Presume Competence First

What we believe changes what students experience.

WHAT PRESUMING COMPETENCE REALLY MEANS

Presuming competence means starting with the belief that every student is thinking, learning, and capable of growth, even when that competence is not immediately visible through speech, behavior, academic performance, or conventional measures.

Presuming competence is not:

- Ignoring support needs
- Expecting students to "figure it out"
- Pretending learning challenges don't exist

Presuming competence is:

- A commitment to possibility before limitation
- A belief-driven practice that shapes instruction, access, language, and expectations
- A daily choice educators make through their words, actions, and systems

When we presume competence, we design learning environments that invite students to show what they know, rather than requiring them to prove it first.

CORE BELIEFS BEHIND PRESUMING COMPETENCE

- Every student can learn and grow — even when progress looks different or takes longer.
- Competence may be masked by disability, language differences, trauma, anxiety, behavior, or past experiences.
- Behavior is communication, not evidence of inability.
- Access to grade-level learning and meaningful participation should precede mastery.
- How adults talk about students shapes how students see themselves.

Inclusive schooling

WHAT PRESUMING COMPETENCE LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE (PREK–12)

INSTRUCTION & LEARNING

- Students have access to grade-level content, with supports built in.
- Lessons are designed with multiple ways to engage, participate, and show learning.
- Mistakes are treated as part of learning, not evidence of limitation.
- Time, scaffolds, and supports are adjusted — expectations are not lowered.

COMMUNICATION

- All students are spoken to directly, respectfully, and age-appropriately.
- Students are given wait time and opportunities to process.
- Any form of communication (speech, AAC, gestures, writing, visuals, behavior) is honored.
- Adults avoid speaking about students as if they are not present.

BEHAVIOR & SUPPORT

- Challenging behavior is viewed as a signal, not a deficit.
- Support plans focus on skill-building, regulation, connection, and access.
- Students are not excluded, removed, or isolated because learning is hard.
- Adults ask: "What support is missing?" instead of "What's wrong with this student?"

SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES

- Students are not grouped, tracked, or separated based on perceived ability.
- Pull-out and replacement practices are questioned and minimized.
- Inclusive settings are the default, not the reward.
- Adults name and disrupt policies or routines that limit participation.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO PRESUME COMPETENCE (STARTING TOMORROW)

SHIFT YOUR LANGUAGE
- Replace: "They can't…"
  - With: "They can't yet — what support would help?"

- Replace: "They're low"
  - With: "They need access and scaffolds."

- Replace: "This will be too hard"
  - With: "How can we make this doable?"

DESIGN FOR ACCESS
- Offer choices in materials, seating, tools, and response formats.
- Use visuals, models, examples, and hands-on supports routinely — not only as accommodations.
- Build in previewing, repetition, and flexible pacing for everyone.

LOOK FOR EVIDENCE OF THINKING
- Notice problem-solving, persistence, curiosity, humor, preferences, and interests.
- Watch what students do when given meaningful tasks — not just compliance tasks.
- Assume understanding before assuming inability.

PROTECT DIGNITY
- Speak about students with respect — even when frustrated.
- Avoid deficit-based labels and shorthand.
- Ensure students are present in conversations that affect them whenever possible.

BE A LEARNER

- Reflect on how bias, urgency, and systems shape expectations.
- Learn from students and families without expecting them to educate others.
- Stay open to being wrong — and to doing better.

PRESUMING COMPETENCE: QUICK REFLECTION CHECKLIST

Use this when planning a lesson, reviewing an activity, writing a report, or drafting an IEP goal.

Before the Lesson or Activity

☐ Does this lesson assume the student can engage with the core idea, not just a simplified task?

☐ Have I planned supports and scaffolds instead of lowering expectations?

☐ Are there multiple ways for students to participate and show understanding?

☐ Am I offering access to grade-level content, with flexibility in how students engage?

☐ Have I planned for processing time, modeling, and practice?

During the Lesson or Activity

☐ Am I speaking to the student directly, respectfully, and age-appropriately?

☐ Am I giving enough wait time before assuming the student does not understand?

☐ Am I noticing effort, thinking, and attempts, not just accuracy or compliance?

☐ When challenges arise, am I asking: "What support is missing?" rather than "Why can't they do this?"

☐ Am I interpreting behavior as communication, not a lack of ability?

After the Lesson or Activity

☐ Did the student have a real opportunity to demonstrate what they know or can do?

☐ Were supports adjusted without removing access to learning or peers?

☐ Did I reflect on my own assumptions and expectations?

When Writing Reports or IEP Goals

☐ Does my language describe the student's strengths, interests, and capabilities?

☐ Am I avoiding deficit-based or limiting phrases (e.g., *low, unable, non-functional*)?

☐ Does the goal focus on skill-building and access, not compliance or isolation?

☐ Have I written the goal in a way that assumes growth is possible?

☐ Would this goal make sense in a general education setting with appropriate supports?

☐ If the student read this, would it protect their dignity?

FINAL CHECK:
If I truly believe this student is competent, does this plan, activity, or goal reflect that belief?