Learning Differences Programme

Programme strategy
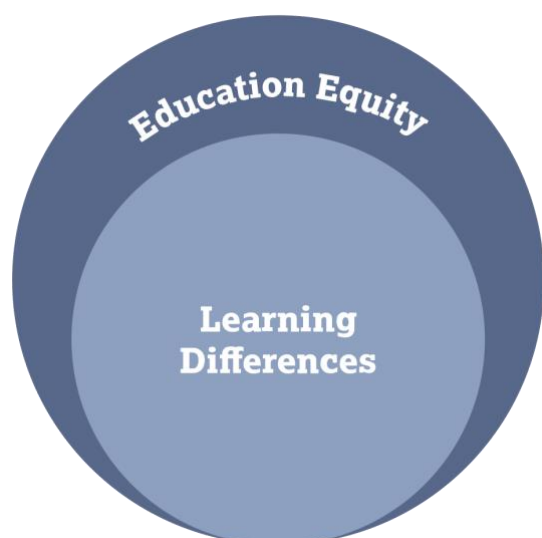## Unlocking the potential of all learners

Overview

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

What we fund
Oak Foundation's Learning Differences Programme makes grants to not-for-profit organisations that create learning environments and promote educational equity to improve education for students with learning differences, particularly those who are furthest from opportunity due to racism and poverty.

Our definition of 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). 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.

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.

Our view of the need

Too often for too many students, the environments in which they learn do not support their success. Years of research point to inequities in education for students with learning differences, students of colour, and students from low-income backgrounds.

Students with learning differences such as dyslexia or ADHD face many barriers to success, such as a lack of understanding about their learning needs, inadequate accommodations and support, and/or stigmas related to their performance. Students with learning differences are also more likely to fall far behind their peers in reading and mathematics and are more than twice as likely to drop out of school.

These challenges are often further exacerbated for students of colour who also have learning differences. Systemic inequities in education can lead to compounded barriers for students of colour with learning differences. They are more likely to be misidentified for special education services, and those who receive referrals to special education are more likely to be placed in restrictive settings and experience harsher discipline than their peers.

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. However, changes in school organisation and instructional practice are often slow to respond.

Our strategic framework

The Learning Differences Programme promotes more equitable educational experiences and systems for students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity. Our strategic framework is comprised of three approaches.

1) Build knowledge and understanding of what works best for students with learning differences

As schools, teachers, and education systems recognise the variability of each learner and reimagine classrooms with a broader understanding of how students learn, we seek to better understand what is working, particularly for students with learning differences who experience racism and poverty.

We support organisations that:

- Conduct research, with a priority on supporting more diverse perspectives, to understand how teaching and learning can be transformed to unlock the potential of students with learning differences.
- Analyse quantitative and qualitative data related to student outcomes, resource allocation, and public policy to develop policy- and system-level recommendations for improving learning environments for students with learning differences.
- Share research findings to improve teaching and learning for students with learning differences.

2) Translate knowledge into practice to build more equitable learning environments and student experiences so that students with learning differences thrive.

As we learn what research and evidence-based 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 all students, particularly students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity.

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.
- Strengthen the pipeline of talented and diverse educators who are equipped to serve students with learning differences.
- Support activities that engage students in developing social, emotional, and cognitive competencies, with a priority on building relationships, developing youth leadership, and engaging young people with learning differences in the design of supportive learning environments.
- Support the curation and dissemination of tools and resources that provide stakeholders with evidence-based strategies and frameworks for supporting students with learning differences.

3) Influence systems to embrace and adopt enabling conditions necessary for schools to meet the needs of students with learning differences and those furthest from opportunity

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.

We support organisations that:

- Build movements through grassroots and policy advocacy to advance the needs of students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity.
- Develop broader measures of student success and support their adoption in education policy and practice.
- Elevate the voices of students with learning differences and their families in transforming education by amplifying their skills and agency as advocates.

Our grantee partners

Please see our grant database for a complete list of our grants and their locations (oakfnd.org/grant-database.html). Visit our website page to learn more about our partners' work. We publish stories on a regular basis that explain our grant-making approaches.

Where we fund

We support education not-for-profit organisations in the United States as well as a limited number of global networks and initiatives.

Requests for support

The Learning Differences Programme's annual budget is currently USD 31 million. On average, we make 30 grants per year to new and existing partners. Organisations that fit our current strategy can submit an enquiry through our website. We value and consider all submissions. However, due to the volume of requests we receive, we are unable to fund all requests, despite alignment with our strategy.

We believe in providing long-term support to our partners to help create long-lasting change. We also believe that our partners benefit from having diverse funding sources to promote resiliency and to achieve the impact they desire. Therefore, we generally fund no more than 50 per cent of any project budget and no more than 20 per cent of organisational budgets. Requests to fund higher levels should be discussed with the programme officer. We provide core support grants to organisations whose overall missions align fully with our programme strategy.

We do not provide support for:

- individuals
- scholarships or tuition assistance for undergraduate or postgraduate studies
- religious organisations for religious purposes
- election campaigns
- programme grants under USD 25,000, except in special circumstances.

Download this document to learn about the grant-making timeline and process.

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. Through our grant-making, we support others to make the world a safer, fairer, and more sustainable place to live. We make grants to organisations in approximately 40 countries worldwide.

Oak Foundation has seven global and four country programmes. The seven global programmes are:
- Environment
- Housing and Homelessness
- International Human Rights
- Issues Affecting Women
- Learning Differences
- Prevent Child Sexual Abuse
- Special Interest

The four country programmes are:
- Brazil
- Oak Foundation Denmark
- India
- Zimbabwe

More information can be found at:
http://www.oakfnd.org