

CHAPTER 2

INCLUDE ME



The school team includes students with special needs in general education classrooms during as much of the school day as possible.

▶ THE PROBLEM: HISTORICALLY, SEGREGATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES HAS LED TO POOR OUTCOMES

For many years, “special education” has been not only a label, but a place. Many educators and parents believed that students with disabilities couldn’t handle the typical general education classroom. They believed that self-contained learning environments offer better instruction, a better sense of community, and a more thoughtful approach to unique needs.

A fundamental part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the requirement that students with disabilities be placed in the “least restrictive environment” in schools.²⁹ Schools are expected to begin by placing students with disabilities in a general education classroom. Students are only removed from these classrooms when school staff decide that “the nature or severity of the disability of a child”³⁰ makes it impossible to teach this student in a general education setting.

However, this isn’t always what happens. In 2014, only 62% of students with disabilities nationwide were educated in general education classrooms for more than 80% of the day.³¹ In California, it was 53%.³²

▶ THE SOLUTION: THE MOST EFFECTIVE SCHOOL PRACTICE IS “INCLUSION”

In 2004, a study conducted by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute looked at school districts that have achieved better-than-expected results for students with disabilities. They found one thing these schools had in common: they all practiced inclusion.³³

“Inclusion” means that students with disabilities spend as much of the school day as possible in general education, learning the same content and skills as other students. This allows these students to have equal access to grade-level curriculum, general education teachers, and meaningful learning experiences. By not segregating these students in separate classrooms, it can also help these students feel less stigmatized.

Inclusion is also an attitude. “[Our philosophy] is making sure that you are always thinking that the child is a general education student first,” said a teacher from Oxford Preparatory Academy, a school that practices full inclusion, in a 2016 report by the California Charter Schools Association. “Here’s your general education student who has some special needs; not here is a special education student.”³⁴

In the Donahue Institute study, when interviewing all of the case study districts and schools, “among the most common phrases heard during discussions of curriculum access was ‘they are all our kids.’”³⁵

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Teacher, Oxford Preparatory Academy
2016 report by the California Charter Schools Association

In 2001, the American Institutes for Research identified four academically strong California districts for students in special education based on standardized test results. All four of these districts practiced inclusion. They emphasized “creating a learning community unified in the belief that all children can learn.”³⁶

Research shows that when students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms for the majority of the school day, they are more likely to meet grade-level standards than students with similar disabilities who are assigned to separate classrooms. In 2001, the Okaloosa County School District in Florida pushed to include more students in general education programs. By 2014, the number of students with disabilities who passed Florida’s state achievement tests increased from 41% to 69% in reading. It increased from 47% to 78% in math.³⁷

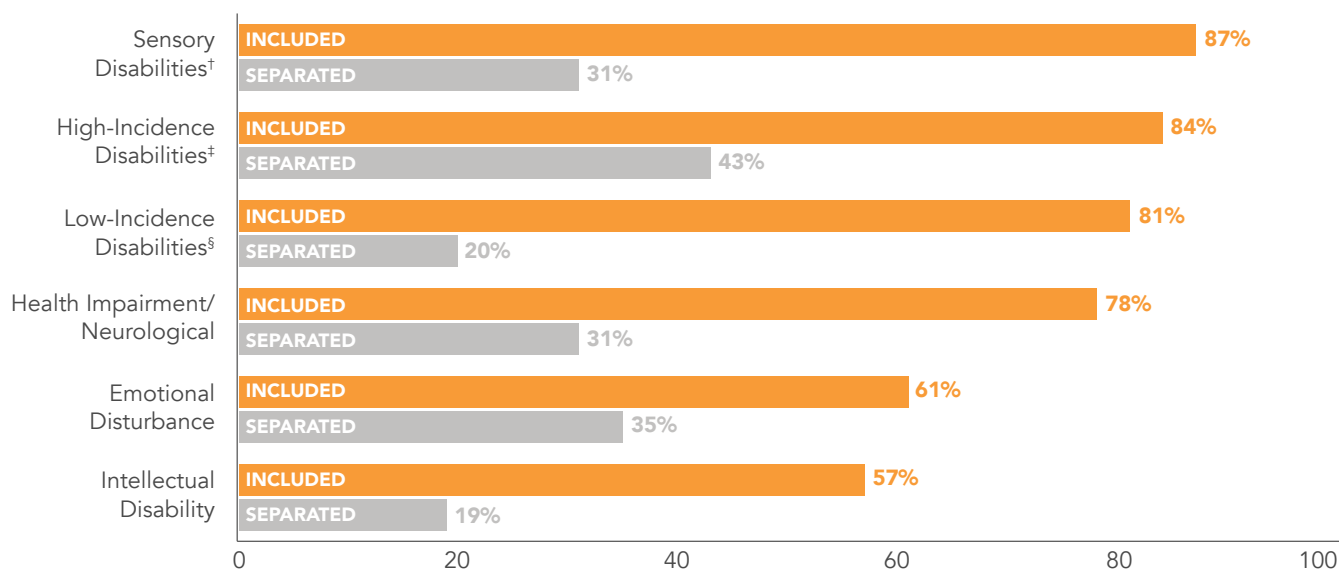
There are long-term benefits to inclusion as well. One Massachusetts study found that when students with high-incidence disabilities are included, the probability that they will graduate on time nearly doubles. Across all disability categories, this finding was consistent: when controlling for all other factors, students with disabilities who were included, were far more likely to graduate than students who were not.³⁸ Another study looked at high school students with disabilities who earned 80% or more of their academic credits in general education classrooms. The study found these students were twice as likely to enroll and stay in postsecondary education than those who received fewer credits in general education classrooms.³⁹

“While neither simple nor cheap, inclusive practices are convincingly the best way to ensure that students with disabilities get access to the same challenging curriculum as their peers,” said the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD).⁴⁰



Students with disabilities who are included are more likely to graduate within four years

Percent likelihood of four-year graduation in the state of Massachusetts by inclusion status*, from 2005 to 2012



SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005 - 2012. State of Massachusetts. Laura Schifter. Using Survival Analysis to Understand Graduation of Students with Disabilities, *Exceptional Children* 2016, Vol. 82(4) 479-496

*Participation in the general education setting for more than 80% of the school day.

†Sensory disabilities in this study include hearing impairment, vision impairment, or physical impairment.

‡High-incidence disabilities in this study include learning disability and speech impairment.

§Low-incidence disabilities in this study include autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blind.

Students with disabilities may still benefit from a different classroom setting at times. Sometimes, they need individualized support that works better outside a general education classroom. Sometimes they need a modified curriculum. But at inclusion schools, the school teams aim to make this the exception, rather than the norm. As much as possible, they ensure that students with disabilities - particularly moderate disabilities - can access the same curriculum in the same classrooms as their peers.

More inclusion leads to better outcomes for all students

Some parents fear that inclusive classrooms hurt the academic achievement of students without disabilities. They fear that students with special needs distract teacher attention away from other students. There is limited research on this topic. But so far, studies show that students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms perform around the same as students in classrooms with fewer or no students with disabilities.⁴¹ They have also found that the presence of students with severe disabilities does not decrease teachers' instructional time or the attention paid to other students.

Some research has found that inclusion practices actually benefit all students, not just those with disabilities. Many studies show that inclusion can help students without disabilities develop empathy for students with disabilities. It can also teach them to appreciate and interact across other types of difference.⁴²

Sometimes, inclusion practices also provide other students with more individualized attention in the classroom.

Schools and districts are often legally required to provide students with disabilities with teaching aides or paraprofessionals. When schools practice inclusion well, all students benefit from having these extra adults in the classroom.

For example, after Lafayette Elementary School implemented inclusive practices, some classes

were co-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Parents of students without disabilities began noticing how the extra support of special education instruction benefited their children too. "We have a lot of parents asking us, 'Can my kid without a disability be in a co-taught class too?'" said Principal Heath Caceres. "It kind of becomes contagious."⁴³

To make inclusion work, school teams *must* let student needs drive all decisions

Inclusion does not mean placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms and then hoping for the best. The most effective schools don't just embrace inclusion. They also put the right support in place to make it work. Here are a few common strategies:

1 - Effective Push-in Supports

Historically, schools taught students with disabilities in separate classrooms. Sometimes these students were "pulled out" of class into small groups in a nearby room or area. More recently, the focus on inclusion has shifted more schools toward a "push-in" model. In this model, specialists come into general education classrooms for some part of the class period to assist students with disabilities. For example, the special education teacher could facilitate a small reading group in an English class. Or, the special education teacher could help a student with a math lesson by providing feedback as the student practices the problems. At the Waldorf-inspired Alice Birney Elementary School in Sacramento, five special education specialists provide a combination of individual push-in supports and small pull-out groups to help with reading, writing, and math support throughout the day.⁴⁴ At the Oakland Charter School for the Arts, students with significant mental health needs begin their day with a breakfast combined with group therapy.⁴⁵ Then in their general education classes, staff counselors and therapists provide support as needed.

2 - Co-teaching

In this strategy, general and special education teachers teach within the same classroom. Both teachers co-plan and deliver the same curriculum to students in large and small groups. The general educator specializes in the overall curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The special education teachers bring in their knowledge of how to adapt instruction and manage behavior.

For example, in the Wyckoff school district in New Jersey, special education elementary teacher Lynda Auxter used to move between classrooms. But she now spends the entire day in one fifth grade classroom with a general educator. "Sometimes [the general educator] does that whole-group lesson. Sometimes, I do whole-group lessons," Auxter told *Education Week*. "Sometimes, she pulls special and general small groups; sometimes, I pull special and general small groups."⁴⁶

Co-teaching works best when students can't necessarily tell the difference between a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Instead, all students benefit from more individualized instruction, whether they have a disability or not. Both teachers can provide different strategies for presenting content as well as ensuring students receive targeted support.

3 - Flexible Grouping

Teachers have the power to decide where a student learns: in pairs, in small groups, or with the whole class. They also group kids for different activities - like pulling together a group of students who are struggling with fractions to work with an adult or having the most advanced readers pair together.

Too often, the default is to group students with disabilities together. These groupings should be flexible and change from day to day and week to week based on students' work. That way, no student remains segregated in a certain group for the entire year.

Teachers group students in a flexible way that depends on the individual needs of each student, and the daily objective of each lesson. Instead of saying, “This is where this student belongs for the rest of the year,” they ask, “Given the context of my class today, what makes the most sense for grouping my students?”

A 2004 study conducted by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute looked at school districts that have achieved better-than-expected results for students with disabilities.

The study found that classroom strategies -- like flexible groupings -- helped create an inclusive environment for students with special needs.⁴⁷

The high-performing Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. has great examples of all three of these strategies. A special educator is assigned to each grade level for push-in support. In the middle school grades, a special educator co-teaches with a general educator. Students cycle through learning “stations” based on their needs -- regardless of whether they have a disability. Teachers collect data on how well students perform on each assignment, and then group and regroup students as necessary.⁴⁸

Embrace neurodiversity: View learning differences as strengths

To change the way educators think of students with disabilities, we might need to change the way we think about learning and disability more generally. Most people think of disabilities as a barrier that prevents students from functioning *normally*. But some researchers and disability advocates have developed a powerful new idea called “neurodiversity” to expand what we think of as “normal.”

The phrase “neurodiversity” was coined in the early 1990s by journalist Harvey Blume and Australian autism activist Judy Singer. Through the perspective of neurodiversity, “neurological differences are to be honored and respected just like any other human variation, including diversity in race, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on,” wrote educator Thomas Armstrong.⁴⁹

Recent brain research has supported this theory.⁵⁰ The research has found that learning differences can actually help a child to succeed.⁵¹ For example, the same characteristics of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) that make it difficult for them to focus might actually also help them multitask better than their peers. Students with autism spectrum disorders might struggle socializing with their peers. But they may outperform them in a task that requires them to find small errors in computer code.

“As an adult with autism, I find the idea of natural variation to be more appealing than the alternative – the suggestion that I am innately bad, or broken and in need of repair,” said John Elder Robison, College of William and Mary Scholar-in-Residence.⁵²

This challenges common attitudes about disabilities. In the past, society has seen differences as deficits and treated them as problems to be solved. Based on this latest research, Armstrong says that special educators need to shift their focus. Instead of fixing and correcting students, educators should instead create environments where neurodiverse students can all succeed.

This means that schools encourage students to learn from these differences. It also means schools develop ways to accommodate all sorts of brains. When teachers emphasize students’ abilities rather than their disabilities, they help ensure that these students not only stay in school, but thrive there.



WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



INCLUDE ME

The school team includes students with special needs in general education classrooms during as much of the school day as possible.

WHAT TO ASK

- Are students with disabilities included as much as possible in general education classrooms (per their IEPs)? Right now, what percentage of students with disabilities are fully included, partially included or in separate settings?
- Are students with disabilities included not just in general instruction classrooms, but in all aspects of school culture, e.g. school events and field trips, enrichment, sports and extracurricular activities? Do leaders allocate resources and provide staffing and training to effectively support inclusion?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- District / charter school network leaders share a district-wide vision for inclusion of special education students as an explicit core value. This is clearly expressed in mission, vision and strategic planning.
- District / charter school network leaders give schools flexibility to make decisions about how to best use staff and resources, and to create the schedule in a way that includes students with disabilities in general education classrooms, at every grade level.
- Special education staff are included in annual district-level or charter school network-level conversations in which principals make decisions about their budget and staffing.
- District / charter school network keeps track of the number of students who are fully included, partially included, or in separate settings and the extent to which these approaches are working for students.
- District / charter school network leaders expect and support general education teachers to build their expertise in special education, and special education teachers to develop greater content expertise. This could include professional development for the entire staff that is focused on special education topics, knowledge, and skills. It could also be integrating special education topics into general trainings (e.g. a session on literacy that includes a focus on learning disabilities and specific strategies to support struggling readers with dyslexia or traumatic brain injury).

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- School leaders make staffing decisions that allow students who need additional intervention or small group instruction to get the time and support they need. For example, a school leader may hire more paraprofessionals, resource specialists, teacher assistants, and co-teachers according to the needs of the student population.
- The school has regular common planning time for general and special education teachers to plan instruction together. Both special education teachers and general education teachers collaborate, co-plan, co-teach, and work with small and large groups of students based on student need. Both deliver content and provide specific supports to struggling students.
- Students with disabilities are seated throughout the classroom alongside their peers without disabilities, at all grade levels. Teachers regularly call on all students, including those with disabilities and ensure all students are engaged in the lesson.
- Student groupings are flexible and change over time based on students' needs and academic progress. Students are not working in the same groups every day based exclusively on their disability status.
- For students who can't be fully included in the general classroom, the school team provides opportunities throughout the school day for students to build relationships and participate in important aspects of the school's culture (e.g. extracurriculars, homework clubs, assemblies, shared lunch times and recess, etc.).

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, smiling warmly while holding a young child. The child is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. They are indoors, with a blurred background showing greenery and a window.

WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- Teachers provide individualized support that addresses the specific disabilities of students.
- Teachers give students with disabilities access to the same standards, curriculum and learning environments as other students.
- The school team intentionally designs its staffing plan, budget, physical layout, and schedules to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This requires strong collaboration between general education and special education teachers. This could include co-teaching in the same classroom, one-on-one support (e.g. push-in or pull-out strategies), and flexible groupings that change over the course of the day, week or year.
- The school team creates a school culture that is safe, welcoming and inclusive of students with disabilities. The school culture celebrates and explores learning differences among students. Staff educate all students about the rights of people with disabilities. They also teach students about the contributions people with disabilities have made to society, science, art, technology, literature, etc.