Universal Design
By Anna Davidson, OTS

What is Universal Design?
Universal design is an approach to the design of products and environments that are usable and accessible by all people, regardless of age, ability, or situation.

Also known as: 'Design for All', 'Inclusive Design', and 'Barrier-Free Design.'

Principles of Universal Design – (Examples applied to a school-based setting)
Equitable use: The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
-bathrooms in which *all* stalls are large enough for wheelchairs, walkers, and other devices
-respect and consideration for students' cultural differences during holiday celebrations

Flexibility in use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
-availability of right and left-handed scissors and desks
-availability of electronic versions of readings and assignments

Simple and intuitive use: The design is easy to understand regardless of experience, knowledge, or language skills.
-parent handouts and information packets are easy to understand and free of confusing terminology
-consistency regarding class expectations, requirements, and instructions

Perceptible information: The design communicates information effectively in a variety of ways.
-teachers' use of verbal, written, and demonstrative instructions for class assignments
-calendars and schedules containing colorful pictures and symbols
-allowing the use of tape recorders in the classroom to record long lectures

Tolerance for error: The design minimizes hazards and prevents accidental or unintended actions.
-playground area and equipment is well-maintained, routinely checked for safety, and free of barriers
-toys that are age-appropriate and safe for all to use

Low physical effort: The design can be used efficiently, comfortably, and with minimal fatigue.
-allowing children with low endurance or physical limitations more time to get from class to class
-modifications to seating positions that ensure comfort and minimize physical strain

Size and space: Adequate size and space available regardless of body size, posture, or mobility.
-adjustable table heights and different sizes of chairs
-having a variety of sizes of art utensils and supplies available in the art room

Universal design is not just for people with disabilities; *everyone* can benefit from universal design. Ramps leading into building entrances can be helpful to wheelchair users, parents pushing a baby stroller, and delivery people transporting large packages. Assembly instructions written in large print for people with low vision are easier for everyone to read. Elevators are beneficial for people with mobility impairments, those who are feeling under the weather, and for carrying several bags of groceries to a third floor apartment.

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The principles of universal design align with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which prohibits discrimination based on disability in the areas of employment, access to public services and accommodations, public transportation, and telecommunications.

References

http://www.ada.gov/adahome1.htm
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/index.htm
http://trace.wisc.edu/world/gen_ud.html