilities (Babik and Gardner, 2021). Educational efforts can also support neurodivergent students' development of self-awareness and personal agency.

Accordingly, educating students in D39 around neurodiversity needs to be a cornerstone of the District's efforts to create classroom communities supportive of neurodivergent students. Educational efforts could include read-aloud books about and/or books authored by neurodivergent individuals. These programs have been shown to promote empathic connection and identity formation amongst neurotypical children who relate to the neurodivergent characters as they were similar to themselves; and all students were more compassionate and understanding of themselves and of each other. (Adomat, 2014). The Stanford Neurodiversity Project Network for K-12 Neurodiversity Education and Advocacy (NNEA) offers a suggested children's book and movie list. Neurodivergent authors could be invited to speak to students and/or parents. Classroom instruction could be provided in a more structured format by using slides or videos available at <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/>. Hallway neurodiversity-themed displays and/or posters could be created. Multiple educational features could be wrapped into a Neurodiversity Celebration Week celebrating the strengths and interests of neurodivergent and neurotypical students (NNEA; <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/>; Armstrong, 2017).

Further, educational outcomes for neurodivergent students are greatly improved by efforts which facilitate and support their active participation within a classroom (Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). Teachers are critical to the success of these efforts. Researchers have identified a number of successful strategies for teachers to develop meaningful relationships with neurodivergent students, including (1) actively listening and noticing their neurodivergent students, supporting appropriate responses to students' specific needs; and (2) talking to and observing their neurodivergent students to learn about their students' background, interests, likes, and dislikes, demonstrating a commitment to get to know such students and building trust (Rentenbach et al, 2017; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). For example, the first five minutes of the school day could be used to have a conversation with students about their outside interests and experiences or students/families could be invited to briefly talk about themselves (Provenzano, 2022). Teachers can plan daily class schedules taking into account when neurodivergent students have better concentration or feel most calm (Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). Knowledge of students' interests also allows teachers to encourage and support socialization in the classroom by incorporating students' interests and strengths into class activities (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012; Dev, 2014; Hart & Whalon, 2011; Koegel, Vernon, Koegel, Koegel, & Paullin, 2012; Rossetti & Goessling, 2010; Simpson et al., 2011; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020).

Beyond modeling respect, warmth, and acceptance of neurodivergent students in front of peers, teachers can also facilitate peer collaboration by assigning students to small group work. However, teachers need to take into account the social demands of the activity, and some of the skills needed to scaffold successful group work may need to be explicitly explored for some

neurodivergent students to scaffold them to successfully engage with their peers (Williams, 2018). Peer buddies can play an important role in modeling social behavior and helping their neurodivergent peer stay focused (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Lucas, 2011; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). Buddies can also cross social barriers more effectively than adults and act as a conduit between neurodivergent students, other members of the classroom, and teachers (Biggs et al., 2017; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). Additionally, neurotypical students can gain valuable skills working in these roles.

Direct facilitation of friendships can be more challenging. Although well-intentioned, some interventions can compound social communication differences, reduce autonomy, and impact skill development. Acting as a “spark” without interrupting the social flow can be more effective. Some barriers to full social inclusion can include fear of ostracism amongst peers, and challenges with relationships that may widen with age (Able, et al., 2014).

Next, promoting a sense of personal agency amongst neurodivergent students can promote inclusion. Children who develop skills related to self-control and insight can be more independent and participate more effectively in the classroom. They may enjoy a feeling of mastery and have a more positive view of themselves. As appropriate, neurodivergent students could benefit from self-assessments and collaboration in their own education plan. Students should be supported to develop coping skills to self-manage certain feelings or behavior that is harmful. Importantly, efforts to conform to neurotypical standards have been associated with negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality (Ne’eman, 2021). Care should be taken to target behaviors which are inherently harmful, as opposed to *different*. For example, insisting an autistic student establish and maintain eye contact may conversely interfere with communication, as eye contact has been found to cause some students to experience, for example, (1) negative emotional reactions (e.g., anxiety, panic and fear), (2) negative physiological reactions (e.g., dizziness, increased heart rate, nausea and headaches), and (3) feelings of invasion or forced intimacy (Trevisan, 2017).

Classrooms also need to be “relationally and environmentally inclusive in order for neurodiverse students to thrive socially and academically” (Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020). With respect to the physical environment of classrooms, research is beginning to provide insight into biological mechanisms involved in sensory modulation challenges, and supports the conclusion that “sensory hyper-responsivity is distracting, exhausting, and anxiety provoking” (Waisman, et al., 2022). As such, some neurodivergent students require modifications to the classroom to reduce sensory overload *before* academic engagement can occur. Researchers have identified many strategies to address sensory processing differences, including: (1) reducing excess noise in the classroom by using nonverbal signals such as hand signals or light systems rather than clapping or speaking loudly (Menear & Smith, 2011; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020); (2) dimming or turning off lights in designated areas (Waisman, et al., 2022); (3) offering varied sensory choices

in classrooms (Waisman, et al., 2022); and (4) providing predictability in the organization of the classroom, including simple strategies such as clearly labeling materials and being consistent with the location of activities (Simpson et al., 2010; Darretxe & Sepulveda, 2011; cited in Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020).

Beyond addressing sensory modulation challenges, classrooms can be modified to provide *classwide* supports, accessible to all learners. These universal supports are easier for teachers to utilize consistently and do not single out individual students (Williams, 2018). Moreover, such strategies emphasize the similarities between students' needs, and could be explicitly framed as such. Examples include (1) sensory and self-regulation supports, such as whole-class movement breaks (Williams, 2018) and (2) giving all students a choice in how they engage in learning (e.g., incorporating flexible seating such as therapy/stability balls or wobble stools into the classroom environment and allowing students to decide when to use them) (Grimm, 2020). Offering flexible seating options to all students, beginning class with a calming meditation, creating a structured, predictable environment, and presenting information in a number of different formats are other examples of whole classroom accommodations (Provenzano, 2022; Williams, 2018).

A final component to consider and implement in establishing an inclusive educational environment is diversity and flexibility in teaching methodology. Research has shown the importance of curriculum adaptations (e.g. simplifying instructions, slowing down the pace, breaking down tasks into smaller components, and giving students extra time to process and respond to information given) to empower neurodivergent students to be active participants in their learning and better access the content being taught (Mirfin-Veitch, et al., 2020).

Professional development can help support these practices. Some concepts can be applied from training related to Social Emotional Learning. Special education staff could help guide educational efforts specific to neurodiversity. This could include education, specific advice on social scaffolding, masking or camouflaging behaviors, and communication preferences. There are also free professional development resources on neurodiversity and related specific conditions on <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/resource-hub>. The Neurodiversity Week website also offers student instruction resources. Learning About Neurodiversity in School (LEANS) is an free online educational program introducing the concept of neurodiversity to children ages 8-11 (<https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/leans>) and there are free online general resources on inclusion of neurodivergent peers and/or challenging behaviors from nonprofit Kids Included Together (<https://www.kit.org/>).

Best practices for supporting an inclusive educational environment include educating students about neurodiversity, encouraging and fostering supportive, respectful, and meaningful relationships between neurodivergent students and their peers, teachers, and staff, and modifying the physical environment of the classroom to be responsive to all

students' needs, and to provide supports, accessible to all learners. Implementation of these practices will benefit all students within District 39.

III. Conclusion

The CRC completed a study on how to foster equitable and inclusive learning environments and support a connected culture of acceptance, understanding, and inclusivity for neurodivergent students within both the general education and special education settings. Our year-long study found that all children benefit from fostering an inclusive and connected environment that values both neurodivergent and neurotypical students for their unique strengths and needs. Through neurodiversity education and awareness, school districts can cultivate a culture that strongly values and respects each student's unique strengths and areas of need, encouraging an inclusive environment of empathy, understanding, and acceptance.

Survey results from District 39 parents and teachers and staff indicated a large majority (77% and 80.6% respectively) would like to learn more strategies to promote an inclusive classroom environment. In order to advance understanding and appreciation within the District, there needs to be consistent communication, education, and awareness of neurodiversity.

The success of neurodivergent students in school often looks different from that of their neurotypical peers because of their unique strengths and areas for growth. Traditional Social Emotional Learning (SEL) practices may not address the specific needs of neurodivergent students. For example, traditional SEL practices may focus on teaching students to read facial expressions and body language as a way to enhance their social skills, but this approach may not be effective for neurodivergent students who may struggle with interpreting nonverbal cues or have difficulty with social communication. To support the differentiated needs of learners, it is essential to embrace an inclusive and personalized approach that recognizes individual variation in brain development. This inclusive approach celebrates individual differences and is grounded in a holistic perspective that equips students with lifelong skills.

The CRC finds that creating a culture of connectedness that values awareness, understanding, acceptance, empathy, inclusivity, and appreciation will significantly benefit both neurodivergent and neurotypical students and their families. This will further support mental health, social emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and academic success for all District 39 students. The CRC believes that these recommendations will help support District 39's mission, current strategic plan, and most importantly, the students and families.

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<https://wp.nyu.edu/asdnestegg/2018/02/27/lessons-about-inclusion-from-nest-part-2/>

V. Resource List

Information was gathered from multiple sources including the following below. A list of resources was originally provided to the CRC and compiled by Amy Wechsler, MSW, LCSW, Clinical Director and Founder of PlayWorks Therapy, in collaboration with her staff of pediatric therapists. Additional resources were added to the original list by CRC members.

General Resources:

1. [NeuroClastic](#)
2. [Therapist Neurodiversity Collective](#)
3. [Emily Lees, Autistic SLT](#)

4. [Alexandria Zachos, MS, CCC-SLP, Meaningful Speech](#)
5. [Rachel Dorsey, MS, CCC-SLP, Autistic SLP](#)
6. [Dr. Nick Walker, Neuroqueer](#)
7. [The Autistic OT](#)
8. [Neurodiversity Hub](#)
9. [David Flood](#)
10. [Kerry Magro](#)
11. [Autistic Self-Advocacy Network](#)
12. [Autism Level Up](#)
13. [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#)
14. [Bridges Learning System](#)
15. [The Informed SLP](#)
16. [Speech Dude and Jessie Ginsburg](#)
17. [ASD Nest Support Project](#)
18. [Kids Create Change](#)
19. [Options for College Success](#)
20. [The Nora Project](#)
21. [Tellin Tales Theatre](#)
22. [JJ's List](#)
23. [Kids Included Together](#)
24. [Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#)
25. [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#)
26. [Assessment of Individual Ableism](#)
27. [Neurodivergent Affirming Goals: Social Engagement and Participation](#)
28. [IEP Makeovers for Neurodivergent Children](#)
29. [How to Teach Pragmatic Language Without Being Ableist](#)
30. [Neurodivergent](#)
31. [Ability and Neurodiversity Terms - Boston University](#)
32. [Neurodiversity-affirming language: A letter to your child's support network | Reframing Autism](#)
33. [Neurodiversity is Diversity](#)
34. [Autistic Communication and Interaction Styles](#)
35. [Learning About Neurodiversity at School \(LEANS\)](#)
36. [How Literary Spaces Can Support Neurodivergent Readers and Writers](#)
37. [Working with Schools from Raising a Sensory Smart Kid](#)
38. [Neurodiversity: The Future of Special Education?](#)
39. [Making Learning Personal: The Growing Diversity in Today's Classroom](#)
40. [WholeHearted School Counseling](#)
41. [A Strengths-Based Approach to Autism](#)
42. [What Is ADHD? It's Not Misbehavior, Manipulation, or Permissive Parenting](#)
43. [Neurodiversity Strengths Checklist](#)
44. [Responding to Neurodiversity in the Education Context: An Integrative Literature Review](#)

Journal Articles:

1. [Inclusive Practices for Neurodevelopmental Research](#)

2. [Neurodiverse Affirming Practices are a Moral Imperative for Occupational Therapy](#)
3. [A Non-Linear Model of Human Development: Implications for Assessment](#)
4. [Neurodiversity in Education](#)
5. [Neurodiversity in Education - Digest #153](#)
6. [Neurodiversity and the Deep Structure of Schools](#)
7. [Factors Affecting The Perception of Disability: A Developmental Perspective](#)
8. [Exploring Issues of Disability in Children's Literature Discussions](#)
9. [Social Perspective Taking: A Professional Development Induction to Improve Teacher-Student Relationships and Student Learning](#)

Books:

1. [*What Can a Body Do?* by Sara Hendren](#)
2. [*We're Not Broken* by Eric M. Garcia](#)
3. [*Neurodiversity in the Classroom* by Thomas Armstrong](#)
4. [*The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of your Differently Wired Brain* by Thomas Armstrong](#)
5. [*Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism* by Barry M. Prizant](#)
6. [*Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* by Temple Grandin](#)
7. [*The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism* by Naoki Higashida, Ka Yoshida, and David Mitchell](#)

Children's Books:

1. [*Some Brains: A Book Celebrating Neurodiversity*](#)
2. [*The Courage to Be Kind*](#)
3. [*We Move Together*](#)
4. [*Room for Us All*](#)
5. [*My Brain is Autistic*](#)
6. [*My Brother Otto*](#)
7. [*Eli, Included*](#)
8. [*Hannah's Down Syndrome Superpowers*](#)
9. [*Completely Matt: An ADHD Story*](#)
10. [*Sensory Seeking Sloth*](#)
11. [*Something to Say About My Communication Device*](#)
12. [*A Day with No Words*](#)
13. [*My Brain is Magic: A Sensory-Seeking Celebration*](#)

Example Alternative Frameworks:

1. [*Dynamic Assessment of Social Emotional Learning*](#)
2. [*The Autism Classification System of Functioning: Social Communication \(ACSF\)*](#)

VI. Appendices

A. Appendix A: Diagnoses Considered under the Umbrella of Neurodiversity

Examples within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) <i>this is not an exhaustive list*</i>
Neurodevelopmental Disorders Examples: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Language Disorder, Stuttering, Specific Learning Disability, Tic Disorders
Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders
Bipolar and Related Disorders
Depressive Disorders Examples: Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder
Anxiety Disorders Examples: Separation Anxiety Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder
Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders
Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders
Dissociative Disorders Example: Dissociative Identity Disorder
Somatic Symptom and Related Disorders
Feeding and Eating Disorders Examples: Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, Anorexia Nervosa
Disruptive, Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders Example: Oppositional Defiant Disorder
Personality Disorders
Other Mental Disorders
Other Adverse Effects of Medication
Other Conditions That May Be a Focus of Clinical Attention Example: Abuse and Neglect
<p>Note: There are other descriptive terms that may provide valid clinical information on developmental presentations (not part of the DSM-V, but used within the therapeutic setting or within certain communities) such as Sensory Processing Disorder or Childhood Apraxia of Speech. There are also several medical diagnoses (i.e. innate qualifiers) that are considered neurodivergent. Examples include: Down syndrome, Edwards syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome.</p> <p><i>*Chart compiled by PlayWorks Therapy</i></p>

B. Appendix B: Communications to District 39 Families, Teachers, and Staff

Email to District 39 Families, Teachers, and Staff

Dear District 39 Families,

The District 39 Community Review Committee (CRC), composed of parents, teaching staff, and administrators from the District, chooses a focus area to research each year and provide recommendations to the District 39 Board of Education to support the needs of students and families.

As in previous years, this year's topic, "A Culture of Connectedness: An Empathic and Inclusive Community for Neurodivergent Students" aligns with the District's strategic plan. The CRC is hoping to gather input from our families as part of our research that will inform our recommendations to the District. Please complete the following survey to help us learn about parent understanding of neurodiversity and how teachers and staff can best partner with families to create an equitable learning environment for neurodivergent students across all grade levels.

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human brains. It describes the idea that people interact and experience the world differently based on the unique way that their brain works. These differences may influence a person's sociability, learning, attention, mood, and the way they process information, speak, and understand.

Neurodivergent means having a brain that functions in ways which diverge from the dominant societal standards of "normal." Neurodivergent is not a medical term. It is a way to describe people using words other than "normal" and "abnormal." This also reminds us that there is no single definition of "normal" for how the human brain works.

We ask that you please complete this quick survey by Wednesday, Feb. 22 to help us learn about parent understanding of neurodiversity and how teachers and staff can best partner with families to create an equitable learning environment for neurodivergent students across all grade levels.

Thank you for your participation!

Sincerely,

Amy Wechsler Ross, Community Review Committee President

Principal Newsletter Message to Request Parent Input:

Community Review Committee (CRC) Is Looking For Feedback

Each year, the District 39 Community Review Committee (CRC) chooses a focus area to research and provide recommendations to the District 39 Board of Education to help support the needs of students and families. This year’s topic is “A Culture of Connectedness: An Empathic and Inclusive Community for Neurodivergent Students.” The Committee is asking families to complete this short survey to help us learn about parent understanding of neurodiversity and how teachers and staff can best partner with families to create an equitable learning environment for neurodivergent students across all grade levels. Thank you for your participation. The survey will close on Wednesday, Feb. 22.

C. Appendix C: Parent Perception Survey

Parent Perception Survey Introduction

Each year, the District 39 Community Review Committee (CRC), which is composed of parents, teaching staff, and administrators from the District, chooses a focus area to research and provide recommendations to the District 39 Board of Education to help support the needs of students and families.

This year’s topic is “A Culture of Connectedness: An Empathic and Inclusive Community for Neurodivergent Students.” Neurodiversity is the diversity of human brains. It describes the idea that people interact and experience the world differently based on the unique way their brain works. These differences may influence a person's sociability, learning, attention, mood, and the way they process information, speak, and understand.

Feedback from District families is an important part of our research and will play a role in forming our recommendations.

We ask that you please complete this quick survey by Wednesday, Feb. 22 to help us learn about parent understanding of neurodiversity and how teachers and staff can best partner with families to create an equitable learning environment for neurodivergent students across all grade levels.

Thank you for your participation!

Parent Perception Survey

What school(s) do your child(ren) currently attend? [Multi-Select]

- Central
- Harper
- McKenzie
- Romona
- Highcrest
- Wilmette Junior High

I understand the concept of neurodiversity (*understood as the diversity of human brains and cognition that might influence a person's sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions*).

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

My child/children are neurodivergent learners (*meaning having a brain that functions in ways which diverge from the dominant societal standards of “normal”, and impacting the way they learn, socialize, etc.*)

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

There are neurodivergent learners in my child(ren)’s school.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

Creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in the general education classroom supports academic success in PK-8 students.

Answer Choices: Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

I understand the strategies my children’s teachers use to foster tolerance and acceptance amongst students and support inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in general education classroom.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

I would like to learn strategies to teach my child about fostering an inclusive environment at school with their neurodivergent peers.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

In your opinion, how much emphasis does D39 put on supporting an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in the general education classrooms?

Answer Choices:

- a. I don’t know enough to answer
- b. Far too little emphasis
- c. Too little emphasis
- d. Right amount of emphasis
- e. Too much emphasis
- f. Far too much emphasis

Are you a member or know of any member of The Parent Association for Student Services in District 39 (PASS39) - *a parent organization committed to supporting parents of children with learning, behavioral, emotional, and developmental challenges in D39?*

Answer Choices: Yes No

Would you agree to be interviewed about your thoughts on current methods used by D39 to support inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners?

Answer Choices: Yes No

Please share any additional feedback for District 39 regarding supporting inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners.

[Optional free text response]

D. Appendix D: Teacher and Staff Perception Survey

Teacher and Staff Perception Survey Introduction

The District 39 Community Review Committee (CRC), composed of parents, teaching staff, and administrators from the District, chooses a focus area to research each year and provide recommendations to the District 39 Board of Education to support the needs of students and families.

As in previous years, this year’s topic, “A Culture of Connectedness: An Empathic and Inclusive Community for Neurodivergent Students” aligns with the District’s strategic plan. The CRC is hoping to gather teachers' input as part of our research that will inform our recommendations to the District. Please complete THIS SURVEY to help us learn about teachers' understanding of **neurodiversity** and how teachers and staff can best partner with families to create an equitable learning environment for **neurodivergent** students across the grade levels.

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human brains and cognition that might influence a person's sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions.

Neurodivergent means having a brain that functions in ways which diverge from the dominant societal standards of “normal.” *Neurodivergent is not a medical term. It is a way to describe people using words other than “normal” and “abnormal.” This also reminds us that there is no single definition of “normal” for how the human brain works.*

Teacher and Staff Perception Survey

What school(s) do you currently work at?

- Central
- Harper
- McKenzie
- Romona
- Highcrest
- Wilmette Junior High

I understand the concept of neurodiversity (*understood as the diversity of human brains and cognition that might influence a person's sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions*).

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

There are neurodivergent learners in my classroom (*meaning having a brain that functions in ways which diverge from the dominant societal standards of “normal”, and impacting the way they learn, socialize, etc.*).

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

Creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners supports academic success in PK-8 students.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

I utilize different strategies to foster tolerance and acceptance amongst students and support inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in my classroom.

Answer Choices: Never Rarely Sometimes Always Often

I would like to know more about how to foster tolerance and acceptance for my neurodivergent students.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

In your opinion, how much emphasis does D39 put on supporting inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners?

Answer Choices:

- a. I don't know enough to answer
- b. Far too little emphasis
- c. Too little emphasis
- d. Right amount of emphasis
- e. Too much emphasis
- f. Far too much emphasis

List the specific strategies that you use in your classroom to create and support an inclusive culture. Please list at least three strategies.

[Optional free text response]

What additional resources or training would you like to receive to further foster an inclusive environment in your classroom/school?

[Optional free text response]

Please share any additional feedback for District 39 regarding supporting an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners.

[Optional free text response]

Would you agree to be interviewed regarding this topic?

Answer Choices: Yes No

E. Appendix E: Student Perception Survey

Student Perception Survey Introduction

One of the goals of our school District 39 is to create an inclusive environment for all the students in every school in the District. We believe that tolerance and acceptance is essential to create a positive school experience for all our students.

Everyone is different and we notice that for some students learning and socializing with their peers is more challenging than for the others. Please complete THIS SURVEY to help us learn about students' understanding of how teachers and students themselves can create an inclusive environment for everyone in their school.

Student Perception Survey

Each person's brain works differently and not every student learns or interacts with others in the same way.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

There are students in my classroom who use different strategies to learn (e.g. some people prefer when it is quiet, some need to move around, some draw charts, etc.).

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

Students who use different strategies to learn or interact with others are generally accepted by their peers.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

Teachers try to support and help students who learn and interact with peers in different ways.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

Students try to support and help their friends who learn and interact with peers in different ways.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

How do you make students who may learn or interact differently than you feel part of the community in your classroom?*Please give one or two examples.*
[Optional free text response]

F. Appendix F: Local School District Survey

Message for Local School District Survey

A committee of staff and parents in District 39 are conducting a survey to better understand how neurodiversity is understood within local schools, districts, and community organizations. We invite you to participate and share your perspectives. Your input is valuable in creating inclusive environments for all students while also shaping the future of neurodiversity support in education and the community. You and your group are welcome to view our findings once the report is published, and we hope that this work will be beneficial to the larger educational community. Please visit [this link](#) to take the survey. Thank you in advance for your participation!

Local School District Survey

1. What school or organization are you reporting on?

SHORT ANSWER RESPONSE

2. What's your role within the school or organization?

SHORT ANSWER RESPONSE

3. I am familiar with the concept of neurodiversity (*understood as the diversity of human brains and cognition that might influence a person's sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions*).

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

4. What does creating an inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners mean/look like in your school and/or district?

OPEN ENDED RESPONSE FIELD

5. Our organization prioritizes providing professional development for our staff to utilize neurodiversity-affirming strategies to foster understanding and acceptance amongst students and support inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in my classroom.

Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure

<p>6. Please provide the names of professional development courses your staff has found helpful.</p> <p>OPEN ENDED RESPONSE FIELD</p>
<p>7. Our staff utilize neurodiversity-affirming strategies to foster understanding and acceptance amongst students and support inclusive culture for neurodivergent learners in my classroom.</p> <p>Answer Choices: Yes No Unsure</p>
<p>8. If so, please provide examples</p> <p>OPEN ENDED RESPONSE FIELD</p>
<p>9. Are you willing to be contacted to elaborate on your responses? Please provide your contact details if you would like to be contacted for an interview.</p> <p>OPEN ENDED RESPONSE FIELD</p>

G. Appendix G: Peer Group List

Peer Group List provided by Dr. Kari Cremascoli

Peer Groups		
Referendum Peer Group	New Trier Feeders	Similar Districts (Enrollment, Low Income)
Avoca SD 37	Avoca SD 37	Aptakisic-Tripp CCSD 102
Glencoe SD 35	Glencoe SD 35	Deerfield SD 109
Glenview CCSD 34	Kenilworth SD 38	Frankfort CCSD 157C
Golf ESD 67	Sunset Ridge SD 29	Fremont SD 79
Kenilworth SD 38	Wilmette SD 39	Hinsdale CCSD 181
Lincolnwood SD 74	Winnetka SD 36	Kildeer Countryside CCSD 96
Morton Grove SD 70		Libertyville SD 70
Niles ESD 71		Lincolnshire-Prairieview SD 103
Northbrook ESD 27		Park Ridge CCSD 64
Northbrook SD 28		Wilmette SD 39
Northbrook/Glenview SD 30		
Skokie SD 73-5		
Sunset Ridge SD 29		
Wilmette SD 39		
Winnetka SD 36		

H. Appendix H: Expanded Recommendations with Examples

(1) **Social Emotional:** Research and implement Social Emotional Learning practices, curriculums and frameworks that are supportive of the social-emotional development and well-being of neurodivergent students.

- a. Educate staff on neurodiversity-affirming practices.
 - i. Prioritize professional development for all staff that highlights neurodivergent voices and perspectives including those with invisible disabilities.
 - 1. Examples of neurodiversity-affirming professional development:
 - a. [Collaborative and Proactive Solutions](#)
 - b. [Learn Play Thrive](#)

- c. [Rachel Dorsey, Autistic SLP](#)
 - d. [Autism Level Up!](#)
 - e. [The Neurodivergent Teacher](#)
 - f. [Revelations in Education](#)
 - ii. Emphasize and communicate the practice of **presuming competence** of neurodivergent students to help create an inclusive and accepting environment for all students.
 - 1. Emphasize the importance of building and supporting the teacher-student relationship and the critical role that staff play in modeling positive interactions with neurodivergent students (e.g. talking to and observing neurodivergent students for the purpose of learning about their background, interests, and likes and dislikes, refraining from talking about students in front of them, etc).
- b. Teach students about neurodiversity.
 - i. Teach all students about neurodiversity through structured and unstructured learning opportunities. For example, teachers can teach students about neurodiversity during the Responsive Classroom morning meeting time. Within this context, teachers can encourage neurodivergent students to suggest topics for discussion.
 - ii. Teach neurodivergent and neurotypical students interpersonal skills that allow them the ability to learn to attend to body cues and facial expressions of others and recognize discomfort, in order to inform how they may need to modify their interactions.
- c. Review procedures and ensure all students are taken into consideration.
 - i. Educate teachers and staff on derogatory comments relating to perceived differences and the communication challenges that may occur between neurodivergent and neurotypical students. Educate students on affirming practices for reparative and restorative conversations between students that encourage **self-advocacy**, support developing insight, and demonstrate respect for **personal agency**.
 - ii. Establish an environment that emphasizes conversations that lead to insight and understanding rather than punitive consequences for derogatory comments on perceived differences.
- d. Research and implement affirming behavioral frameworks and support strategies for all students.
 - i. Demystify common beliefs about “behavior” and reframe in the context of learning styles (for example, a child asking a teacher to repeat information may have difficulty processing spoken information).
 - ii. Research and implement affirming **trauma-informed** behavioral frameworks and support strategies for all students that supports **self-advocacy**, **bodily autonomy**,

- and **respect for personal agency**. Create a process for students who witness recurrent dysregulated behavior to talk through their feelings.
- iii. Discontinue use of public accountability systems like clip charts and transition to affirming classroom management systems.
- e. Research effective sensory and regulatory supports for both neurodivergent and neurotypical students.
- i. Educate and train teachers and staff on effective usage of sensory supports (e.g. determining when sensory supports are needed in the moment, duration and intensity of sensory supports, etc.)
 - ii. Equip classrooms and common spaces (e.g. the lunch room or music room) with necessary sensory supports such as (not an exhaustive list) noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, weighted blankets or lap pads, visual schedules, sensory bins or boxes, calming scents like lavender or peppermint, therapeutic balls or cushions for seating, wiggle seats or bouncy bands for chair, tactile or textured materials for fidgeting, chewable jewelry, sensory paths or paths with different textures, indoor swings or hammock, and quiet areas or sensory rooms for breaks.
 - iii. Provide sensory supports on field trips for all children to access such as headphones, a hat, or putty.
 - iv. Create a physical space in the classroom to support student self-regulation like a calming corner that is equipped with sensory and relaxation tools. Consider creating calming areas in commonly used spaces such as the art room or library.
- f. Review paraprofessional and assistant teacher staffing to ensure classroom needs are commensurate with available support.
- i. Increase paraprofessional staffing and assistant teacher staffing in order to have more adults in the classroom to support both neurodivergent and neurotypical learners (e.g. consider usage of full time teacher’s assistants beyond kindergarten).

(2) Fostering Connection: Provide education and opportunities for connection and understanding between neurodivergent and neurotypical students.

- a. Research ways to celebrate the strengths and interests of all students.
 - i. Institute a district-wide Neurodiversity Celebration Week (<https://www.neurodiversityweek.com>) celebrating the strengths and interests of neurodivergent and neurotypical students. Include peer voices with an emphasis on those with invisible disabilities. Highlight famous neurodivergent individuals.
- b. Provide opportunities for relationship building between neurotypical and neurodivergent students.
 - i. Provide opportunities for peer buddy, lunch bunch, mentoring activities, and/or after school programming that fosters relationship building, support, and inclusion for neurodivergent and neurotypical students across all grade levels.

- ii. Consider creative table arrangements like the Capri Sun Together Table initiative to foster inclusivity in the lunchroom.
 - iii. Promote playground use directly before and after school for mixed-age free play.
 - iv. Consider facilitating before or after school “play club,” potentially with PTO involvement (<https://letgrow.org/program/play-club/>).
- c. Increase opportunities for representation and sense of belonging for neurodivergent students through diversification of school materials, school enrichment activities, and school decorations.
- i. Bring in neurodivergent authors and other speakers to speak to students and/or parents (e.g. Kerry Magro <https://kerrymagro.com>).
- d. Explore methods to promote *self-advocacy* and decrease exclusivity amongst students through differentiated communication approaches.
- i. Encourage *self-advocacy* when exclusivity is observed between students.
- (3) **Parent Education:** Provide parent education around neurodiversity and ensure neurodivergent students are valued and represented in all parent education and events.
- a. Research and implement a shared language around neurodiversity that emphasizes affirming practices and promotes inclusivity and support for neurodivergent learners.
 - b. Demonstrate neurodiversity-affirming values in school communications.
 - i. Update language on website and school communications to best demonstrate neurodiversity-affirming values.
 - c. Increase representation of neurodivergent students in District 39’s parent education series.
 - d. Partner with external organizations to further collaborate and support parent understanding of neurodiversity.
 - i. Partner with FAN (Family Action Network) or New Trier to sponsor parent education events around neurodiversity.
 - e. Explore parent interest in alternative formats for parent education and parent-to-parent community building.
 - i. Offer webinars and/or in-person seminars about neurodiversity for parents on an individual school level (e.g. a seminar could be offered on a back-to-school night) as well as district level.
 - ii. Emphasize that affirming neurodiversity practices support and benefit all students.
 - f. Increase partnership and collaboration between District 39 and PASS39 to improve communication, engagement, and visibility of PASS39 within the school's parent community.