



Inclusive School Communities for Students with Disabilities: 10 Reasons Why

Inclusive school communities are educational settings in which students with disabilities have opportunities to participate and receive support in all aspects of school life alongside peers who do not have disabilities. In an inclusive system, special educators, related service providers, general educators, and other education personnel work together to address the educational needs of students with disabilities. By collaborating, these educators better support the learning and participation of *all* students.

The precedent for inclusive education was set in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause of Public Law 94-142, passed by Congress in 1975. Since that time many strides have been made in realizing the intent of the law. Inclusive education, however, continues to be a new and challenging way of supporting students with disabilities in many schools. Too often, separateness and exclusion can define the educational experience. Despite the slow rate of implementation and the challenges involved, educators, students and families have found many compelling reasons to support inclusive education. Here are 10 of them.

1 Preparation for Community Life

A primary goal of education is to prepare individuals to be contributing members of society. Segregated and homogenous settings do not prepare young people for integrated,

heterogeneous community life. By growing up and learning together in school, students with varied abilities, interests, and backgrounds experience diversity as a community norm. Many people in our society have misconceptions about persons with disabilities. The best way to overcome these misconceptions is by bringing people with and without disabilities together in shared activities. Inclusive schools provide the opportunity for all students to develop the attitudes, values, and skills needed to get along with others in a diverse society.

2 A Sense of Belonging

Belonging is a human need for all people. Difference can threaten a sense of belonging. The practice of sorting, tracking, and separating students is institutionalized in much of public education. Conversely, an inclusive approach to education challenges these practices and their underlying assumptions. As educators become more successful implementing inclusive practices, fewer students are at risk for experiencing rejection and its potentially devastating effects on learning. By attending their local schools and being included in general education life, students with disabilities are included in the communities where they live and can make friends and learn with other kids in the neighborhood.

3 Varied Learning Opportunities

Inclusive educational settings offer many varied opportunities to grow socially and academically. Peers are often the best models and teachers of socially acceptable and valued behavior. Inclusive settings also offer students many incidental opportunities to learn useful skills and repertoires, such as following typical daily routines, figuring out multiple ways to solve problems, using humor and sharing stories, and communicating effectively. Academically, there is a wide range of curricular opportunities in general education that cannot be replicated in a separate system of special education. Like all children, those with disabilities grow from encountering a variety of experiences.

4 Differentiated Instruction

With an increasingly wide range of abilities, interests, and backgrounds in the general student population, educators are beginning to differentiate instruction to a much greater degree than ever before. By working together, educational team members can creatively design instruction to better meet the needs of students. Differentiated instruction involves appropriately varying the ways in which individual students and groups of students go about learning. It may also involve students demonstrating different ways of understanding the main concepts. For example,

in a unit on reading maps, some students may work with maps of their home country while others use a map of their neighborhood. Some students may create their own maps for a trip; others may create a map to be used for a school scavenger hunt. The main concepts of map reading would be the same for most students, but the instructional approach and performance expectations may differ. Introducing this type of instruction expands the variety of instructional approaches and can result in increased learning for students.



5 An Individualized Education in a Supportive Context

Beyond differentiated instruction, students with disabilities may require an educational program that is individualized for most of the school day. This is done by first identifying the priority learning objectives for an individual student with disabilities and then carefully examining the general education environments and activities to determine the times and places in which the individual learning objectives can be addressed in these regular environments. In this way, the individualized educational program for a student with disabilities meshes with that of peers while still meeting individual educational needs. The natural flow of productive interactions and learning in general education environments makes them ideal places in which to expect active student participation and high levels of student accountability for performance. Students with disabilities can practice skills in these supportive learning contexts even though specific goals and objectives may vary greatly among students.

6 Relationships with Peers

Inclusive learning environments provide students with many opportunities to establish relationships with peers. Such relationships form the beginnings of friendships that are a source of fun and enjoyment, and an essential source of emotional support during challenging times. When considering what contributes most to one's quality of life, "friends" often appears toward the top of the list. Therefore, the opportunity to connect with others is an important outcome of being included.

7 Effective Use of Instructional Resources

In inclusive schools, resources – especially instructional personnel – can be leveraged to create more effective and efficient learning opportunities for all students. When students with disabilities are educated in general education classes, special educators and related service personnel provide support in those settings. This results in general education teachers and students having additional expertise more available. For example, additional personnel can result in smaller instructional groups during language arts and math, which allows for more frequent and individualized interactions between teachers and students. In addition, general educators have often remarked that their instructional repertoire has expanded as a result of team-teaching with special educators. In this way, special educators and general educators support each other in meeting the educational needs of all children.

8 Team Building for School Improvement

A cornerstone of effective special education has always been collaborative teamwork. An inclusive approach to service provision requires an even greater amount of collaboration among an even greater number of education professionals. Teamwork not only results in improved instruction for students, it also brings about increased *esprit de corps* and support among a critical mass of educators in a school building. Positive working relationships and a sense of shared responsibility for students are now recognized as cornerstones of successful school-wide improvement efforts. Relation-

ships established among staff involved in creating inclusive learning experiences can support such initiatives, resulting in increased learning for students throughout a school.

9 Parental Involvement

When children with disabilities are included in their local schools, their parents can participate to a greater extent in that school and in the community where the school is located. Parents of included students can be a part of a support network of parents of other local children with disabilities, as well as parents of children without disabilities. Such support is more difficult to access when a child's school is a long distance from home or when families do not feel welcome.

10 Support of Civil Rights

Like all students, those with disabilities have the right to attend regular schools and general education classes. Inclusion is a civil rights issue. In a democratic society, every person is to be afforded equal opportunities; segregated settings and marginalization from mainstreamed American experiences symbolize society's rejection of a segment of the population. Participation in inclusive schools and communities provides students with and without disabilities the experience of a society that values and includes all its citizens.

Written by Jennifer York-Barr, Ph.D., Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD), University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; and Terri Vandercook, Ph.D., School of Education, University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis. Published 2003, by the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

Available online at ici.umn.edu. To order print copies or request alternate formats contact the Institute's Publications Office: 612/624-4512, publications@icimail.umn.edu.

The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity employer and educator.

 The College of Education
& Human Development
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA