



Learning Differences Programme

Programme strategy

Unlocking the potential of all learners

Introduction

Children bring wonder, curiosity, and eagerness to their first days of school, along with identities that are forged by their unique attributes and experiences. We all want better lives for the next generation. We also know that a better future and a good education are linked, that learning today and opportunity tomorrow are intertwined and that educated citizens contribute to healthier and more vibrant communities.

Appreciating the value of education, our fundamental sense of justice demands that every child has the chance to develop skills and knowledge to realise his or her potential. Too often, however, schools do not serve the students that need them the most to thrive in a changing world. Fairness demands that we do better.

“Together we can build a world in which schools unlock the creativity and power of every young person and equip each one to shape more just and equitable communities.”

Our vision and approach

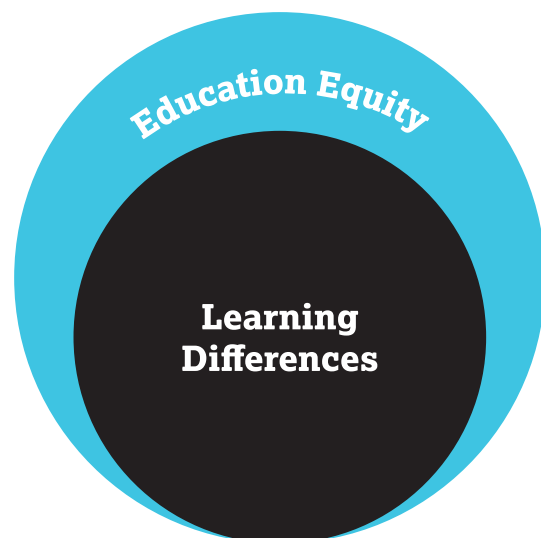
Oak Foundation's Learning Differences Programme strategically partners with and invests in not-for-profit organisations that improve education for students with learning differences. For Oak Foundation, the learning differences population includes students who have specific learning disabilities (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia) as well as individuals who may have other related neurological processing challenges that can impact learning (such as attention deficits, sensory processing disorders and executive function challenges).¹

We believe that every student should benefit from engaging and rigorous educational opportunities regardless of personal and social identifiers that privilege some students and marginalise others such as learning differences, race, income, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and religion.

In our work, we are particularly focused on efforts that support students with learning differences who experience further marginalisation due to racism and poverty.

We partner with organisations that create learning environments to support and empower the most marginalised young people globally. In each of the regions we work in, we listen closely to parents and families, students and educators to help us understand who is at the margins.

“Every student should benefit from engaging and rigorous educational opportunities regardless of personal and social identifiers that privilege some students and marginalise others.”



We promote educational equity by strategically partnering with non-profit organizations that improve education for students with learning differences, particularly those who experience further marginalization due to racism and poverty.

¹ Oak includes both those who have been formally identified for special education and related services as well as those who do not meet diagnostic criteria but who experience challenges between the ways they best learn and the ways classrooms and instruction have typically been designed. An estimated 1 in 5 people experience these types of learning differences in the United States.

Rethinking ways learning happens



Our grantee partners rethink ways learning happens for students and better prepare adults to engage and support all students. We support these efforts so that students will experience learning that builds **four key attributes**:

1. A sense of **belonging** through strong relationships that promote acceptance, connection, support and empathy in their learning environment;
2. Mastery through **engagement** with rigorous content, demonstration of its understanding, and critical reflection on new material;
3. **Agency** through their capacity and habit to form and act on intentions; and
4. **Purpose** through understanding of personal values and their relationship to learning and to long-term goals.

These attributes help students develop **metacognition** – the ability to reflect on their own learning, achievements, and identity and to plan, implement, and evaluate strategies to meet their needs as learners. Ensuring that marginalised students, especially those with learning differences, develop these critical attributes requires providing more responsive and unique learning experiences, which benefit all students. And we believe that investing in educators’ ability to create responsive and unique learning experiences will benefit all students, not only those with learning differences.

Our view of the problem

Too often for too many students, the environments in which they learn do not support their success. In the United States and in many countries around the world, schools were organised to sort students efficiently into narrow career paths. Many education systems maintain this century-old model designed to provide standardized skills and knowledge to prepare workers for formulaic jobs, not workplaces that routinely require critical thinking or problem solving.

Designed to meet the needs of an “average student,” many schools continue to move students uniformly through the same curriculum and assessments based on their age regardless of their understanding or interests. As a result, schools can push through some students despite gaps in their understanding while inhibiting others from accelerating through content in the interest of management and order.

This one-size-fits all approach to teaching and learning is particularly damaging for students who do not conform to the “average,” or are otherwise marginalised due to learning differences, race, income, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or religion.

“In a world of growing complexity, education systems define student success so narrowly that they fail to consider the importance of social and emotional wellbeing to prepare students for a changing world.”



Advances in cognitive science and neuroscience have provided more understanding than ever about human development from the science of reading to the link between academic mastery and social and emotional growth, yet changes in school organisation and instructional practice are slow to respond to this new information. These are challenges of capacity not caring, of design not desire.

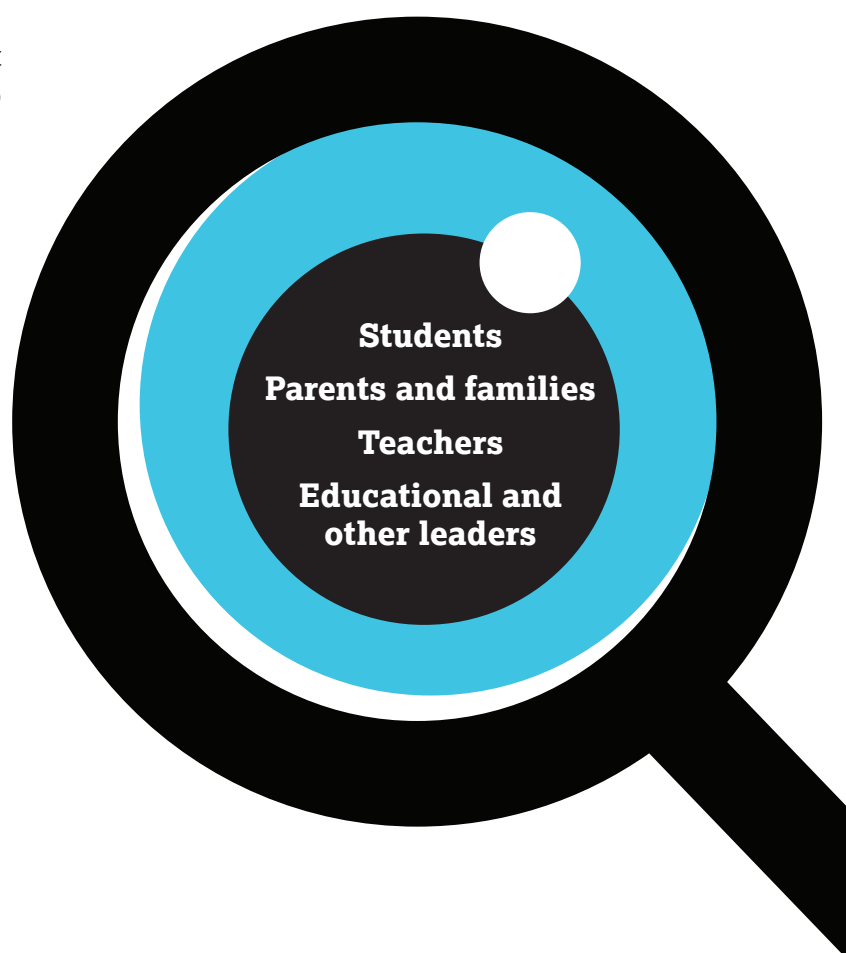
A strategy centered on students, parents and families, teachers, educational and other leaders

The Learning Differences Programme reexamined our priorities in 2018 and intentionally followed a process that allowed us to evolve our understanding of why and how to keep marginalised students and their communities at the center of our strategy. In our planning process, we acknowledged our own biases and misconceptions and sought to draw heavily on the knowledge and experiences of people closest to the problems we seek to address. We spoke to students, parents and families, educators and other leaders.

This is what they told us:

- **students** seek to gain skills and master rigorous content, to know themselves as learners and to experience agency and a sense of belonging;
- **parents and families** want and need to understand how their children learn and to play a part in transforming the settings in which they learn;
- **teachers** seek to understand how students learn and to respond to their unique and diverse needs; and
- **educational and other leaders** seek to broaden their understanding of student success as they reimagine the systems in which students learn.

Our updated strategy seeks to address the systemic root causes of the challenges that students locked out of opportunity confront. It reflects our commitment to supporting young people who are disproportionately affected by an education system not yet designed to serve them well.



3 steps to impact through building and spreading knowledge

The Learning Differences Programme promotes more equitable educational experiences by leveraging knowledge and information to bring about better outcomes for every student, particularly those who learn differently. We focus on three areas of partnership and investment that provide the assistance and support needed to build systems that unlock the potential of all students.

1. Accelerate development of broader measures of student success and their widespread adoption in education policy and practice.

As schools, teachers and education systems recognize the variability of each learner and reimagine classrooms with a broader understanding of how students learn, we seek to better understand what is working. To this end, we support organisations that:

- Conduct research to understand how teaching and learning can be transformed to unlock the potential of students with learning differences.
- Deepen understanding of how structural racism and other power systems intersect with and shape students' agency and metacognition.
- Bring together students, parents and families, educators, leaders and others to explore and pursue new ways to improve marginalised students' education.

2. Build the knowledge and strengthen the will of decisionmakers to support policies that advance the needs of students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity.

As we learn what strategies, practices and conditions are most effective to help students with learning differences thrive, we seek to share that knowledge with educators and other leaders and to support approaches that work for students. To this end, we support organisations that:

- Connect research on the science of learning with the needs of students with learning differences, particularly to ensure the science of reading informs teacher professional learning and practice in literacy instruction.
- Identify and share learnings from transformational schools, especially in racially and socioeconomically diverse contexts, that help students master rigorous content while defining student success more broadly to consider academic and social and emotional wellbeing.
- Build educator understanding of teaching and learning practices that meet the needs of diverse students through the curation and dissemination of culturally-responsive and evidence-based tools and resources.
- Address racial and other biases and inequitable structures and practices within school communities that disproportionately discriminate against students of colour and other marginalised groups.
- Promote peer networks that build agency and sense of belonging among students with learning differences.

3. Elevate students' and families' voices in transforming education by amplifying their skills and agency as advocates.

We recognise that students and educators exist within a broader context and that the redesign of learning environments often requires changes in policy and systems more broadly. The voices of parents and families, students and educators are essential to promote awareness of and strengthen demand for learning environments that are responsive to students with learning differences, particularly those who are furthest from opportunity.

To this end, we support organisations that:

- Support development of broader measures of student success and their widespread adoption in education policy and practice.
- Build the knowledge and strengthen the will of decision makers to support policies that advance the needs of students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity.
- Elevate students' and families' voices in transforming education by amplifying their skills and agency as advocates.

General information

About Oak Foundation

Oak Foundation reflects the vision and values of its founders. We commit our resources to address issues of global, social and environmental concern, particularly those that have a major impact on the lives of the disadvantaged.

We have 11 programmes, through which we have made more than 4,300 grants to organisations around the world. Our six main programmes are:

- Environment
- Housing and Homelessness
- International Human Rights
- Issues Affecting Women
- Learning Differences; and
- Prevent Child Sexual Abuse.

In addition our Trustees support causes that fall outside the remits of the other programmes through the Special Interest Programme.

There are four national programmes: Brazil, Oak Foundation Denmark, India and Zimbabwe.

With offices in Europe, Africa, India and North America, we make grants to organisations in approximately 40 countries worldwide.

Where we fund

We support organisations in the United States as well as in a limited number of countries around the world. We aim to increase support to worldwide initiatives. Please see our grant database for a complete list of our grants and their locations (oakfnd.org/grant-database.html).

How to apply for funding

Oak Foundation accepts unsolicited requests for funding through a letter of enquiry. However, please note that the majority of our grant-making is not initiated by our letter of enquiry process. The submission form can be found on our website (oakfnd.org/submit-letter-of-enquiry.html).

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