



## Culturally Responsive Teaching in Self-Contained Urban Classrooms for Students with Intellectual Disability

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Urban classrooms today reflect an incredible range of diversity, with students bringing rich cultural backgrounds, multilingual abilities, and varied life experiences. This diversity, shaped by global migration, economic shifts, and changing demographics, transforms classrooms into vibrant microcosms of multicultural society (Banks, 2015). These dynamic environments enhance learning and foster cross-cultural understanding. At the same time, they call for intentional strategies to support students' language development, affirm cultural practices, and respond to varying socioeconomic contexts in ways that uplift and empower all learners (Nieto, 2013). For educators, this reality highlights the importance of moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and embracing teaching practices that celebrate students' identities, cultivate their strengths, and foster inclusive and equitable learning communities (Gay, 2018).

For students with intellectual disability, the intersection of cultural diversity and disability creates additional challenges. These students often navigate compounded obstacles, including limited access to culturally sensitive resources, misconceptions about their abilities, and low expectations from educators who may need more experience with inclusive practices (Hammond, 2015; Ituma, 2025). This is exactly where culturally responsive teaching (CRT) becomes not just helpful but necessary. CRT offers a framework for creating a learning environment that values and validates students' cultural identities while addressing their individual needs (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culture, as defined by Gay (2018), encompasses the values, traditions, communication styles, learning preferences, and contributions of socially identifiable groups. When teachers affirm students' cultural backgrounds and intentionally integrate these cultural elements into instruction, they can bridge cultural gaps, reduce feelings of isolation, and boost students' self-esteem (Gay, 2018).

CRT also helps tailor educational experiences to meet the specific cognitive, emotional, and social needs of students with intellectual disabilities. This approach improves academic outcomes and builds essential life skills, enabling these students to thrive in the classroom and the natural world (Turnbull et

al., 2015). By embracing CRT, educators can transform their classrooms into inclusive communities where every student, regardless of background or ability, feels valued and supported to achieve their full potential (Banks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### Understanding Culturally Responsive Teaching

CRT is an approach to education that values and integrates students' cultural backgrounds as an essential part of their learning process (Gay, 2018). By drawing from the richness of students' cultures, CRT creates classrooms where diversity is embraced as a strength, rather than viewed as an obstacle. It prioritizes inclusivity, cultural relevance, and equity, making sure that all students feel seen, respected, and empowered in their learning environments.

CRT plays a critical role for students with intellectual disabilities in urban schools. These students often face multiple challenges, dealing not only with the stigma of their disabilities but also with cultural and linguistic biases that can limit their opportunities for growth (Counts et al., 2018). CRT addresses these overlapping challenges by creating environments that value their identities and offer equitable opportunities for success. It works to bridge gaps and provide the support students need to overcome barriers and thrive, both socially and academically.

Teachers using CRT connect academic content to students' lived experiences, making learning more meaningful and accessible (Ituma, 2025). This can involve weaving students' cultural histories and traditions into the curriculum, using materials and examples that reflect their diverse backgrounds, or adapting teaching methods to better align with specific cultural learning styles. By grounding lessons in the realities of students' lives, educators foster trust, increase engagement, and make learning more relevant and impactful.

In urban schools, cultural and linguistic diversity can intersect with socio-economic inequities, and therefore CRT

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becomes an essential tool for creating equity. These schools frequently serve students from historically marginalized communities who face barriers such as poverty, limited access to resources, and systemic racism. CRT helps counteract these challenges by building a learning environment that acknowledges and celebrates the unique contributions of every student. For students with intellectual disability, this approach goes further to highlight talents and abilities, ensuring they are not overlooked, but instead, empowered to succeed.

By addressing both the cultural and cognitive dimensions of learning, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) provides educators with the tools to build a more inclusive and equitable educational experience. The cognitive dimension refers to how students process, retain, and apply information—shaped by their prior knowledge, cultural background, and learning experiences (Hammond, 2015). When educators recognize that students may approach thinking, problem-solving, and demonstrating understanding in diverse ways, they can design instruction that aligns with those cognitive strengths. CRT transforms classrooms into spaces where every student can thrive and equips teachers to create lasting change in their schools and communities.

## **Practical Strategies for Special Education Teachers**

### **1. Learn About Students' Cultural Backgrounds**

Understanding students' cultural traditions, languages, and values allows educators to connect academic content to their lived experiences, making lessons relevant and engaging (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teachers can:

- Conduct student and family surveys
- Attend community events to gain cultural insight
- Incorporate culturally relevant materials such as books, media, and historical examples that celebrate students' heritages and validate their identities (Nieto, 2013)

### **2. Differentiate and Scaffold Instruction**

Differentiating instruction is essential to accommodate both cognitive and cultural needs. Strategies include:

- Using multimodal learning opportunities, such as visual aids, hands-on activities, or culturally relevant digital tools (Tomlinson, 2014)
- Breaking tasks into manageable steps to ensure students with an intellectual disability can successfully engage with the content (Vygotsky, 1978)
- Employing collaborative learning groups that include students from diverse backgrounds to encourage empathy and mutual support (Johnson & Johnson, 1989)

### **3. Build Partnerships with Families**

Families provide invaluable insights into their children's needs and strengths. Teachers can foster effective family partnerships by:

- Hosting multilingual family-teacher meetings

- Encouraging families to share their cultural practices in the classroom (Epstein, 2002)
- Maintaining open communication channels, ensuring that families feel heard and valued (Hammond, 2015)

### **4. Create Inclusive Classroom Environments**

Inclusive practices promote a sense of belonging for all students. Teachers can:

- Display multicultural artwork and celebrate cultural traditions
- Provide spaces for students who may need emotional or sensory breaks (Banks, 2015)
- Shift from a deficit-based perspective to one that highlights students' abilities, fostering confidence and self-esteem (Bandura, 1997)

### **5. Support Social-Emotional Learning**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical in CRT for students with an intellectual disability. Teachers should focus on:

- Teaching empathy, emotional regulation, and respectful communication (CASEL, 2020)
- Incorporating SEL activities that reflect cultural and individual diversity to help students build meaningful relationships

### **6. Engage in Reflective Practice**

Teachers must actively reflect on their assumptions and biases to align their teaching with CRT principles. Strategies include:

- Keeping reflective journals
- Participating in professional development tailored to the intersection of culture and disability (Scott et al., 2017)
- Seeking peer and family feedback to refine practices

## **Conclusion**

CRT creates classrooms where all students—including those with intellectual disability—feel valued, understood, and supported (Gay, 2018). It fosters a sense of belonging by affirming each student's identity and recognizing the diverse perspectives they bring into the classroom (Nieto, 2013). By connecting cultural identity with learning, CRT gives students the confidence and skills they need to succeed academically and socially. At the same time, it encourages empathy, respect, and collaboration among peers, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment (Hammond, 2015).

For students with intellectual disability, CRT goes a step further by bridging the gap between their individual needs and the broader cultural context of the classroom. It ensures their voices are heard and their potential is recognized, giving them the tools they need to thrive (Ituma, 2025). Educators in urban schools who embrace CRT not only improve educational out-

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comes for their students but also contribute to fostering inclusive and equitable school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These educators become change-makers, breaking down barriers and challenging the stereotypes that so often marginalize students with disabilities (Banks, 2015). Through their efforts, they lay the groundwork for lifelong success and inclusion, helping every student become a meaningful contributor to an increasingly diverse world (Turnbull et al., 2015). ■

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## President's Message

**Bree Jimenez**

Dear DADD Members,

As we move through 2025, I want to take a moment to reflect on the strength, unity, and unwavering commitment that defines our DADD community. We are more than an organization—we are a powerful family of educators, researchers, practitioners, advocates, and allies, all dedicated to the advancement of meaningful education and support for individuals with autism, intellectual disabilities, and developmental disabilities.

This year has presented significant challenges in the ongoing fight for special education, research, and evidence-driven practices. Yet, through it all, DADD has remained steadfast. In April, we released a public statement reaffirming our commitment to holding high expectations for all individuals, while recognizing and embracing disability as a natural part of human diversity. This was more than a message—it was a promise to



continue leading with compassion, evidence-based practices, and integrity.

We also recognize that individuals with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), as well as their families, do not experience disability in the same way. Their journeys are varied, nuanced, and deeply personal. While we embrace this diversity of experience, we also stand firmly against misinformation and pseudoscience—ideas and practices that may appear scientific but lack credible evidence and are known to cause harm, particularly to vulnerable communities. We will not condone low expectations. Our work is grounded in rigor, research, and respect, and we remain committed to being a trusted resource for our members and the broader field.

As your professional home, DADD is here to support you. We are committed to continue to build resources, and initiatives to help you advocate, educate, and drive meaningful change in your communities. Whether you're in the classroom, conducting research, leading at the district or state level, or working

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directly with individuals and families, our goal is to ensure you feel equipped and supported.

DADD proudly supports all educators who serve individuals with IDD, including autism, across the full spectrum of abilities and needs. This includes individuals who have the capacity and opportunity to advocate for themselves, as well as those with complex communication and behavior profiles. We recognize the diverse and nuanced experiences of students, families, and educators within the autism and IDD community, and we are committed to fully representing and supporting their unique needs. This inclusive vision guides all that we do, including our upcoming annual conference.

Looking ahead, I am thrilled to invite you to join us in Long Beach, California, in January 2026 for our annual conference. Planning is already underway, and the conference website is live! This year's theme will emphasize research, evidence-based practices, and community impact. It will be a time to gather,

learn, collaborate, and reinforce our shared mission of promoting high-quality education for all students, especially those with autism and IDD. Our sessions will highlight the needs of learners across the spectrum and the educators who support them, ensuring that every voice is represented.

This is your organization! Your voice matters, and your involvement strengthens us all. Whether you're a long-standing member or newly connected to DADD, we encourage you to get involved in any way you can. Join a committee, share your expertise, or simply reach out to learn more about how you can contribute.

Together, we will continue to support DADD as the leading voice and go-to organization for guidance on education and support for individuals with autism, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. ■

With gratitude and determination,  
**Bree Jimenez**  
**DADD President**

## The Future of Special Education Under HHS: Implications for Students with Disabilities

**Luann L. Ley Davis, PhD**  
**DADD CAN Coordinator**



In a sweeping and controversial move, the Trump administration has proposed dismantling the US Department of Education and transferring oversight of special education to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This shift, outlined in a March 2025 executive order, raises serious concerns among educators, families, and disability advocates regarding the continuity and quality of services for students with disabilities.

### A Structural Overhaul

Under the proposed plan, all functions of the Department of Education would be redistributed. Special education programs governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) would be moved to HHS, while the Small Business Administration would assume control of the federal student loan portfolio. Enforcement responsibilities, particularly those related to civil rights, are expected to transition to the Department of Justice (Vox, 2025). The proposal aligns with a broader initiative to reduce federal involvement in education and shift responsibilities to state and local authorities. While proponents argue that this streamlining will reduce bureaucracy, critics

warn it could disrupt educational access and protections for vulnerable populations.

### Potential Disruption of Critical Services

The Department of Education has long served as the federal agency responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate public education. By transferring oversight to HHS, an agency primarily focused on healthcare rather than education, there are concerns that critical services like speech therapy, behavioral supports, and individualized instruction could be compromised (Vox, 2025).

### Potential Reduced Oversight and Legal Safeguards

Another major concern is the weakening of oversight and enforcement mechanisms. The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights currently plays a proactive role in ensuring compliance with anti-discrimination laws, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If these responsibilities are moved to the Department of Justice, enforcement could shift toward a more reactive and litigation-based model, potentially leaving students and families without timely recourse (Wikipedia, 2025).

### Ongoing Funding and Resource Constraints

Simultaneously, proposed budget cuts to disability-related services compound the risks. Reports suggest that upcoming federal budget proposals may reduce allocations for special education and related supports. Such cuts, combined with administrative restructuring, could result in fewer resources for students who require intensive and individualized interventions (The Guardian, 2025).

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## Advocacy and Legislative Response

In response to the proposal, more than 40 disability rights organizations and 23 Democratic senators have issued formal statements opposing the dismantling of the Department of Education. These groups emphasize the importance of maintaining a centralized agency focused on upholding the rights of students with disabilities and ensuring compliance with federal law (Disability Scoop, 2025). Legal and legislative hurdles also remain. Because the Department of Education was established by an act of Congress, its dismantling requires congressional approval. With a narrowly divided legislature, the proposal's future remains uncertain.

## Next Steps...

The proposed shift of special education oversight to the Department of Health and Human Services represents a fundamental change in the federal role in education. While the long-term outcomes of such a move are unknown, immediate concerns focus on the potential erosion of services, protections, and oversight mechanisms that are vital to students with disabilities. As this initiative unfolds, sustained advocacy, rigorous oversight, and informed policymaking will be essential to ensure that educational equity and legal protections for students with disabilities remain intact. I encourage you to take action and make your voice heard. To contact your representatives and advocate effectively for special education policy, you can follow these steps:

### How to Contact Your Elected Representatives

#### Find Your Representatives

- **US House of Representatives:** <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>

- **US Senate:** <https://www.senate.gov/senators/senators-contact.htm>

\*Enter your ZIP code or state to find their names, contact forms, phone numbers, and office addresses.

#### Methods of Contact

- **Phone Call:** Call their Washington, D.C., or local district office. Be brief, polite, and specific.
- **Email or Online Form:** Most representatives have contact forms on their websites.
- **Letter:** A mailed letter to their D.C. or district office can be effective for formal advocacy.
- **Social Media:** Engage via Twitter/X, Facebook, or Instagram, tagging them and using hashtags (e.g., #ProtectIDEA, #SpecialEducationMatters). ■

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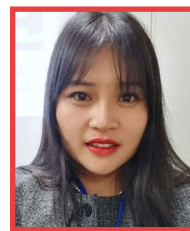
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## Diversity Committee Update

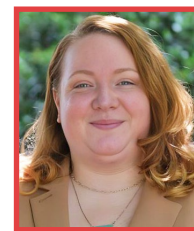
In January 2025, at the annual DADD conference held in Clearwater, Florida, members of the Diversity Committee provided feedback on priorities and goals for the upcoming year. The purpose of this entry to the newsletter is to provide a summary of the feedback from the membership, along with an explanation of potential impact and a short statement of how we (the chair and liaisons) plan to address the comments. We organized the Membership Committee feedback into four thematic sections (funding, policy, accessibility/empowerment, and authentic outreach), which we will use to structure this document. DADD members are welcome to email the chairperson ([diversitychair@daddcec.com](mailto:diversitychair@daddcec.com)) to provide additional



Sarah Cox



Guofeng Shen



Kayla Malone

feedback. We hope the Diversity Committee can continue to engage in these conversations, leading to a sense of belonging for all of our members.

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## Funding

### Committee Feedback

The committee members indicated they were interested in pursuing funding opportunities that would promote inclusion and expand access to DADD resources and events. Specifically, they mentioned strategic recruitment efforts such as sponsorship for underrepresented members to join DADD and attend the annual conference as a worthwhile financial investment. Overall, the committee agreed that funding DEIJ (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice) initiatives would be a meaningful step forward in making DADD more reflective of the populations it serves. However, the committee also emphasized the importance of transparency and clarity as it relates to all funding opportunities.

### Why This Is Important

Access to financial resources can be a major barrier to participation, particularly for professionals from historically marginalized backgrounds, early career individuals, and those in underfunded institutions. Offering sponsorships will help diversify DADD's membership and ensure broader representation at conferences, thereby enriching discussions and deepening the organization's commitment to inclusive practices. Supporting DEIJ initiatives with dedicated funding can also allow DADD to identify systemic gaps, improve internal practices, and increase accountability in pursuing equity. Such investments send a powerful message that DADD is committed not only in words, but in action, to building a more inclusive and representative organization. This ultimately benefits not only members but the communities and individuals with disabilities whom we serve.

### Next Steps by the Diversity Committee

The Diversity Committee leaders plan to draft a funding proposal outlining the scope of sponsorships, selection criteria, and implementation logistics this summer and fall. We will explore potential partnerships or funding revenues to support these efforts. The committee also plans to collaborate with the finance and membership teams to ensure transparency and feasibility.

## Policy

### Committee Feedback

The committee members affirmed the importance of reexamining DADD's policies and structures through an equity lens. There was strong support for creating dedicated spaces for ongoing dialogue about practice and policy—such as a community chat or forum—especially one where members from underrepresented backgrounds feel safe and heard. Members highlighted the need to examine how current policies (both organizational and external) may influence participation and representation within the DADD organization and leadership. Relatedly, sev-

eral members advocated for having a dedicated policy expert at the annual DADD conference. They referenced how important regular updates by a senior policy analyst would be welcomed, and suggested DADD pursue a similar model. The committee members also reinforced the importance of continuing to support and expand the roles of DEI liaisons, ensuring they are empowered with leadership development opportunities.

### Why This Is Important

Organizational policy doesn't just live in bylaws—it's felt in who is at the table, who feels empowered to speak, and how decisions are made. Reviewing DADD's policies through a DEIJ lens ensures that barriers to leadership are removed and diverse voices are valued and elevated. Additionally, having regular spaces to engage in policy dialogue creates transparency and a shared sense of ownership among members. The recommendation to include opportunities for members to stay up to date on federal policy and advocacy reflects the critical need for DADD members to remain informed about national updates in special education. Sharing information about interpretation and implementation of federal policy could strengthen advocacy skills, inform practice, and support members in aligning their work with current legislative developments.

### Next Steps by the Diversity Committee

The committee leadership plans to continue to collaborate with DADD leadership to find ways to foster equitable representation. Using the previously established DEIJ Community Chat Series, we will pursue speakers who can provide expertise and insight into policy issues relevant for DADD members. We hope the Community Chats will continue to foster open discussion and inclusive feedback loops. We'll also consider alternative opportunities such as partnerships, working groups, or existing resources through CEC (<https://exceptionalchildren.org/policy-and-advocacy>) which could meet the expressed desire to receive updates on federal policies and how they will likely impact individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. Concurrently, we'll develop a leadership pathway for DEI liaisons, including mentoring and initiative-based leadership opportunities. These efforts will help embed equity and policy engagement at all levels of DADD's policy and practice structure.

## Accessibility and Empowerment

### Committee Feedback

Through our recent feedback process, many committee members shared honest reflections on where DADD can improve when it comes to creating spaces that are accessible, welcoming, and empowering. One major concern was the choice to hold our annual conference in states like Florida, where travel may

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not feel safe or fundable, creating a barrier that affects who gets to participate.

Members also pointed out ways our conference environments can reduce barriers to better support a wide range of access needs. Specifically, members requested the annual conference consider providing sensory-friendly spaces, accessible layouts, printed or visual app-based schedules, microphones and captions in every session, and videos of the venue ahead of time to reduce uncertainty. One group also shared that traveling alone can feel isolating, and that structured social events or dedicated spaces for connection could facilitate interpersonal connections and reduce feelings of isolation. Another clear takeaway from committee member feedback was the need to center autistic and neurodivergent voices. Requests for more representation in keynotes, panels, and proposal strands that reflect lived experiences and affirm neurodivergent identities led to this conclusion. There was also strong interest in connecting with educators from the local communities where we host our conferences, ensuring our work reflects and engages the people closest to the issues we care about.

### Why This Is Important

These points hit at the heart of our mission. Accessibility isn't a checklist item—it's essential to equity. And the more we can create spaces where everyone feels safe, seen, and supported, the more impactful our work becomes.

### Next Steps by the Diversity Committee

The DADD leadership held a vote to elicit conference location preferences and selected Long Beach, California, for the 2026 conference. The Diversity Committee will continue to advocate for the prioritization of safe, accessible, and affirming locations for future conferences. We're advocating for features like sensory rooms, communication badges, hybrid options, and comprehensive access supports across all sessions. We're also thinking creatively about ways to invite and include local educators in conference programming. We are committed to ensuring autistic and neurodivergent voices have a central place

in shaping what we do (from proposal strands to the keynote stage) and encourage our members to contact us with any additional feedback or ideas.

## Authentic Outreach and Collaboration

### Committee Feedback

Attendees' feedback also highlighted ways we can build deeper, more meaningful connections beyond our annual events. Many of the members asked us to share more practical, low/no-cost resources for families and educators that reflect the realities of day-to-day life in schools and communities. Participants also emphasized the importance of building reciprocal relationships with institutions like Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges—approaching these partnerships with respect, not extraction.

### Why This Is Important

A major theme was the importance of listening. Rather than assuming what communities need, the feedback challenged us to ask and remain open. In other words, to let real needs and lived experiences inform our decisions and priorities.

### Next Steps by the Diversity Committee

The Diversity Committee is working on ways to co-create and share useful resources with families and educators, grounded in real-world use. We're beginning to form relationships with institutions we haven't historically partnered with, while keeping equity and mutual benefit at the core. And we're developing strategies to keep the feedback loop open—so the voices of our members and communities continue to shape where we go next.

## Conclusion

Thanks to everyone who took the time to share. Your feedback matters, and we're committed to taking action—with transparency, intention, and care. We plan to continue to provide updates through the DADD Newsletter including dates and topics for the upcoming Community Chats. In the meantime, we encourage members to email us at [diversitychair@daddcec.com](mailto:diversitychair@daddcec.com) with any diversity-related questions or concerns. ■



## Congratulations!

DADD wants to thank and congratulate **Caroline Fitchett** and **Laura Gomez** for being chosen to represent DADD on the

Leadership Development Committee and Leadership Development Program Subcommittee with the Council for Exceptional Children! Well done and best wishes as you start this new endeavor. ■

## ETADD Updates: Call for New Translations of Research to Practice Manuscripts

ETADD editors are excited to share a few updates with DADD members:

- 1) We are including a new manuscript type in ETADD: translating research to practice. These manuscript types work to translate research-supported or evidence-based practices



to help support practitioners in the field. These manuscripts are generally ~20 pages and focus on how these practices can be implemented. Complete guidelines and information are available on the DADD website at <https://daddcec.com/publications/etadd>.

- 2) We have also refined the ETADD article guidelines for all submissions. Again, complete guidelines and information are on the DADD website.
- 3) Please remember, all ETADD submissions are through our Sage ScholarOne site at <https://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/etadd>. ■

Submit at

<https://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/etadd>



ETADD Editors are seeking manuscripts for a new section of ETADD, to be published in every issue or every other. This section will focus on the translation of research to practice and provide practical applications of research for educators and others who support students with autism, intellectual disability, and other developmental disabilities.

## Author Guidelines

- No more than 20 pages (text, references, figures/tables)
- Are tailored for the practical elements; the focus is on translating research-based and/or evidence-based practices into practice to support practitioners with implementation within real setting
- The writing should reflect the translation of research into practice; they should not be written in a similar tone or fashion to research manuscripts
- The focus involves approaches practitioners can implement, which may often include a case vignette to illustrate such practices within a fictionalized settings
- Tables and figures are especially welcomed to support the application of the practice for practitioners
- The practices translated are based on current research
- Attention is on the HOW, not the why.
- Include a brief rationale/literature review and then move into the what and most importantly the HOW



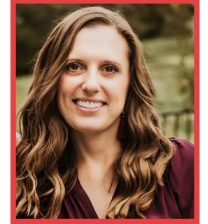
## Editors' Note

Thank you for reading this issue of *DADD Express*! As always, we hope you found this issue valuable. We continue our commitment to presenting content that supports individuals with ASD, ID, and DD, and that emphasizes diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). We always encourage our members to submit their ideas to *DADD Express*.

Please submit potential manuscripts to us at [alhorn1@radford.edu](mailto:alhorn1@radford.edu) or [slayden@odu.edu](mailto:slayden@odu.edu). We are also happy to answer any questions you may have. ■



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