

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to local education agencies regarding inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities.

Frequently Asked Questions:¹ Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

What is inclusion?

Inclusion is a term used to describe the ideology that each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, should be educated in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* does not require inclusion. However, the law does require in §§ 300.114 through 300.120 that children with disabilities must, to the maximum extent appropriate, be educated in the least restrictive environment. The *IDEA* considers the general education classroom to be the least restrictive environment². It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students).

What do inclusion and access mean in the practical sense? What do they look like in the classroom?

The best inclusive environments are those that allow observers to see all of the students as the same and provide a seamless provision of services for students enrolled in the class both with and without IEPs. Inclusive teachers utilize different evidence based practices to meet the needs of each child in the classroom despite ability level. This may include utilizing different teaching strategies or adapting materials to the student's ability level. Instruction is conducted by the general education teacher (teacher of record) as well as the students' special education teacher and/or educational assistant (under the supervision of the special education teacher.) Inclusive classrooms tend to be largely student-centered and active. There is more than one instructional person in the classroom at a time and the students most likely are engaged in active, cooperative learning activities. Small groups and learning centers are also very important in an inclusive classroom.

What factors should be considered when deciding upon placement for students with special needs?

Each student's placement should be individually considered based upon their present levels of performance, their strengths and challenges and their educational needs. The IEP Team should consist of teachers (special and general) and specialists who have observed and worked with the child as well as the parents, the child (if appropriate) and a local education agency representative. Ideally, these individuals gather to consider:

- the educational benefits available to the disabled student in a traditional classroom, supplemented with appropriate aids and services, in comparison to the educational benefits to the disabled student from the special education classroom;
- the educational benefits to the disabled student from interacting with non-disabled students; and
- the degree of disruption of the education of other students, resulting in the inability to meet the unique needs of the disabled student.

Regardless of placement, all students should receive access to the general education curriculum, to the extent appropriate.

What ratio of special education students to general education students works best? Can you have too many students with special needs in an inclusion class?

One useful guideline is that an inclusive environment should attempt to maintain a natural proportion of students with special needs. This means that the ratio in a classroom of students with disabilities to students without disabilities would approximate the ratio of students in general or special education within the school. This also depends on the disability of the students with special needs within the class. Having more students with special needs within the class defeats the purpose of inclusion and makes it difficult for the teachers and paraprofessionals³ to implement IEPs of the students with special needs.

¹ Adapted from EMSTAC (Elementary & Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center)

² Federal Register at <http://idea.ed.gov/download/finalregulations.pdf>

³ **Paraprofessional**- a paraprofessional is a trained aid who assists either the general education or special education teacher in the classroom. At no time should the paraprofessional be without supervision of a certified teacher when working with special needs students.

What are some of the challenges for teachers who are transitioning their program to inclusion?

Prior to implementing inclusion, the administration, teachers and paraprofessional must be provided with professional development training. Teachers who are transitioning to inclusion learn that they need to use a different pedagogical framework. In the inclusive environment, they need to learn how to be able to individualize lessons as well as teach an entire class. Additional challenges for teachers include instructional planning and learning how to share teaching time in the general education classroom setting. Specific to most special education teachers is the need to learn the grade level standards for that curriculum and grade.

How do teachers individualize lessons?

Teachers may use a variety of methods to individualize lessons that involve making modifications or accommodations.⁴ Some may use grouping to meet various students' needs. Others may supplement class work with individual assignments or adjust material (substance or amount) to meet the ability level of the student. Peer tutoring is another option that allows for collaborative work and higher order thinking skills. Universal Design for Learning⁵ and direct instruction are also methods which are useful when seeking to meet specific student needs.

What types of assessments are used in settings that provide access and/or are inclusive?

Many schools continue to use traditional grading scales, while considering the individual skills and abilities of all students. Teachers can use portfolios to judge progress by students in core areas. The portfolio serves as a tool to compare the student to himself or herself. Other systems include curriculum-based measurements, anecdotal notes, checklists and more formal assessments. These allow the teacher to compare the student to the other members of the class or the developmental norm. While traditional grades may be assigned to students, narratives to explain strengths and challenges can enrich a student's report and allow others to determine how best to meet that student's needs. Notations can also be made on IEP documentation to ensure that students are meeting goals which parallel the skills and knowledge being taught in the regular education setting.

What types of in-service training are necessary for those already working to provide access to the general education curriculum and/or teaching in inclusive classrooms?

In-Service training is most rewarding to teachers when they are able to choose the topics. Yet, in order to facilitate inclusion and access, some topics that are most helpful involve training regarding direct instruction, teaming, individualizing curriculum in the classroom, classroom management, establishing peer tutoring/mentoring programs, cooperative learning, Universal Design for Learning, behavior modification, parent communication, accommodations and modifications, assistive technology, meeting IEP goals, formal and informal assessment strategies and effective use of paraprofessionals. Knowledge and understanding of the grade level state curriculum standards is of primary importance for special education teachers who co-teach in an inclusion setting and training must include state curriculum standards at the subject and grade level of the inclusive classroom.

⁴ Many students with special needs included in the general curriculum will require accommodations and/or modifications. An **accommodation** allows a student to complete the same assignment or test as other students, but with a change in the **timing, formatting, setting, scheduling, response and/or presentation**. This accommodation does not alter in any significant way what the test or assignment measures. Examples of accommodations include a student who is blind taking a Braille version of a test or a student taking test alone in a quiet room. A **modification** is an adjustment to an assignment or a test that changes the standard or what the test or assignment is supposed to measure. Examples of possible modifications include a student completing work on part of a standard or a student completing an alternate assignment that is more easily achievable than the standard assignment.

⁵ **Universal Design for Learning** is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) helps educators meet this goal by providing a framework for understanding how to create curricula that meets the needs of all learners from the start. (*National Center on Universal Design for Learning* – <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines>)