



Paolo DeMaria
NASBE President/CEO

from the President's Pen

Committing to Equity for Students with Disabilities

It is an honor and privilege for me to write my first “From the President’s Pen” column as NASBE’s new president and CEO. I am thrilled to be leading such an outstanding organization and proud of its commitment to supporting the needs and underscoring the important role of state boards of education. And I could not be prouder that this edition of the *State Education Standard* addresses the issue of students with disabilities.

I am sure that when state boards talk about equity, they recognize that ensuring that students with disabilities acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for their future success is an essential part of the conversation. Yet in many places across the nation, the data show that the widest achievement gaps are between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers.

Why is this? In some ways, it starts with a deep misunderstanding. Many think that these students are not as capable as their peers. The truth is that, except for the very small number of cognitively disabled students, students with disabilities can master the expectations reflected in state academic content standards. That is, they have intellectual capabilities comparable to other students and thus can learn at comparable levels if expectations are high and they are given opportunity and support. In fact, many students with disabilities do achieve that goal. So why does that not happen for more?

Federal law commands that there be equal opportunities for students with disabilities, but often state education leaders have in response focused on legal compliance rather than on what

will foster actual academic achievement. Fortunately, academic outcomes are becoming a more prominent focal point for states. If state and district leaders provide educational opportunities to these students and use proven evidence-based practices, like using Universal Design for Learning (UDL), it will make a difference for more students with disabilities. And education leaders should also steer away from practices that do not work. Too many schools and districts still use pull-out programs or fail to integrate all aspects of a child’s education into a single, holistic approach.

State boards can play a key role in ensuring that district and state education officials focus appropriately on improving the learning experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities. They can review data and ask questions about the information their state has reported to the federal government about legal compliance and student outcomes, and they can identify schools and districts that are showing impressive results or improvements with these students. They can ensure that state policies do not obstruct quality educational experiences that support student learning.

Thanks to research, we know a lot about what works for these students. Thus state boards, in partnership with their respective chief state school officer and state education agency and along with the rest of the education community, can promote practices and conditions that can better serve these students so they are prepared to be successful in future education, the workforce, and in society. ■