An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

NCSE RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2026

When Inclusion Becomes Belonging: What Matters Most for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Students learn best and flourish most when they know they belong. Yet, too many schools and communities still struggle to become places where students with disabilities are fully included and deeply valued. Drawing on more than two decades of research with students with disabilities, their families, and educators, Dr. Carter will share a framework for understanding and fostering belonging within our classrooms and schools. He will introduce ten essential dimensions of belonging, highlighting the experiences and relationships that assure students they have a valued place in their school communities. Throughout the presentation, he will connect these dimensions to research-based practices and everyday decisions that shape school life. Together, we will consider what it takes to move beyond simply sharing space toward creating schools where every student is known, supported, and needed.

Bio

Dr. Erik Carter is the Luther Sweet Endowed Chair in Disabilities and Professor of Educational Psychology at Baylor University. His research focuses on principle-driven and research-based strategies for promoting full participation and valued roles for students with disabilities. Much of his work explores how schools, workplaces, and communities can become places of belonging for people with disabilities and their families. He is particularly focused on capturing the reciprocal and lasting benefits that come through friendships and life lived together. His leadership centers on calling and equipping schools, workplaces, and congregations to become communities where people with disabilities and their families are invited, known, needed, and loved.

He serves as Executive Director of the Baylor Center for Disability and Flourishing, which aims to promote the thriving of people with disabilities and their families. He joined the Baylor faculty in 2023 after previous faculty appointments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Vanderbilt University. Erik is deeply committed to ensuring that the best of what we know works is what permeates everyday practices. He began his career as a high school special education teacher and now collaborates with schools and organizations from across the United States. He has co-authored seven books and more than 300 journal articles, chapters, and other publications. His scholarship and leadership have also been recognized with awards from All Belong, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, the Association of University Centers on Disability, TASH, and the Council for Exceptional Children.