

What We Mean by Inclusive Education

The focus of this book is inclusive education in relation to special education. However, when we say “inclusive education,” we mean *all* learners. In our district inclusive education is not just about special education. It is also about students who are emerging bilinguals, it is about students with diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds, it is about students who are excelling academically, and it is about students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Inclusive education means that everyone belongs, diversity is a strength, and demographics should never be predictors of outcomes. There may be some specific structures or areas of expertise that support growth among these different student groups, but we continue to find that our approaches are more alike than different.

We support high expectations for all, while allowing individualized pathways to get there. We believe that everyone wants to, and deserves to, belong. We believe that all children should see their perspective and story reflected in their educational materials and experience and all children should be learning about perspectives and experiences that are different from their own. We believe that implicit biases and deeply held beliefs are difficult to uncover yet we must remain committed to this work. We believe that identity matters and that voluntary affinity groups can help build understanding. We believe that our language is powerful, and we continue to adapt our terminology as social constructs and understanding of people’s experiences become clearer. We believe that all children can learn and that we can be the district where each child, every child, succeeds.

Michael Giangreco and Mary Beth Doyle (2007) explained the importance of inclusive classrooms for all students:

What matters most is not only standards from the district or state curriculum framework, but also values such as tolerance, kindness, and fairness.

An inclusive classroom that embodies these dispositions forms a strong foundation for teaching students the lessons of history and the tools of modern scientists, historians, writers, healers, and artists. With these tools, all students, including those with a label of “disability,” can be successful learners and citizens in their communities. (p. 228)

In terms of special education it is important to clarify what we mean by inclusion. Words are powerful and can create mental pictures and assumptions based on the schema and experience that each person brings to an interaction. *Inclusion* is one of those words that can bring with it stories and references that may vary significantly. For some, inclusion is the rallying cry of civil rights. For others, inclusion harkens back to a classroom experience where a student with significant learning differences was physically present in a general education classroom with no entry points for meaningful participation in the learning.

For us, inclusive education is about belonging, equity, and instructional practices. Every child belongs in their neighborhood school and in their grade-level classroom with their peers. That is always our starting point. We no longer have any self-contained classrooms; we no longer bus students to another school in our district to access the services they need. Because we believe students belong in their neighborhood school, we are committed to developing the resources and support for each student at their school. They belong at their school, so we need to bring the support to them, in their general education classroom.

FIGURE 2.1 Exclusion-Segregation-Integration-Inclusion Diagram

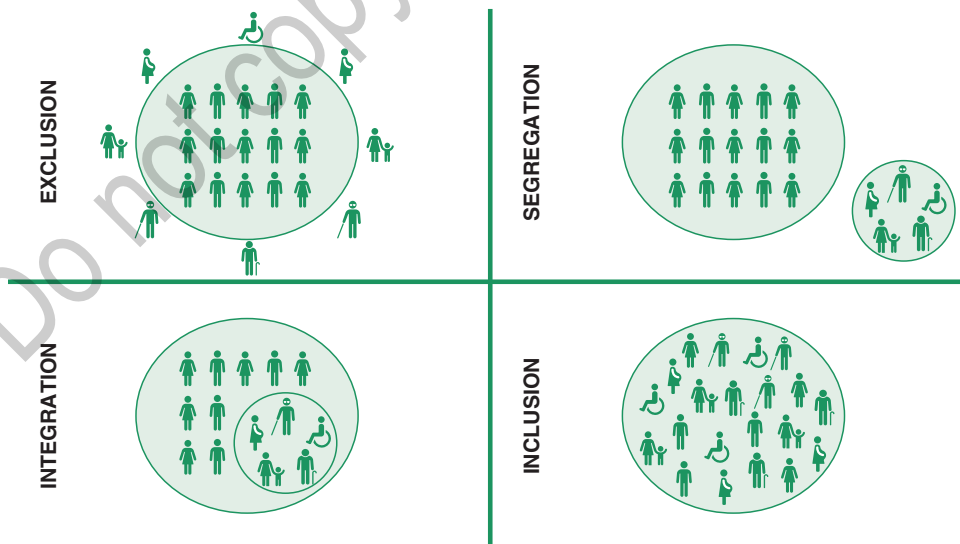


IMAGE SOURCE: iStock.com/Sudowoodo

Exclusion. Figure 2.1 is a picture of the history of children with learning differences. In the United States, prior to Public Law 94-142 of 1975, many students were simply excluded from public school altogether. This historic law, reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), provides the basic rights for students with disabilities to receive a free, appropriate public education. The concept of least restrictive environment (LRE) is made clear in the IDEA, and the law explicitly states that removal from the general education classroom cannot be solely based on the need for curriculum modification.

Segregation. More commonly, segregation for children with learning differences has occurred at the classroom rather than the school level. There are separate classes, often called “self-contained” classrooms, in most school districts throughout the country even today. There are many acronyms and euphemisms for these classes, such as Social Learning Center, Behavior Support Class, Life Skills Center, Structured Learning Program, Medically Fragile Class, and Applied Academics Program, to name a few. Generally, these classrooms are centralized, to be most efficient with district resources. For example, there may be students with cognitive learning differences living throughout a school district, and when a determination is made that a student needs significantly modified curriculum, and things like learning to do laundry independently are more important for that student than learning grade-level content, that student will then be bused to another school in the district where the Life Skills Center is located.

There is certainly a logic to this model. It is efficient. It is systematic. Most important, it is familiar. Most of us attended school and began our careers as educators in this kind of model. There are a few arguments in favor of segregated, self-contained classrooms:

- We can capitalize on the talents of teachers who have expertise working with students with significant cognitive differences.
- We can teach relevant life skills.
- Students will spend time with peers who share similar characteristics.

But look deeper into these assumptions, and some provocative questions emerge:

- Don't all young people need to learn life skills, not just students with disabilities?
- If we espouse axioms like “All children can learn,” are we adding an asterisk and really saying, “. . . except those children”?
- How do we know what a student is learning if they have significant challenges or differences in how they communicate?
- When we assume that children who share a common characteristic (e.g., a disability) are the children who will be friends, what does that say to our axiom about valuing diversity?

- These same beliefs—that “those children (or people) should be together”—have led to segregation and ghettoization throughout U.S. and world history. How many of us grew up in schools where all we knew about the children in those segregated classes was that they were different, “other,” and not worthy of being in our classrooms?

Integration. Early attempts at inclusion were actually much like the integration visual in Figure 2.1. Students with learning differences may have been present in the classroom, but that was all. The curriculum, the learning tasks, the adults with whom they interacted, these were all different from what was occurring for the other students in the class. Often, there was a physical separation in the classroom, where the student with learning differences was placed at a table in the back of the room with a paraeducator or instructional assistant. The goal was to have learning activities that did not “interfere” with the learning of other students or get in the way of the general education teacher. For many students this model can have all of the negative aspects of a segregated classroom but without the benefits. This can even be considered a more restrictive model as there is often very little interaction with typical peers and no interaction with other children with disabilities. The general education teacher may not feel empowered to engage with or teach this student, and therefore, there may be no real learning and embracing of diversity.

Inclusion. Imagine a classroom where students are all learning together, learning targets are clear and rigorous, and all children are engaged in the learning. Engagement can look different for different students. But it is a learning community where differences are accepted and diversity is valued, several adults are moving around to meet the needs of the learners in the classroom, access to content may come in different ways, and wherever you look you see evidence of the belief that all children can learn.

Equity. Equity means that every student gets what they need to access rigorous levels of learning but what each student needs is not the same. Therefore, our commitment to equity means recognizing that though every student belongs in their class, the ways they access their learning or represent their thinking may be different. If a student needs to be pretaught key vocabulary words in a less distracting setting so that the student may access an important social studies lesson with peers, then that is exactly what needs to happen. Our commitment to equity allows us to be okay with some students getting more teacher attention, different sorts of scaffolds to access learning, or additional opportunities to practice.

Inclusive education means that all teachers are changing the way they teach. Years ago, the prevailing attitude was that the teacher presents the material and the student has the opportunity to learn it. Some students may seize that opportunity, while others may choose not to work hard to learn. The dramatic shift that has occurred in the past 20 years, is that we are now committed to student learning (outcomes) rather than simply teaching (inputs).

We now understand that there is, and always will be, a range of ways in which all students learn in every classroom.

Educational leaders Richard and Rebecca DuFour note that the focus in public education as a whole has shifted to being clear about what we want all students to know and be able to do, assessing if they have learned it, and then having clear ways of responding if they haven't (DuFour et al., 2010). The responsibility has shifted from

teaching (or presenting the material) to student learning. This radical shift is in perfect alignment with inclusive education. In the old model, if a student needed a different style or pedagogy, no one would have thought to ask the general education teacher to change their methods. Instead, the student was pulled out to receive this "special" education in another setting. We now understand that there is, and always will be, a range of ways in which all students learn in every classroom. If classroom teachers plan lessons through a lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), allowing multiple ways for students to access and represent their learning, we can inclusively support the learning of all students in the classroom. The role of the special education teacher then shifts to the role of collaborator, coplanner, and "access expert," working with the general education teacher to create lessons that engage all learners to move toward rigorous, meaningful learning.

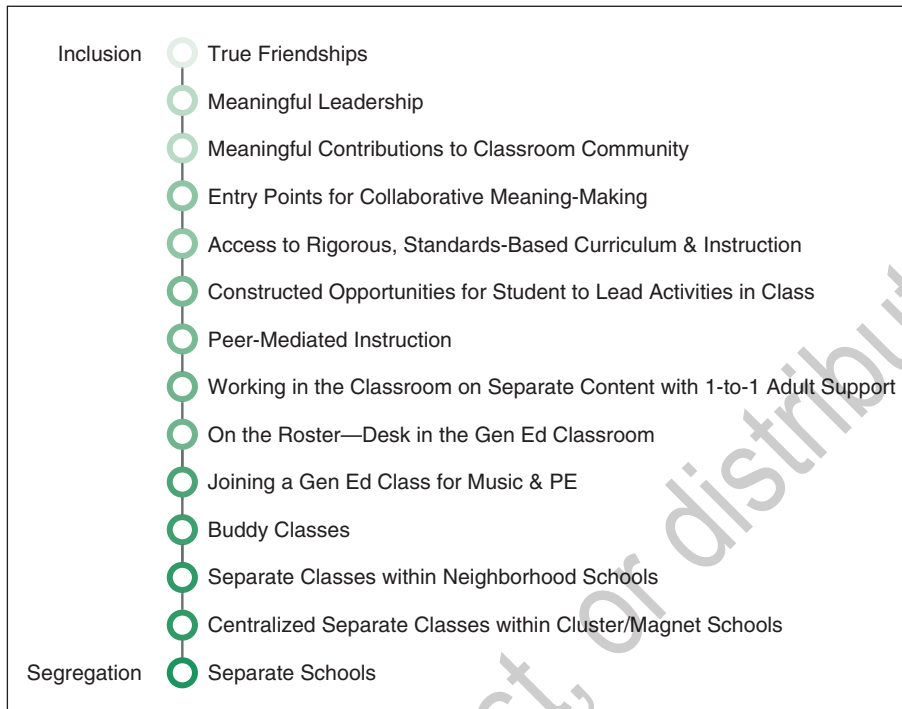
A CONTINUUM OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Early in our journey toward more inclusive learning communities, we learned that the binary construct of segregation versus inclusion is not authentic or useful. Rather, there is a rich spectrum. There are steps that we can take to be more inclusive wherever we are, while keeping our eye on the target of what inclusive practices in their most developed form will look like. The title of Richard Milner's (2010) insightful book about equity in education provides a helpful word of encouragement here: *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There*.

Figure 2.2 shows a continuum that describes a range of student experiences in schools. In our district we can look at this continuum and see where we have been. We can reflect on and celebrate the steps we have taken and their impact on students and the school community. And we can still see goals ahead in the distance.

We have formatted this continuum with "Segregation" at the bottom and "Inclusion" at the top. However, we know that the continuum of inclusion—from separate classrooms and schools to meaningful leadership and true friendships among all students—is not a direct, linear path. Researchers Danforth and Naraian (2015) affirm this idea, framing inclusive education as a process where we can always find ways to be more inclusive. Each school and district will need to chart their own direction as they work within their unique historical and cultural context. There will certainly be overlays of racial and linguistic equity that will influence how you

FIGURE 2.2 Inclusion Continuum



NOTE: Gen Ed, General Education; PE, Physical Education.

proceed toward greater inclusion. The nature and quality of your relationship with parent groups and teacher unions will inform specific leadership moves and modes of communication. Nonetheless, there are certain markers or signposts that can help guide the way toward true equity and inclusion for all.

Here are brief definitions of the terms in the continuum of inclusion. These are intended to help school leaders reflect on their own successes and identify opportunities for future leadership.

Separate schools: This is the oldest model of special education, where students with learning differences were not allowed to attend the same schools as students who were not labeled with a disability. Most districts have eliminated separate schools, but they do still exist. In particular, some districts house a cluster of segregated classrooms in a former school building that no longer serves a general education population. The only students in the school are those served by specialized programs.

Centralized separate classes within cluster/magnet schools: Many districts use a structure of centralized classes as a way to pool resources and expertise by bringing the students to the resources rather than bringing

the resources to the students. This is an efficient model, but it values efficiency over student outcomes, including belonging and peer interactions and even academic progress. This is the most common model in Oregon (and many other states) for serving students with significant learning differences. There are students with and without disabilities in the same school, but their educational experience is still predominantly segregated.

Separate classes within neighborhood schools: In this model, students are allowed to attend their neighborhood school, but students with more complex needs are housed in a self-contained classroom, where they have limited opportunity to interact with peers or engage in grade-level curriculum. These are often multi-age classrooms based on ability (or disability).

Buddy classes: A self-contained class will often partner with a general education class for a specific activity or project. The gen ed buddies drop in for brief encounters. These may be joyful interactions for both the students in the self-contained class and their gen ed buddies. But they are not sustained and are not likely to lead to a deep sense of belonging or true friendship. In addition, the academic rigor is vastly different between the two class settings.

Joining a general education class for music and physical education (PE): Students in a self-contained classroom sometimes “get out” for specials or electives like music and PE. Ideally, they should join their grade-level classmates, but due to the multi-age nature of many self-contained classes, students are often paired with a general education class that does not match their age/grade level. Sometimes this results in fourth or fifth graders from the self-contained class grouped for PE with kindergarten or first-grade classes because of their similar functional skills. Or sometimes K–1 students from a self-contained class get grouped with older elementary students who can be role models. Either way, students are often not with their same-age peers.

On the roster and with a desk in the general education classroom: Students with significant disabilities may receive a substantial amount of their daily instruction in a separate setting. However, they are listed on the general education teacher’s roster and have a dedicated space in the classroom. Wherever possible, that space should be a desk just like any other student’s. If the student needs a more specialized work space, it should be provided in the most typical way possible. This is a significant first step that districts can take to break the model of segregated self-contained classes.

Working in the classroom on separate content with one-on-one adult support: The student is physically in the classroom but not interacting with peers

or engaging in the same content or learning activities. All interactions (with peers and with the classroom teacher) are mediated through an adult assistant. An outside observer stepping into the classroom would immediately recognize that this student is not fully part of the classroom community. This is described above as “Integration.”

Peer-mediated instruction: In addition to being present in the classroom, the student has specific, intentional connections to peers, both socially and academically. Peers can also help the student follow routines and manage behavioral expectations. Peers are often trained with specific strategies and language to support the student.

Constructed opportunities for a student to lead activities in class: The teacher designs activities to give the student a prominent place in the classroom community. For example, a student who communicates with an augmentative communication device could be the person who asks their classmates about the weather during the morning circle each day.

Access to rigorous, standards-based curriculum and instruction: The purpose of special education is to provide services that help students learn the skills to access grade-level curriculum. Some students with significant functional and learning challenges may need significantly modified curriculum. However, whenever possible, the target should be connected to the work their peers are doing in class. Over time, this should result in measurable academic outcomes, including improved graduation rates.

Entry points for collaborative meaning-making (including structures for student talk): When teachers use specific strategies and structures to enable students to contribute to the conversation in small groups or the whole classroom, it increases students’ status and emphasizes that they are colearners with their peers. In Chapters 5–7 we will talk more about the power of student talk for collaborative meaning-making and the impact this can have for students with significant learning needs.

Meaningful contributions to the classroom community (social-emotional and academic): Belonging is one of the most powerful factors in any individual’s sense of well-being. Many of the earlier stages in this continuum address the need to belong. In addition, all people need to feel that they are making a *meaningful contribution* to their community. Students are much more engaged learners if they know that their participation in the class is helping their classmates make sense of the content and learn more deeply. If they are always receiving support from adults and peers, the classroom community is missing the opportunity to experience unexpected richness.

Meaningful leadership: In most classrooms, most of the substantive decisions are made by adults. In high-functioning classrooms teachers incorporate student voice in meaningful ways. In truly inclusive classrooms

all students have authentic opportunities to take the initiative and assume leadership roles.

True friendships: The mark of a true friendship is that both participants contribute to and benefit from the relationship. They both need each other, and together they are better than they are as two separate individuals. While we cannot measure friendship with standardized assessments, some signs that we are planting the seeds of true friendships are that students spontaneously play together on the playground, laugh together at inside jokes, stand up for each other in challenging situations, and invite each other to birthday parties and sleepovers.

This continuum is not linear, and we may never feel that we have fully arrived. But these signposts may be helpful for your school and district leaders as you dream together and set targets and aspirations for your school community. You may have additional or different steps along your inclusion continuum. What is most important is to keep moving, keep questioning, and keep improving. Our children are counting on us.

A SUMMARY OF CHANGES OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS

The 2011–2012 school year is a useful demarcation for the start of the inclusion journey in our district. That is the year we identified inclusion as our goal and began actively disrupting our status quo. In truth, there were many important beliefs and structures in place prior to that, setting the stage for the work of the past eight years.

Previous superintendents of our district greatly influenced the culture in ways that laid the groundwork for inclusion. *The Relentless Pursuit of Excellence* chronicles the work of Dea Cox, our district's superintendent from 1978 to 1994 (Sagor & Rickey, 2012). Cox led a transformation in the district through commitments to hiring the very best teachers and continuous responsive professional development. These commitments were critical to our district moving forward with inclusive practices. Having teachers with high levels of professionalism who value continuing to learn is foundational to implementing this sort of deep and comprehensive reform.

Superintendent Roger Woehl (1994–2011) followed with, among other things, a commitment to inquiry and well-rounded education. Dr. Bill Rhoades (2011–2016) led the district next, with an emphasis on equity and closing achievement and opportunity gaps. When Dr. Kathy Ludwig became superintendent in 2016, she built on these previous ideas and currently inspires our district with a commitment to “Leading for All” with a steadfast commitment to inclusive practices.

WHAT INCLUSION LOOKS LIKE

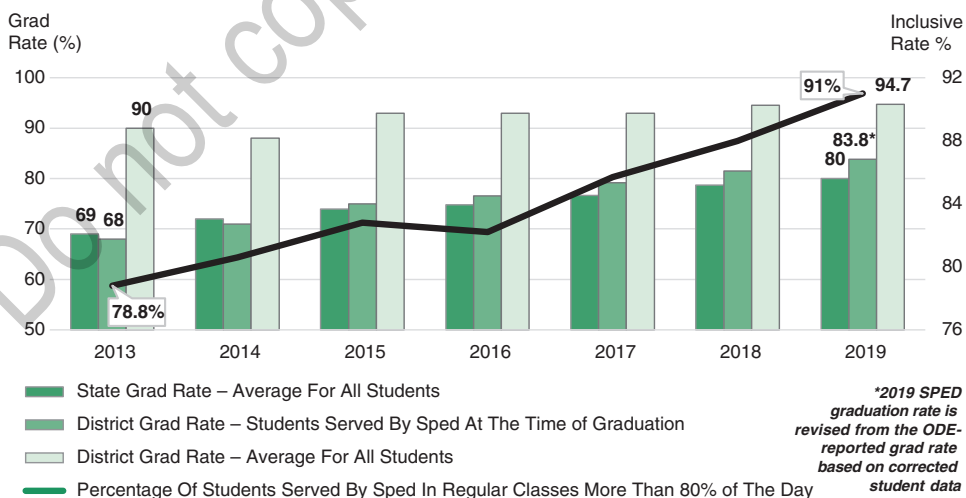
Throughout this book, we will share stories of teachers and students in our schools. The stories will illustrate specific elements of our frameworks or specific leadership moves that we have made over the years. They will also help create a composite picture of what inclusion looks like. We could not fit all of the stories in the next few pages. So we will end this chapter with two examples of what inclusion looks like in our district.

We don't pretend to have it all figured out. We know that on any given day, there are students who are struggling in our schools. We know that we have a lot more to learn about how to support each student's needs in an inclusive setting. We know that it is really hard work. But we also know that it is the right work. Here are two reasons why.

The first example of what inclusion looks like is one of the most basic measurable outcomes: graduation rates. When we began our journey toward inclusive practices, the graduation rate for students served by special education in our district was 68%. Our overall graduation rate for all students was 90%. Over the past six years, as our classrooms have become more inclusive, the graduation rate for students served by special education increased to 83.8%. This is higher than the overall graduation rate (for all students) for most districts in the state of Oregon. (Oregon's average graduation rate is 80%.)

This is only one measure, but it is an indication that inclusive practices have been beneficial for students served by special education. In addition, during the same six-year span, the district's overall graduation rate has improved to 94.7%.

FIGURE 2.3 Graduation Rates and Inclusive Practices



NOTE: Grad, Graduation; SPED, Special Education.

SOURCE: Used with Permission from West Linn-Wilsonville School District.

As we have become more inclusive, students who are not served by special education are also experiencing benefits. During this span, both graduation rates have increased. And more important, the gap between the graduation rates has been cut in half from 22 to 11 percentage points.

We are proud of the growth in graduation rates and the progress we have made toward closing the achievement gap. These numbers don't just represent trends and scores. They are reflective of the hard work and commitment of teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, administrators, and families. They represent the lives of individual students who will have a greater range of opportunities in the future because of their inclusive school experience.

We are even more proud of the transformation of our school communities and the impact of those transformations on individual students with and without disabilities. This is illustrated by a powerful story that one of our parents shared about her daughter's class. We were presenting at an educational conference, telling the story of our district's journey toward inclusive practices. A parent from another district asked about the need to protect students with significant disabilities. "I like what you are saying about inclusion," she said. "But I'm afraid that if my daughter leaves her self-contained classroom, she will be bullied by all of the other kids. How do you prevent that in an inclusive school?"

Before we could begin to respond, another parent stood up from the audience. We recognized her as the mother of a fourth grader in our district who experiences significant developmental disabilities. The mother, Shannon, answered the other parent by telling the story of her daughter, Stella.

Stella began her school career in a self-contained Life Learning classroom in our district. Over the course of her first few years, we were working on breaking down the Life Learning program and moving toward more inclusive opportunities. By third grade, we no longer had a segregated Life Learning program. Stella was on the roster of her classroom teacher and spent most of her day in the general education setting. She still received significant support—for academics, communication, and behavior. Because she was part of her class, she began to develop relationships with her peers.

Shannon told the audience at our workshop session that day about how she used to worry about Stella being bullied—and how she might react aggressively toward students who were making fun of her. But over time, Shannon realized that Stella was becoming part of her classroom community. One day, a new student joined the class, moving from another district. This new boy hadn't been in an inclusive classroom before. He had never had classmates who learned and communicated in unfamiliar ways. He didn't know Stella. When she began vocalizing in unexpected ways, he started to laugh at her. He looked to his new classmates for encouragement, and he made rude jokes about Stella.

At that point the coolest boy in the class stepped forward and confronted the new boy. "Hey, stop that," he said. "You don't treat Stella like that. She's our friend."

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