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# Implementing Inclusion



In a growing number of schools across the United States, it is now possible to walk into elementary, middle and secondary classrooms and observe students with Down syndrome and other cognitive and physical disabilities learning with their nondisabled peers. This practice of welcoming, valuing, empowering and supporting diverse academic and social learning among students of all abilities is called Inclusive education.

## What Is Inclusion?

Inclusive education is more than mainstreaming. Mainstreaming implies that a student from a separate special education class visits the regular classroom for specific, usually non-academic, subjects. Inclusion is an educational process by which all students, including those with disabilities, are educated together for all, or at least most, of the school day. Generally 80% or more of the day is what is considered inclusion by proponents—a majority could be anything more than 50%. With sufficient support, students participate in age-appropriate, general education classes in their neighborhood schools.

Inclusion is a philosophy of education based on the belief in every person's inherent right to fully participate in society. Inclusion implies acceptance of differences. It makes room for the person who would otherwise be excluded from the educational experiences that are fundamental to every student's development.

When inclusion is effectively implemented, research has demonstrated academic and social benefits for all students: both those who have special needs as well as typical students. Friendships develop, nondisabled students are more appreciative of differences and students with disabilities are more motivated. True acceptance of diversity ultimately develops within the school environment and is then carried into the home, workplace and community.

### BENEFITS OF INCLUSION

A number of studies over the years have reported the various benefits of inclusive education. In 1996, the National Down Syndrome Society published a research report on the inclusion of children with Down syndrome in general education classes. After analyzing and comparing extensive parent and teacher questionnaires, this study found that with

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proper support and adequate communication between parents, teachers and professionals, inclusion is a favorable educational placement for children with Down syndrome. The study also found that the learning characteristics of students with special needs were more similar to their nondisabled peers than they were different. Moreover, teachers reported positive experiences with students with Down syndrome. They described their students as eager to learn, especially when encouraged, and reported personal satisfaction in terms of their professional achievements.

Literature documenting successful inclusion practices is significant and growing. An analysis by Baker, Wang and Walberg in 1994 concluded that "special-needs students educated in regular classes do better academically and socially than comparable students in non-inclusive settings." Research also found inclusion was not detrimental to students without disabilities 3. In fact, a national study of inclusive education conducted in 1995 by the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI) reported academic, behavioral and social benefits for students with and without disabilities. The study also concluded that students within each of IDEA's 13 categories of disability, at all levels of severity, have been effectively integrated into general education classrooms. NCERI also reported positive outcomes and high levels of professional fulfillment for teachers. A number of other studies confirming the educational and social benefits of inclusion for students with and without disabilities can be found in the reference list at the end of this publication.

In May 2000, the Indiana Inclusion Study investigated the academic benefits of inclusive education for students without disabilities. This study concluded that students without disabilities who were educated in inclusive settings made significantly greater progress in math than their peers. Although their progress in reading was not significantly greater than their peers, there was a "consistent pattern" in their scores that favored educating students without disabilities in inclusive settings.

This and other research has highlighted improved academic skills, social skills, communication skills and peer relationships as four of the most important benefits of inclusion. Nondisabled students can serve as positive speech and behavior role models for those with disabilities and students with disabilities offer their nondisabled peers acceptance, tolerance, patience and friendship. As allies and friends, peers can offer support both in and out of the classroom. These findings show that everyone involved in inclusive schooling can benefit from the experience.

The introduction to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act acknowledges that education in inclusive settings works when the mandates of the law are followed. It states:

"Almost thirty years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible, in order to--meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children; and be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible; strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and



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ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home; coordinating this title with other local, educational service agency, State, and Federal school improvement efforts, including improvement efforts under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, in order to ensure that such children benefit from such efforts and that special education can become a service for such children rather than a place where such children are sent; providing appropriate special education and related services, and aids and supports in the regular classroom, to such children, whenever appropriate; supporting high-quality, intensive preservice preparation and professional development for all personnel who work with children with disabilities in order to ensure that such personnel have the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the academic achievement and functional performance of children with disabilities, including the use of scientifically based instructional practices, to the maximum extent possible; providing incentives for whole-school approaches, scientifically based early reading programs, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and early intervening services to reduce the need to label children as disabled in order to address the learning and behavioral needs of such children; focusing resources on teaching and learning while reducing paperwork and requirements that do not assist in improving educational results; and supporting the development and use of technology, including assistive technology devices and assistive technology services, to maximize accessibility for children with disabilities."

Inclusive education has also been shown to have a positive impact on employment outcomes. A 1988 study by Affleck et al., spanning fifteen years, found that students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings had an employment rate of 73 percent while those in segregated programs had an employment rate of 53 percent. Ferguson and Asch (1989) found that the more time students with disabilities spent in regular classes, the more they achieved as adults in employment and continuing education. In its 1997 annual report to Congress, the US Department of Education noted: "across a number of analyses of post-school results, the message was the same: those who spent more time in regular education experienced better results after high school." As nearly all employment settings are themselves inclusive, involving people with and without disabilities, it is easy to imagine why inclusive education has a positive impact on employment outcomes.

## *Overcoming Barriers*

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Many children with disabilities continue to be educated in separate classrooms or schools for all or most of the day, even when their parents believe an inclusive setting would be more appropriate.

### WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Researchers have identified a variety of perceptual, cultural and emotional barriers that cause people to resist the idea of students with and without disabilities sharing the same classroom. In some cases the barrier is simply a matter of prejudice. But there are also many more complex views, including the belief that only those students with disabilities

who are closer to "normal" can or should be included and the belief that the needs of students with disabilities are unique and beyond the reach of general educators.

Others may be concerned about the need for special expertise to support the student's academic and social learning or the potential for students with disabilities to disrupt the classroom. Concerns may also include the costs associated with special services and the idea that functional life skills cannot be addressed in general classroom settings.

Successful inclusion models allay these concerns. In fact, models of inclusive education can be models for the education of all students, especially when Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is implemented, as they overcome barriers and offer a variety of approaches which reach a broader range of students and improve learning. These successful inclusion programs demonstrate how certain changes in the structure of school systems, classroom operations and the roles of teachers, students, parents and community members can enable equal access to general education curricula and related services for all students.

Unfortunately, effective models for inclusion do not yet exist in many parts of this country. Often, parents must convince reluctant IEP teams that inclusion is right for their child. Following are steps parents can take in this situation.

## INDEPENDENT EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION (IEE)

If parents or caregivers disagree with the educational evaluation provided by the school district, reimbursement may be available from the school district for the cost of an independent evaluation. If parents do not want school personnel to evaluate their child, an IEE can be obtained at their own expense. The IEP team must consider an IEE as long as the type of assessment used and the credentials of the person who gave the test comply with school district standards. To get health insurance reimbursement, it is easier to go through the genetics department at a hospital covered under the student's insurance plan or use a developmental pediatrician if the student's plan covers those services.

- Long-Term Goals: Parents should tell the IEP team that they want to prepare their child to live and work as independently as possible. This means being able to function and behave appropriately in a world of typical peers. The goals on the IEP should reflect the skills necessary to achieve this – both academic and non-academic. Parents acknowledge their high but reasonable expectations and inform the team that they will support them in any way possible. It is critical that the IEP team sees the student's future through both the parents' and the student's eyes.
- Drafting IEP Goals for Inclusive Settings: The goals drive placement decisions at IEP meetings. As long as the student can make progress toward the goals in an inclusive environment, the team should not consider a more restrictive placement. It is important that these goals be appropriate for the general education classroom. For example, if the student's IEP includes a goal that specifically requires trips into the community, it cannot be met in an inclusive environment. If the student's goal is to learn to handle money in real-life situations, the goal can be written in a way that uses the cafeteria or the school store, rather than the mall or McDonald's. It also helps to have social goals that involve interactions with typical peers, which cannot be worked on in segregated settings. The goal should not be restricted to "small-group settings." Even though small groups can be arranged in the general education classroom, the term "small-group setting" is often considered to be synonymous with a special education class.
- Planning Matrix: A chart should be used to show how the goals can be worked on in

the different parts of a typical school day. For example, the schedule may indicate that the student will work on money at lunchtime, communication and reading skills throughout the day, and one-to-one correspondence during math – by handing out dittos to each classmate. By demonstrating to IEP and school personnel that it just takes a little creativity and flexibility, the concept of inclusion becomes less threatening.

- **Supplementary Aids and Services and Related Services:** All the supports and services the student and teacher will need should be reflected in the IEP. Examples include curriculum modifications, assistive technology, augmentative communication, paraprofessional support, a behavior plan, staff training, staff collaboration time, psychological support and occupational, speech and physical therapy. The student's need for these supports is not grounds for a more restrictive placement unless they cannot be provided at the school. It is not enough for the school to say it does not have these services; efforts must be made to bring the services to the school, through traveling staff or some other means.

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