Now, more than ever, society is recognizing the importance of respecting the individuality of all people. The classroom, school bus, lunchroom, gymnasium, assembly, athletic field, playground and other school environments are places to model, learn, and teach disability awareness and etiquette. When everyone models respect in everyday interactions and when students see this, they too learn to value and admire all people for who they are and what they do.

The messages that leaders and educators convey play an important role in how students react. The fast pace of today’s society, including the media and social networking, bombards students with multiple messages. All school district employees have the potential to model pro-active disability awareness messages for students and each other.

Establishing respectful and trusting relationships is fundamental to achieving an appropriate educational environment for all. Children and adults without the experience of living or working with a person with a disability, may not have a frame of reference and may find it awkward or uncomfortable being with a person with disabilities, chronic health care needs or who needs accommodations.

As an educator, creating equal learning opportunities for students with disabilities or chronic health care needs based on respect and understanding is an essential ingredient for their success. Consider building upon or creating opportunities in which students with and without disabilities and chronic health care needs can share positive experiences together. Children are inherently curious and are taught to be observant. If a student comments or asks questions, it is an opportunity for a teaching moment. Treat such inquiries as attempts to better understand or get to know another person from a perspective of informed honesty, openness, dignity and respect.

Guiding Principles: Showing Respect and Building Trust with Students with Disabilities

Be Prepared: Prepare for an upcoming school year. If there will be a student with a disability or chronic health care need attending your class, prior to the first day of school arrange to meet with the student and family and their advocate as appropriate. The discussion should include the person’s needs based on the disability, health care, and medical routines, and any accommodations required. Families may have practical suggestions about strategies to enhance the school environment. Throughout the year, do the same when a student with a disability or chronic health care need is new to your class.

Maintain Confidentiality: Students, parents and advocates need to be assured that information will only be discussed in appropriate settings with the appropriate people and be distributed only as necessary.

Acknowledge Disability: Do not act as if the disability does not exist. Ask clarifying questions. Do whatever you can to limit a student’s feelings of isolation and stigma. Treat the student with respect and dignity and expect that others do the same. Define needs based on the disability but omit the diagnosis (unless absolutely necessary) or “label.”

Ask Questions with Sensitivity: Ask only those questions that lead to a greater understanding of the student and the issues related to the person’s disability. Provide assurances to students and parents
that limitations due to the disability are not misunderstood. Listen carefully to statements about medical needs and continue to respect and address stated needs as these arise.

**Use "Person First" Language:** Language is a powerful tool! Identity is a person’s name, not his or her disability. For example, do not identify a person as “the diabetic.” Instead, as necessary, refer to a person as “a student with diabetes.” A person's disability does not define who she is, what she can do, and what she needs. Using "person first" language is a subtle but powerful way to shift the focus from the disability to the student. Speak about the person first, not the disability or barriers. Place the focus on abilities and achievements.

**Use Positive Language:** Avoid negative or limiting terms such as “handicapped bathroom” or “confined to a wheelchair.” Use enabling and empowering language, such as “accessible bathroom” and “the person uses a wheelchair.” Set the tone in the classroom and convey a positive message about the acceptance and treatment of students with disabilities.

**Clarify Expectations:** Ensure that a student with a disability is aware of the expectations of the class, including required coursework and student responsibilities. Work with the student to provide appropriate consideration to any modifications and accommodations as required by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Education Plan.

**Provide Adequate Personal Space:** Students who use medical equipment or devices should be given the same personal space as students without disabilities. Mobility or medical equipment are part of the personal body space of the individual who uses it. Respect the need for adequate personal space. Be respectful of a person’s privacy. Expect this of all who interact daily with the student.

**Respect Decisions:** How much and when to disclose a disability is up to the student and should be respected by all. The student and educators should decide how peer education and involvement might enhance or detract from the student's success in the school environment.

**Awareness of Multiple Service Systems:** Students with disabilities and their families interact with multiple service systems, professionals and agencies. Navigating these systems, with varying terminologies and requirements, can be overwhelming and confusing. Be cognizant that each system places numerous and conflicting requests and demands upon students and parents, multiplying stress levels and anxieties. Keep this in mind when placing expectations on the student and the family.

**Seek Out Proper Medical Advice:** Students with disabilities or chronic health care needs often have complex medical issues. Assume that specific regimens have been implemented for good reason. Offering your own advice, while well intentioned, can add undue stress and feelings of being misunderstood. Ask clarifying questions and enlist the help of trained professionals when medical issues arise.

**Offer Objective Observations:** Be conscious of what is happening to a student during the entire school day. Communication with the school nurse, other professionals and family members leads to better care and prevention of complications that could alter the person’s educational goals.

**Additional Resources**