**1. Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more issues and concerns for all students and their families, but this is**[**especially true**](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/06/remote-learning-shift-leaves-students-disabilities-behind)**for students with disabilities. Additionally, the gap in graduation and drop-out rates between students with and without disabilities continues to undermine their futures. For example, in**[**the class of 2018**](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp)**, only 66 percent of Black students with disabilities, 71 percent of Hispanic students with disabilities, 77 percent of white students with disabilities, and 79 percent of Asian-American students with disabilities completed high school. Furthermore,**[**just seven percent of students born with a disability**](https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/Lack%20of%20Equal%20Pay%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities_Dec%2014.pdf)**graduate from college. What is your plan for ensuring that all students with disabilities receive a quality and appropriate education to acquire the critical and marketable skills necessary to compete in a job-driven economy?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed strain and major disruptions on our children, parents, teachers, and communities in North Carolina. That is why one of my highest priorities during this pandemic has been to secure emergency relief funds for our schools and students. I worked to secure $13.2 billion in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act for K-12 schools and students and an additional $3 billion in flexible emergency block grants designed to enable state governments to decide how best to meet the needs of their students and school districts. These funds are already being used in North Carolina to support the academic needs of at-risk students and students with disabilities through additional in-school support, after-school programming, tutoring, and hiring more teachers and teacher assistants to serve our special needs student population.

I believe that the opportunity to work and pursue self-sufficiency plays a critical role in giving students with disabilities the critical skills needed to compete in a job-driven economy. We must work to ensure that students, including those with disabilities, have the skills and tools needed to find high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand jobs, which is why I was a strong supporter of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act. I am working in coordination with our school districts, the Department of Public Instruction, and the State Board of Education as they work to get students back to receiving stable and reliable education during this unprecedented time and I will continue to advocate for the needs of our students during this pandemic.

**2. In the economic expansion prior to the COVID-19 pandemic,**[**the national employment rate**](https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/iod/reports/2019-annual-disability-statistics-supplement-pdfs/2019_Annual_Disability_Statistics_Supplement_ALL.pdf?ts=1580831674)**for working-age people with disabilities in America was 37.6 percent compared to 77.8 percent of people without disabilities. Further, there continues to be significant disparities in employment outcomes within the disability community, which varies**[**from state to state**](https://www.respectability.org/2020/02/best-states-2020/)**. There are significant racial disparities in disability employment outcomes. 38.9 percent of working-age white people with disabilities have jobs compared to**[**only 29.7 percent**](https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/iod/reports/2019-annual-disability-statistics-compendium-pdfs/2019_Annual_Disability_Statistics_Compendium_ALL.pdf?ts=1580831674)**of working-age Black people with disabilities had jobs, 39.4 percent of working-age Hispanics with disabilities and 43.2 percent of working-age Asian-Americans with disabilities. The pandemic has ravaged the disability community and**[**more than 1 million**](https://kesslerfoundation.org/press-release/ntide-april-2020-jobs-report-covid-recession-hits-workers-disabilities-harder)**workers with disabilities have lost their jobs. If elected, what will you do to ensure that the government is removing barriers and promoting high quality, inclusive services built on evidence-based policies, practices and procedures leading to competitive, meaningful careers, which includes promoting entrepreneurial opportunities?**

I believe that every American should have a fair and equal opportunity to pursue the American Dream and achieve self-sufficiency. This starts with an inclusive and appropriately tailored education, and requires a sustained commitment to making supportive services available to all who need it. Every one of us has different needs, and my goal has always been to ensure that every North Carolinian has access to the services they need to succeed and thrive in the land of opportunity.

As North Carolina’s Speaker of the House, I fought to ensure that services for those living with disabilities are considered medically necessary, thereby requiring health insurance providers to cover those services. I fought to maintain the sustainability and quality of our state’s Medicaid program, especially for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, so that we can honor the commitments we have made and ensure that such critical services will be available to future generations. In the U.S. Senate, I worked to ensure parity in coverage of those services for children of military servicemembers and I urged the administration to provide relief to Medicaid providers who support and care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I championed legislation to ensure that patients with pre-existing conditions cannot be denied coverage or charged more due to their pre-existing condition, and I am proud to support the ABLE to Work Act, which makes it possible for those living with a disability to save a portion of their income without risking a loss of benefits.

**3. The disability community fundamentally believes in the need to ensure “Nothing about us, without us” – real inclusion and places at decision making tables – because we know solutions that work and want to be a part of making our communities stronger. What specific measures have you taken to make your campaign accessible for, and inclusive of, people with disabilities, as every issue impacts our lives?**

On social media, my Senate office adds alt text to describe images for visually impaired readers, which include specifics on what is happening in the photo. Alt text allows for a more detailed description that the caption itself does not always capture. I also include closed captions on videos shared from my social media accounts.  By doing this, my channels are more accessible and inclusive so everyone can be a part of the conversation.

One of the more inspiring aspects of my job as U.S. Senator is getting to meet the best and brightest young North Carolinians who participate in our internship program. I make a concerted effort to recruit interns from all walks of life to ensure our interns represent the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that make North Carolina so strong. Recently, I was proud to welcome an intern to our office who is visually impaired. We secured appropriate accommodations, including adaptive software technology, to ensure that the intern could fully participate in all aspects of the internship program. At the conclusion of the internship program, this intern hosted a staff “Lunch and Learn” session, where they explained what life is like living with blindness, both in an office setting and in general. I have never seen my staff so engaged in a Lunch and Learn before, with the Q&A portion extending far beyond the originally allotted time. Thinking back on the experience today, I realize that I likely learned more from this intern than they learned from me.

**4. RespectAbility published**[**Disability in Philanthropy & Nonprofits**](https://www.respectability.org/2019/04/new-study-philanthropists-and-nonprofits-exclude-people-with-disabilities/#:~:text=48%25-,%E2%80%9CDisability%20in%20Philanthropy%20%26%20Nonprofits%3A%20A%20Study%20on%20the%20Inclusion,foundations%20can%20take%20to%20improve.)**, based on our study on the levels of disability inclusion in the social sector across the country. This largescale study found significant data showing that nationwide, organizations overall want to be inclusive, but are unintentionally excluding the one-in-five people with disabilities. What will you do to promote policies and practices designed to support full community engagement, access and inclusion of people with disabilities?**

One thing I have learned from speaking with leaders in the business and non-profit sectors is that most organizations and individuals do want to be inclusive and welcome those from all backgrounds and ability levels. The biggest barrier is frequently one of knowledge and know-how, and this often stems from a lack of exposure and education. I admit that when I first came to the U.S. Senate, my social media posts did not include closed captioning or alt text to describe images. After a constituent alerted me that not all North Carolinians were able to easily view the resources and updates we were publishing, I worked with my staff to make this content more accessible. It’s hard to correct our shortcomings if we are not aware of them. And while my office has made strides to date, I know there is always room for improvement, and we will only know how we can move forward when we hear directly from the affected community.

More broadly, I have successfully fought to protect the AbilityOne program, which is the largest source of employment for people living with disabilities, and I support policies like the ABLE to Work Act that empower individuals living with disabilities to seek and maintain employment without losing access to medical and other benefits that they need. For too long, federal policies have actually discouraged many Americans from working. I will continue to support policies that remove barriers to employment and encourage a more inclusive workplace and society.

**5. Elected officials have multiple opportunities to demonstrate a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion, full community participation and celebrating the contributions and accomplishments of people with disabilities through press releases, speeches, celebratory events including**[**National Disability Employment Awareness Month**](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/ndeam/)**. There are significant stigmas that create attitudinal barriers that limit options and perpetuates low expectations for people with disabilities. What measures will you take to combat these stigmas and promote opportunities for people with disabilities?**

As I mentioned in response to a previous question, I believe that a lack of education and exposure to individuals with disabilities presents one of the biggest barriers to hiring individuals with disabilities. The associated stigmas are very real and, unfortunately, can result in fewer opportunities for individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment. Some of the most gifted individuals I have ever had the pleasure to meet are living with a disability, and it is incumbent upon those of us who do have a public platform to highlight the incredible work that these individuals are capable of and, indeed, are already doing every day.

One example I will highlight is a heartwarming and paradigm shattering North Carolina business: Bitty & Beau’s Coffee Shop. Any time I find myself in Wilmington, NC, I make a point to visit Bitty & Beau’s for a cup of coffee, and I always leave with a smile. This business provides an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to find gainful employment, but more importantly, it serves as a platform to showcase what their employees are capable of. Their mission, and their impact, reaches far beyond the walls of their store. It helps shape the thinking of each and every customer, so that they too may reconsider their preconceived notions – their next hire might just be someone like Bitty or Beau. We must share these good news stories, shatter the stigmas, and open our hearts.

**6. In**[**our nation’s public schools**](https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/static-tables/index.html)**, there are 6.3 million students with disabilities. The changing demographics of America are reflected in these students, with 11.4 percent of students with disabilities nationwide, almost 720,000, also identified as**[**English-language learners**](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp)**. Their accommodation needs are compounded by the fact that many come from households that do not speak English at home, adding an extra challenge for parental interaction. It can also be harder to diagnose disabilities in children when they are English language learners. Additionally, immigration issues and fears over**[**the public charge**](https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/12/politics/public-charge-explained/index.html)**rule impact students with disabilities, their families and the wider workforce. What policies would you advance to enable students and their families who are English language learners with disabilities to succeed in school and employment?**

While I believe that education should fundamentally be a function of state and local government, I do believe the federal government has a critical role to play. I believe local leaders should be the ultimate decision makers in setting education policy and priorities for their schools and communities because they have the most direct link to the unique circumstances and needs of the community they serve. A one size fits all approach does not work for education broadly, and it does not work for students with unique needs. That said, upon identifying the needs of a particular school, community, or county, the federal government must step in to provide the resources necessary to implement these individually tailored education plans. Ever since I have been in the U.S. Senate, I have championed legislation each year to provide additional funding for Impact Aid that is dedicated to school districts that serve children of military servicemembers with higher rates of students with special needs. I have worked to ensure communities have access to federal funding to facilitate individualized education programs, which include special lesson planning for students with disabilities, including English language learners. As your U.S. Senator, I will continue to advocate for federal support to state and local governments to ensure that every student, regardless of background, special needs, or English language proficiency, has access to an individually tailored education that meets their needs, so they can succeed, achieve, and thrive in our great state and country.

**7. Housing, criminal justice, climate issues, transportation and every other area have significant impacts on people with disabilities. What additional policies and priorities, other than those already discussed above, do you plan to focus on to improve the lives of people with disabilities?**

I believe in giving every single American a fair shot at success. That starts with an appropriately tailored education, access to the supportive services they need, and a level playing field to thrive in the land of opportunity. I commit to continue working with my Senate colleagues, on a bipartisan basis, to remove barriers to employment, ensure quality of care and services, and allow each and every one of us to live a life our parents would be proud of. I am honored to serve as your U.S. Senator, where in my last six years, I have worked to expand opportunities for Americans of all backgrounds, and in my next six years will open up even more doors for you, for your children, and for your grandchildren.