



# TASH

Equity, Opportunity and Inclusion for  
People with Significant Disabilities  
since 1975

## Frequently Asked Questions About Inclusive Education

### **FAQ #1: What are the current barriers preventing the effective implementation and enforcement of IDEA provisions related to inclusive education?**

The original purpose of PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act was to ensure access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), to establish procedural rules, and to guarantee due process. This legislation was enacted in 1975 when the field of special education did not even consider that students who had intensive support needs could be educated in general education classrooms. Subsequent reauthorizations of the law (as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]), have raised expectations for students to make progress in the general education curriculum, but have not changed to reflect our growing understanding of the benefits of teaching students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in heterogeneous general education classrooms. Congress continues to resist incorporating language around educational best practices related to inclusive education in part because, among others, *inter alia*, of the requirement that special education programs be individualized and the reluctance to standardize what good educational practices are for all students with disabilities.

A key barrier is the language of the law itself that maintains options for segregation in conflict with the intent of federal civil rights legislation. The following examples show how IDEA language regarding “the continuum of alternative placements and services” and the definition of “the least restrictive environment” are a barrier to students’ inclusion.

- While the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause states that a student with a disability cannot be removed from the general education environment unless “the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” the federal regulations provide minimal direction on how this is determined. As a result there is great district to district and state to state variation in how the LRE principle is operationalized. In some states (e.g., Alabama, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Vermont) over 40% of students with intellectual disability spend 80% of the day in general education classrooms; in other states (e.g., Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, and Rhode Island) between 70% and 80% of students with intellectual disability spend less than 40% of their day in general education classrooms or attend separate schools (*30th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2008*). Commenting on these differences, researcher Thomas Parrish (2001) said “Are the students in Virginia that different from the students in South Dakota?” to justify such large differences in placement patterns.
- Although the law does not *per se* foster placement decisions made by disability label or pre-conceived, limiting assumptions, local historical placement patterns are likely to maintain the segregated status quo. For example, if a district has historically placed students with more intensive support needs in a self-contained class, then it will continue to do so without leadership at the state or federal level requiring a different practice. Furthermore, some states’ funding schemes only provide funding for special education staff if it can be shown that the teacher has an actual classroom of students with particular labels. Thus it may be difficult for a local district to justify state funds for a special education teacher whose students spend all of their time in a general education classroom with supplementary aids and services.
- Although IDEA requires participation by a general education teacher in the development, review, and revision of the IEP, the law is not clear that a general education teacher can deliver specially designed instruction within the context of a general education lesson.

- Misinterpretation of the principle of LRE allows for placement in special education classes or centers away from non-disabled peers and from the school the child would attend if not disabled, thus creating unnatural proportions of students with disabilities within certain settings.
- Misunderstanding of the regulations regarding Supplementary Aides and Services may encourage pull-out services rather than push-in supports and services by staff who come into the general education classroom.
- Although the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) monitors all states' placement data, there are no incentives nor sanctions if states do not achieve a universal level of student participation in the general education classroom.

## **FAQ #2: How are schools implementing Response to Intervention and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support practices in ways that foster inclusive education?**

RtI and PBIS are school-wide problem solving processes designed to reduce and prevent academic and behavioral challenges (Sailor, 2008/09). Although they were meant to provide alternatives to separate, special education classroom services, anecdotal evidence suggests that they may not be having the intended result, with students continuing to receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in separate classrooms.

Alternatively, Sailor and Roger (2005) describe an approach that melds elements of Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in a fully inclusive educational model. The Schoolwide Applications Model (SAM) is based on the following principles: general education guides all student learning; all school resources are configured to benefit all students; social development and citizenship is addressed schoolwide through PBIS; schools are democratically organized, data-driven, and use problem-solving systems; schools are welcoming and expect partnership with families and communities; and districts provide support for extensive systems-change efforts. This means that there are no self-contained categorical special education classes and that when "special" places exist, they are used for all students at any given grade level who need to receive tutoring, or work in small groups or on special project.

SAM schools also maintain permanent problem solving, site based leadership teams that use data to monitor progress and plan differentiation and instructional interventions. Temporary teams might be pulled together, as needed, around a specific student. Funding and resources from all legislative sources are merged and used strategically to meet the needs of all learners in the building. In addition, staff are whole school staff, with differentiated, but blurred roles. These roles are based on student and school need, not mandated by legislative language. And finally in the SAM model, Tiers 2 and 3 interventions are delivered in general education to any and all students who, based on progress monitoring, need them.

## **FAQ #3: How can families become more involved in promoting inclusive education at the local, state, and national levels?**

In the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, Congress reaffirmed that the education of students with disabilities can be made more effective by "strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home" and ensured "that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improved educational results for children with disabilities." When it comes to inclusive education, however, parents/guardians are marked as uncooperative or combative when they advocate for such (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Resch et al, 2010). Parents who have felt that their voices were not heard by schools and who possess the means and social capital have even moved their children to different schools or to different districts to obtain more inclusive education (Soodak, & Erwin, 1995; Kluth, Biklen, English-Sand, & Smukler, 2007). Others have exercised their right to legal recourse when all other means have been exhausted. Short of taking these drastic actions, what are effective strategies for parents to advocate for their children's full inclusion in general education classes in their neighborhood schools?

### **It's All About Relationships**

Many parents have found that building personal relationships with school staff helps to overcome the “us vs. them” culture unintentionally created by the separate systems of “regular” and “special” education. Focusing on the development of positive relationships not only models what families want for their children’s educational experience, but also demonstrates the underlying values of inclusive education such as community, relationships, presuming one another’s positive intentions, and viewing everyone through a strengths-based lens.

### **More Alike Than Different ... More Typical Than Special**

Parents who describe their children in positive terms, emphasizing their gifts and talents rather than their “limitations,” can help change the conversation from fixing or remediating children to talking about what supports they need for full membership and participation. One effective strategy for doing this is for parents to invite the members of their children’s school teams to be part of a MAP or PATH meeting (<http://www.inclusion.com/bkpcpmasandpath.html>) where they describe their hopes and dreams for their children’s future – going to college, living in the community, having a job, falling in love and getting married – and the importance of an inclusive education in helping to achieve those dreams. As part of the IEP process, parents can advocate for descriptions of their children that portray them as multi-dimensional, complex human beings, rather than a collection of “can’t do’s.” Parents can advocate for their children’s IEP goals to be firmly rooted in the general education curriculum. And of course, parents can express their wish that their children be welcomed into the school that they would attend if they didn’t have a disability, with the supports (i.e., supplementary aids and services) necessary for their full participation and learning.

### **Knowledge is Power**

Parents/guardians who know the law and are conversant in educational best practices can be effective advocates for their children’s inclusion. IDEIA mandates that states implement Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs), and the national network of Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) (<http://www.parentcenternetnetwork.org/>) may be sources of education and empowerment. PTI’s such as the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, the Colorado PEAK Parent Center, and the Pennsylvania Parent Advocacy and Education Leadership Center (PEAL) have long histories of supporting inclusive education. Several of the University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs), such as the National Center on Inclusive Education at the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire (<http://www.iod.unh.edu/inclusiveed.aspx>) and the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota (<http://ici.umn.edu>), offer a myriad of print, web-based, and training resources for parents/guardians. Many states, through their Governors’ Councils on Developmental Disabilities, offer advocacy training to parents of children with disabilities through Partners in Policymaking, <http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/> a 25 year old organization that teaches parents and individuals with disabilities leadership skills, best practice, and tools for community organizing.

### **Strength in Numbers**

Parents who work together with other parents and like-minded professionals often find that their impact is multiplied. At the local level, there are opportunities for parents of children with disabilities to become PTA leaders who can influence everything from the building of an accessible playground to assisting with grant writing to fund inclusive recreational activities. At the state level, parents are represented on statewide task forces that deal with educational issues such as teacher certification, large-scale assessment, or assistive technology. Nationally, parents can become members of grant review panels, run for office within organizations promoting inclusive education such as TASH or the National Down Syndrome Congress, or run for Congress.

**FAQ #4: Is inclusive education more costly than traditional special education service delivery models?**

No. On a pure cost basis, all available evidence suggests that inclusive education is not more costly than segregated special education services; in fact, over the long term, it may be less so. Odom and his colleagues (2001) found this to be true when they analyzed the instructional costs of traditional versus inclusive preschool programs. McGregor & Vogelsberg (1998) reviewed over 100 research studies and concluded that while start-up costs may initially increase the cost of inclusive services, the costs over time decrease, and are likely to be less than segregated forms of service delivery" (p. 69). Thomas Parrish (2001) from the Center for Special Education Finance concluded that the preponderance of evidence suggests that inclusive placements are no more expensive than separate ones, and in fact, may be less costly over time when investments in local school capacity increase as funding for separate educational programs and facilities decrease. For example, Michael Remus, a special education administrator in Arizona, saved over \$4 million when he brought all of his special education students back into district.

When we analyze the cost-*benefit* of inclusive education, the rationale for inclusion is even stronger. Over 35 years of research has demonstrated the benefits of general education placement for students with disabilities. Studies have found that students with disabilities included in general education classes had better social and communication skills, higher academic achievement, wider social networks, and fewer behavior problems (National Center on Inclusive Education, 2012). The National Longitudinal Transition Study (Blackorby, Chorost, Garza, & Guzman, 2003; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005) found that positive school and post-school outcomes were associated with increased amount of time that students with disabilities spent in general education classes. This correlation held true regardless of students' disability label, the severity of their disability, or their socio-economic status. That same study found that two years after leaving high school, 68% of students who spent more than 2/3 of their school day in regular classes were employed, while 46% of students who spent 2/3 or less of their school day in regular classes was employed, a statistically significant difference (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

And finally, Sailor asked (2002) "how can services and supports available to a school be organized and coordinated in such a manner that *all* children can benefit from the total configuration of *all* available resources?" (p. 4) Imagine if all the money currently being spent on to the buildings, overhead, desks, and administration in separate educational settings were used to hire highly qualified personnel to work in general education classrooms? What if that \$40,000, or \$400,000, or \$4,000,000 used to transport students to out of district placements were used instead to improve the capacity of local schools to teach all children within the mainstream of general education? Would that not be the best use of our resources and help put an end to the debate over the rising costs of *special* education?

**FAQ #5: What Research Still Needs to Be Done on Inclusive Education?**

There is a fairly large research base that supports the positive impact that inclusive education has on the academic outcomes of students with significant disabilities (Buysse & Bailey, 1993; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995). Yet we do not know why students with significant disabilities remain largely segregated from their nondisabled peers in educational settings. Furthermore, there is a much smaller research base around the post-school outcomes of these students. For example, data show that the graduation rate of students with disabilities (regular diploma) is 57% but only 37% for students with intellectual disabilities, while the graduation rate for students without disabilities is approximately 75%. The employment rate for people with disabilities is 20.3%, compared to 69.1% for people without disabilities.

The following are recommendations for further research that will contribute to the knowledge base about effective education for students with significant disabilities.

**Communication**

- How can we improve communicative competency for students with the most significant disabilities so that all

students develop symbolic language systems before they leave school?

### Instruction and Assessment

- How do students with the most significant disabilities best learn?
  - What are the outcomes of discrete skill instruction versus other instructional models (e.g., cooperative learning, embedded or milieu instruction)?
  - To what extent does learning for students with the most significant disabilities correlate to the underlying blueprints that will be used in the new Common Core State Standards assessments that the two GSEG consortia (National Center and State Collaborative and Dynamic Learning Maps) are developing?
- How can functional life skills be taught without compromising students' access to the general education curriculum and their relationships with classmates without disabilities?
- How can Universal Design for Learning principles and strategies accommodate students with the most significant disabilities?
- How do students with the most significant disabilities fit within Response to Intervention models?
- What is the relationship between the quality of students' social relationships and learning?
- What supports, accommodations, and modifications facilitate learning grade-level general education standards?
  - How do teachers make support decisions?
  - What is the influence of learner characteristics on support decisions?
  - What technologies are most effective for promoting learning?
- Are there multiple pathways of skills and concepts that lead to key academic understandings (as being explored by learning progressions) that work for students with significant disabilities? And, are there patterns in how these students learn that can be used to inform instruction?
- What are the intended and unintended consequences of next generation large-scale assessments?

### Professional Preparation

- What are the characteristics of pre-service personnel preparation that promote the most positive educational and life outcomes for students with significant disabilities?
- What are the characteristics of ongoing professional development that promote the most positive outcomes for students with significant disabilities?

### Educational Systems

- Would the elimination of categorical labeling promote improved outcomes for students with disabilities?
- What teacher and related service professional behaviors lead to high quality inclusive practices?

- What are the school organizational structures that promote high quality inclusive practices and outcomes (e.g., teacher roles, use of time and space, etc.)?
- What administrative/leadership practices promote high quality inclusive practices and outcomes?
- What are the characteristics of educational systems that sustain innovation in inclusive education beyond the initial start-up period?
- What funding models (at the federal, state, and local levels) promote effective and efficient use of resources leading to improved outcomes for students with disabilities?
- What practices promote effective home-school partnerships?

### Post-School Outcomes

- What are the post-school outcomes of students who were taught in inclusive settings, particularly with respect to post-secondary education, employment, housing, social relationships, health, and general participation in inclusive community activities (e.g., leisure and fitness, citizenship and volunteering, online communities, etc.)?

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