

**A PROPOSAL TO RE-INVENT DISABILITY:**  
**The Strength-Based Individualized Learning Plan**  
**for public school special education students**

**SUMMARY**

Disproportionality is an issue in most urban public school districts, especially the case for students labeled with the category Special Education. Students with disabilities often do not thrive in standardized and zero tolerance educational systems. A need exists for a truly transformational school concept to foster success in school and life of these students.

History shows a pre-determined focus on the deficits, whether actual, perceived or implied, of student learning abilities. Research shows socio-political-cultural agendas which purposely leave out race, age, gender, class, and strength-based views of humanity when developing special education policies.

A Strength-Based Individualized Learning Plan (S-B ILP) is a 21<sup>st</sup> Century re-envisioning process to focus on the strengths of a student vs. focusing on their deficits in order to reach student potential.

**A strength-based ILP will:**

- Effectively and efficiently focus on appropriate:
  - Student Strengths vs. Deficits (actual, perceived and implied)
  - Learning choices
  - S.M.A.R.T. Goals
- Help students more easily reach educational and life goals by using their strengths
- Incorporate a “village” approach to addressing the whole student
  - Create a learning culture where uniqueness and difference are “taken for granted” attributes of every child
  - Empower teachers, students, families and communities towards student success in school and life
    - Design trainings for all village members towards belief in the capacity of the students and how to use strengths to address underdeveloped areas, including training in High Operational Practices that demonstrate how the villagers can teach best to elicit the best learning.
- Describe how the student learns best, how the student best demonstrates that learning and what teachers and service providers will do to help the student learn more effectively
- Tailor to the individual student's needs
- Help teachers and related service providers and the student’s “village” better understand the student's disability and how the disability affects the learning process
- Improve results of supplementary support services by adding enrichment and the focus on high intellectual performances
- Reduce disproportionality of mental health needs, suspensions, expulsions, drop-outs and graduation rates
- Positively affect societal issues such as unemployment, violence, and incarceration
- Guide Special Education policy
- Change our community’s view towards inclusion of individuals with disabilities by eliciting and illustrating strengths.

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As no one student learns at exactly the same rate/speed or in the same way as another student, the S-B ILP investigates where the student is currently and where he/she needs development in a reasonable and realistic manner. Instead of focusing on deficits, the Village of a student and the student him/herself will spend more time working on interests, strengths and realistic developmental needs of the student.

Village members for a student include the student him/herself, student's parents or guardian, child care providers, relatives, past and current teachers, mentors, religious leaders, social/mental health providers, or any other person who is involved with the student on a daily, weekly, monthly or repetitive/periodic basis.

The Villagers are the student's subject matter experts and know the student best. Villagers are invited to participate via INPUT Gathering Form which assists a student in acknowledging and defining their individual interests, strengths and needs that will be discussed at an S-B ILP meeting and used to develop individualized goals for the student that are more realistic and obtainable.

To understand the impacts on a student's learning, Villagers must also understand the student's background. Varied backgrounds can have great effect, positively and negatively, on a student's learning, sometimes creating unspoken biases, and need to be defined and considered in order to establish realistic and obtainable individualized learning choices for a student through establishing Agreed Upon Development/Belief Models through categories labeled: Academic, Psychological, Social/Emotional, Cultural, Religious, Political, Economic, Race, and Family. Villagers give input on the Agreed Upon Development/Belief Models.

Again, the purpose of the S-B ILP is to determine the next free and appropriate learning choices and goals for a student based on a student's interests, strengths, needs and wants towards a future happy, engaged, productive and well-balanced citizen. While it is important for the student to consider the Villager's input concerning what the Villager's see as the student's interests, strengths and development needs towards the student's own self-actualization, it is more important to note that the student has a right to agree, to disagree, maybe agree, maybe disagree and to not have an opinion about any input a Villager may have concerning him/herself. The Villagers have a responsibility in guiding the student towards self-actualization within their discussion during an S-B ILP meeting.

The outcome of the S-B ILP meeting is the development of S.M.A.R.T. goals and Goal Progress forms that are individualized to the student and must have student input in order to be realistic. Whenever possible and depending upon the maturity of the student, the student is responsible to track their progress on their goals by compiling documentation of proof of achievement of the goals throughout the year and for calling a reconvening of the S-B ILP meeting should they accomplish all of their goals prior to the next annual S-B ILP meeting or are finding one or more of their goals to be unrealistic or unobtainable. The Village also has these same responsibilities at all times.

The S-B ILP creates a 21<sup>st</sup> Century model that allows students to find self-actualization through guided learning and realistic goals while reducing the potential impact of negative societal issues on their lives and the community. Imagine a school system and society that expects individuals to be different, values those differences, and capitalizes on those differences.