

Paths to Improving Education: Why Inclusion?

“When people are not included, they are excluded.” —James Ryan

Children with disabilities must be regarded as general education students first.¹ This statement from the U.S. Department of Education reflects the original intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in which special education was conceived as a continuum of services within general education, not a place or system apart. Research shows educational systems to be more effective when they operate cohesively and as one.² While not every child with a disability is best served in a general education classroom, research has for decades shown that most students benefit both socially and academically from inclusive settings.³

Social Benefits

Parents want their children to know that they are welcomed and included in their school communities. This sense of belonging, which is fostered through inclusive settings, carries with it significant implications for a child’s future. According to the National Association of Special Education Teachers, a child’s feeling that he or she belongs “positively affects the student’s self-image and self-esteem, motivation to achieve, speed of adjustment to the larger classroom and new demands, general behavior, and general level of achievement.”⁴ Decades of research have shown this to be true. As well, children with disabilities who have the opportunity to interact regularly with their general education peers with “higher-level social skills often imitate these behaviors and skills in the future.”⁵

The converse has also proven to be true: when children with disabilities don’t have regular opportunities to see how their typically developing peers talk, socialize, and generally behave, they are “less likely to achieve the fundamental social milestones”⁶ that are linked to later success in school and life. In summary, “regular, sustained interaction” in inclusive classrooms gives children with disabilities the opportunity to observe typically developing children and develop, expand, and generalize their own social skills.⁷

Academic Benefits

Some parents of students with disabilities fear that their children may not be able to learn in general education classrooms and would perform better in a more restricted setting. But inclusive education does not mean that a child with a disability is simply placed in a general education classroom and expected to figure out how to survive on his or her own. “In a well-designed inclusion classroom . . . the teacher uses inclusion strategies to help students succeed academically . . . students encounter higher expectations—both from their peers and their teachers, as well as the positive academic role models of their non-disabled classmates.”⁸ In the process of creating these classrooms, general and special educators work together to meet the needs of all students—through team teaching, co-teaching, and support provided by instructional assistants. And while the general educator provides the content expertise, the special educator

(*Why Inclusion* continued on page 4)

1. U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Thirty-five Years of Progress in Educating Children With Disabilities Through IDEA*. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/idea35/history/index.html?exp=7>
2. Parrish, T. (2010). *Special Education Expenditures, Revenues, and Provision in California*. <http://www.smcoe.org/assets/files/about-smcoe/SpEd%20Expenditures,%20Revenues,%20Provision%20in%20CA.pdf>
3. Bui, X., Quirk, C., Almazan, S., Valenti, M. (2010). *Inclusive Education Research and Practice: Inclusion Works*. Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education. http://www.mcie.org/usermedia/application/6/inclusion_works_final.pdf
4. National Association of Special Education Teachers. (n.d.). *Promoting Positive Social Interactions in an Inclusion Setting for Students with Learning Disabilities*. http://faculty.uml.edu/darcus/01.505/NASET_social_inclusion.pdf
5. Henninger, W., & Gupta, S. (2014). *How Do Children Benefit from Inclusion?* <http://archive.brookespublishing.com/documents/gupta-how-children-benefit-from-inclusion.pdf>
6. Holahan, A., & Costenbader, V. (2000). *A Comparison of Developmental Gains for Preschool Children with Disabilities in Inclusive and Self-Contained Classrooms*. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20, 224–235.
7. Strain, P., McGee, G., & Kohler, F. (2001). *Inclusion of Children with Autism in Early Intervention Settings*. In M. J. Guralnick (Ed.), *Early Childhood Inclusion: Focus on Change* (pp. 337–364). Baltimore: Brookes.
8. BrightHub Education. (2012). *Inclusion for Special Education Students: Advantages and Benefits*. <http://www.brighthubeducation.com/special-ed-inclusion-strategies/66128-advantages-and-benefits-of-inclusion/>

informs how instruction can be individualized so that all students learn. Quality inclusive settings require every student to be able to read, write, and understand mathematical functions.⁹ In addition, the diversity of students in these kinds of classrooms gives every child the opportunity to observe and learn new approaches to solving the same problem, contributing to the development of greater mental flexibility and more robust problem-solving skills for all students.¹⁰

Supporting All Students

Another feature of many inclusive classrooms is the “push-in” model of service delivery, where specialists—physical therapists, reading specialists, speech therapists, etc.—provide special services directly in the classroom. A child with a disability doesn’t have to go elsewhere to receive special supports, and the child experiences greater continuity throughout the school day.

These specialists also have the opportunity to look beyond strict assignments and labels; inclusive classrooms give them the chance to observe the progress of all children. The specialists—special educators among them—are in the perfect position to recognize and support those children who are just beginning to have problems with reading, for example, or who may be experiencing difficulty pronouncing the letter “r,” or who don’t seem to be able to sit still. Research shows that targeted supports at the earliest stages of these kinds of struggles can actually prevent certain learning challenges from developing into something serious, prevent speech and language problems from becoming severe enough to require a child to be assessed and labeled, and prevent a small but disruptive behavior from turning into a persistent problem.

An additional advantage is that, when a specialist can work within a diverse class of students, his or her services are “normalized.” No one child is singled out or made to feel different. Everyone simply receives the instruction and supports he or she needs within a general setting. Everyone benefits.

Legitimate Fears

Jane Floethe-Ford is director of education services at Parents Helping Parents, a parent training and information center in San Jose. “In a perfect world,” she says, “all schools would be inclusive. That’s how it is in life. We’re all together. But in reality, many parents worry about the prospect of inclusive classrooms for their children. They worry that there won’t be appropriate supports for their child; that there’s not enough training for the teachers or the instructional assistants, that the money won’t follow.” Referring to the Individualized Education Program (the IEP), which details the specialized instruction and related services that a child with disabilities will receive in school, Floethe-Ford and other parents worry that “the ‘I’ in IEP will be lost.”

These concerns are real. And school districts in the state can—and are—addressing them by creating lasting, districtwide commitments to quality inclusive settings: taking the time and resources to prepare staff and providing robust and ongoing training and support to educators (see pages 6, 13, and 16).

The Parent Perspective

Every child has unique learning needs, and every family has different beliefs about—and experiences with—inclusion. Kristin Wright’s daughter Shelby was born 17 years ago with multiple and significant disabilities. Wright admits to having “fought to have a home program” for Shelby so that she would always know that

her daughter was safe. But after visiting CHIME, an inclusive charter school in Southern California, Wright was able to imagine her daughter in a similar school. “A home program served a need for Shelby after surgeries and illnesses, but she needed to expand her world and the people in it. I had to learn that the world would be a safer place for her if she learned to navigate it. I had to learn to trust my school team and community. This was the best choice we ever made for Shelby. She is better served in an inclusive setting, and it took me 10 years to realize that.”

Wright also talks about the challenge of finding the balance between functional skills and academic skills for her child. While she has faith in the IEP process helping to strike that balance, “there are always trade-offs. As parents we’re not taught to navigate the complexities.” Parent centers,¹¹ such as the one that Floethe-Ford helps direct, are designed to support parents in learning how to navigate the options and to find a balance.

Keila Rodriguez is the parent of four children and a busy school administrator. “I didn’t have time to create a separate world for Diego,” she says of her son who was born with Down syndrome. “Besides, our stores, our church, my kids’ swimming lessons, they’re all inclusive. I didn’t want to isolate him.” But when Diego moved into kindergarten, “I hit a brick wall. I had to fight for inclusion. Diego’s main deficit is speech. And he was placed in a special day class with 16 other students; 11 of them were nonverbal. How was he going to learn to speak? I know that kids learn as much from their peers as they do from the adults in their lives.”

Rodriguez is one of many parents who want their children to be included in school with their general education peers. Sumathi Balaji’s daughter, Shrinidhi, has

Rettt syndrome. She can't talk, and she uses her eyes to communicate. Yet from kindergarten, "I knew that she could access the general education curriculum, and I wanted that for her," says Balaji. "But I wanted more. I wanted her to be happy. I have my fears about inclusion. Is my daughter going to be safe? Will she be able to communicate her needs? What will happen if she has a seizure? I worry about that. But she is a social child, and she is most happy in an inclusive setting."

Until Michael Adams was 11, he was in a setting that was similar to Diego's. "Most of the kids in his classroom were nonverbal or unable to function on their own," says Michael's mother, Christina Adams, of the county program Michael attended. He and his mother saw the teachers at the county as "amazing. They loved the kids and were part of the family," says Adams. Yet Michael was not developing socially or academically in the way his mother knew he could. "He was completely dependent on his instructional aides and could barely keep up with simple writing tasks. His ability to interact with the kids in that class was very far behind [developmentally] and getting worse. He needed social interaction with typical children."

Denita Maughan, director of student support services at Standard Elementary School District, helped to make it possible for Michael to join a general education sixth-grade classroom. "We were sad to leave what we knew," says Adams, "and we worried about how Michael would adjust." Michael has cerebral palsy, which primarily affects his legs and motor skills, and he is confined to a wheelchair. So his mother was also worried about how he would be able to physically navigate a general education environment. "But Denita, all of the staff, and all of the kids completely surrounded us with support and took

care of us," says Adams. "If Michael had stayed in the county program, he would be dependent on his aide. He's a freshman in high school now and has made so many friends since sixth grade. He barely uses his aide. He has the tools and independence that he needs to be successful in his life.

"Michael is a typical child who, for most of his life, has been treated like a disabled child. I know that there are others like Michael who need the same opportunities to be challenged."

Partnerships

Quality inclusive classrooms are possible, and school districts that are committed to inclusion are attending carefully to the fears and concerns of parents. When Sara Beggs, coordinator of inclusive learning in the Orange Unified School District, and other members of her inclusion team were beginning to offer inclusive settings, "I thought I was going to be a superstar when I shared the news with families. But they really fought me. I had to explain [inclusion] to them and share lots of information with them. Inclusive school wasn't yet in place, so I couldn't take them to see anything. They had to trust our team that this was going to be the best for them and their children. They heard from me a lot. I did offer to take them on observations of the general education sites that they were going to. Within that setting, I would say, 'Look, the children are in small groups right now. So here's when your child will receive special supports.'"

Beggs admits that "there were difficult conversations with parents. But we welcomed hearing their concerns, because then we—teachers, principals, everybody—can move forward to solve them. We didn't shy away from that. And we didn't paint this rosy picture. We have to look at the concerns. Only then can we solve them." ◀

9. Inclusive Schools Network. (2015). *Together We Learn Better: Inclusive Schools Benefit All Children*. <http://inclusiveschools.org/together-we-learn-better-inclusive-schools-benefit-all-children/>
10. Agran, M., Blanchard, C., Wehmeyer, M., & Hughes, C. (2002). *Increasing the Problem-Solving Skills of Students with Developmental Disabilities Participating in General Education*. *Remedial and Special Education, 23*(5), 279–288. <http://www.beachcenter.org/>
11. A directory of **Parent Centers in California** is at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qa/caprntorg.asp>

Resources

- ▶ **Benefits of Inclusive Education** on the Kids Together Web site, is at <http://www.kidstogether.org/inclusion/benefitsofinclusion.htm>
- ▶ **Effective Teaching Practices for Students in Inclusive Classrooms** by S. Land at the William & March School of Education Training and Technical Assistance Center is at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/resources/articles/inclusion/effectiveteach/>
- ▶ **Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities Benefits Everyone** by A. Beninghof is at <http://expertbeacon.com/inclusive-education-students-disabilities-benefits-everyone/#.VmBm94tHGXM>