WHEN STUDENTS STRUGGLE:
A Curiosity-Based Guide for Educators

When students struggle to participate, complete work, or show what they know, it's easy to jump to conclusions. But learning may still be happening... even when it isn't immediately visible.

Before assuming a lack of effort, motivation, or ability, try shifting your stance from judgment to curiosity.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF FIRST

1 **Was the task clear and predictable?** Did students know what to expect, what success looked like, and how to begin?

2 **Did I present information in more than one way?** Were there visual supports, written directions, models, or examples that students could return to?

3 **Could the pacing have been a barrier?** Was there enough processing time before students were expected to respond or produce work?

4 **Am I assessing the learning or the method?** Is the task measuring understanding, or skills like writing speed, organization, or verbal confidence?

5 **Is anxiety affecting participation?** Could fear of mistakes, uncertainty, or past experiences be getting in the way of engagement?

6 **Have I offered more than one way to show understanding?** Are students limited to a single format, or do they have options?

7 **What assumptions might I be making?** Am I equating struggle with lack of effort, attention, or interest?

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

8 **Is the structure consistent enough to feel safe?** Do routines, transitions, and expectations stay mostly predictable?

9 **Are there unnecessary barriers built into the task?** What happens if one demand (writing, speed, public sharing, fine motor skills) is reduced or removed?

10 **How might this be more accessible for some and better for all?** Would a small shift improve learning across the room, not just for one student?

THIS! When students struggle, it's often not a lack of learning, it's a **mismatch** between how learning is happening and how it's being asked to show up.

Curiosity helps us notice the difference... and adjust with intention.