

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Inclusion is not a new concept. In fact, including students with identified special education needs has been a Federal “mandate” since PL 94-142, formerly known as The Education of All Handicapped Children Act. Congress signed this act into law in 1975, some 37 years ago. This law is now referred to as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEIA. Subsequently, in January of 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was enacted in an effort to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility and choice so that literally, no child is left behind. In response to this legislation, then U.S. Secretary of Education stated the following:

*Never in the history of human civilization has a society attempted to educate all of its children. Under this new law, we will strive to provide every boy and girl in America with a high-quality education – regardless of his or her income, ability, or background.*

~ Rod Paige (2002), U.S. Secretary of Education

Finally, a mandate that shines a light on the spirit and intent of IDEIA! This legislation catapulted promising practices for students who have traditionally struggled, failed and even dropped out of our schools. This also brought about a new era of standards for our public schools that insists that we have excellent and equitable schools in America, the goal of which is to, “get each and every child, no matter what his or her differences are and no matter what he or she has learned or not learned at home, to learn the designated curriculum material at the highest level possible” (2003, Leadership for Equity and Excellence, Scheurich & Skrla, p. 68,).

While certainly worthy of celebration, we must also be realistic about the challenge ahead. Higher standards – for all students comes at a time when our schools and classrooms are more diverse than ever before in American history, coupled with dwindling budgets and resources.

The conversation has quickly moved from “why” to “how”. How do we provide access for all children to a highly qualified teacher and rich learning environment? How do we decide and provide students with individualized supports that are driven by student needs versus traditional adult roles? And last, how do schools do this well – with shrinking resources? Our goal here is to de-mystify inclusion. There are several component parts that when all present create a system that supports the staff supporting all students with their individualized progress.

## INCLUSION

Webster defines inclusion as a “presence in a group”. We challenge schools to take this definition one step further and develop “membership” in a group. A mere “presence” is much like the dated notion of “mainstreaming” whereby students with special needs “visit” mostly non-academic subjects - lunch, PE, music and/or art, and are often accompanied by an adult from their special education classroom. Thankfully, “mainstreaming” has changed drastically not only in name, but in practice.

Inclusion is more than students being “located” in a general education setting. Inclusion means:

- ▶ All students are full members of a general education classroom.
- ▶ All students have the right to the individual instructional and/or personal supports and services necessary for success regardless of label, language, or difference – including gifts and talents.
- ▶ As a school system, we all carry the responsibility to work together and ensure success for every single student.

Clearly, inclusion is complex. The following are four components that we believe interlock and work together to create the necessary conditions for success – for all staff and students. Each component is multifaceted, but can be achieved as evidenced by many exemplars (see references).

1. Leadership for Shared Ownership;
2. Multi-level Instruction;
3. A System to Schedule Instructional & Personal Supports; and,
4. Collaboration.

### LEADERSHIP FOR SHARED OWNERSHIP

When we think of school “leaders” we usually think of a building principal or a central office director. Leadership for shared ownership includes not only the roles just mentioned, but also leadership at every single level including teacher leaders, para-educators and even the attendance clerk who greets parents as they enter the school building. Leadership for shared ownership is about ensuring the necessary conditions for success are consistently present in the entire school building. Simply put, this means we (as a school system) believe that all children have the right to access high quality, grade-level instruction, with individually determined instructional and/or personal supports as necessary- to the greatest extent possible.

For some leaders, this may mean challenging the status quo, traditional roles, responsibilities, stereotypes, assumptions and attitudes. In practice, this looks like action when a child fails – for whatever reason. We can no longer locate the blame for failure on the child, his home-life or her lack of preparedness. It means we look deeper into our practice, perhaps with colleagues to craft the next step or support for that child. It looks like an entire faculty who work toward the same goal, and begin to use terms such as “our students” versus “yours or mine”. Thus, if we really believe all children learn can learn, then how do our actions and instruction align with this belief? How do we ensure, and stubbornly persist toward progress for every single student in our school? We lead; we build, maintain and sustain a system whereby we work together to promote success for every single student.

## **MULTI-LEVEL INSTRUCTION IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION SETTING**

Ensuring access to high quality, grade-level instruction requires classrooms where multi-level Instruction is firmly rooted. Multi-level Instruction is exactly what it sounds like – students learning, at multiple levels as appropriate. Multi-level instruction challenges classrooms that have all students working on the exact same product, in the exact same manner and time frame. Multi-level Instruction acknowledges that every single classroom, has a continuum of learning, tailored to the individual needs of the learners. Planning for Multi-level Instruction always begins with the grade-level standard. This ensures rigor and fidelity to the course or content standards. From there we:

- ▶ Create rich, activity-based learning opportunities;
- ▶ Vary the learning environment to balance learning individually, whole group, in pairs and/or small groups;
- ▶ Plan for and prepare instructional supports including scaffolding, accommodations, modifications (if appropriate), or even acceleration; and,
- ▶ Consider personal supports, if necessary.

When all of these are combined, our classrooms contain rigorous instruction tailored to the individual needs of the learners or what we call Multi-Level Instruction.

## **A SYSTEM TO SCHEDULE INSTRUCTIONAL AND PERSONAL SUPPORTS**

Once teachers have designed Multi-level Instruction with individually determined instructional and/or personal supports, the school needs a system to schedule the time and people to not only plan these supports, but also provide supports for students and staff when necessary. Many school systems still deliver supports and services as defined by traditional adult roles, programs, student labels or places. This often creates the perception that they will need additional staff in order to provide the student-driven supports and services. In reality, schools often find that they don't need additional staff; they learn to use their existing staff differently. We challenge schools and systems to create instructional and personal supports driven by student needs versus labels, places and/or traditional adult roles. This practice is the foundation from which a true collaborative partnership can grow into a strong source of support for students.

## COLLABORATION

Collaboration for Inclusion has multiple layers. Collaboration often begins with professional peers during the instructional planning phase for ideas and the implementation of Multi-level Instruction. General Education teachers most often have expertise in the standards-based core content. Special Education teachers most often have expertise in scaffolding, accommodating, differentiating and even modifying, if necessary. Bringing these two “experts” together has the potential to enhance the practice for each professional while also supporting them in the process of meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners.

Another facet to Collaboration is the actual sharing of the instructional role. This will take some time prior to instruction to work out the many details involved in sharing anything! A few considerations include defining roles and responsibilities, styles and preferences so that the collaboration can ease into a true partnership. This of course, takes time, planning, leadership and shared ownership for ensuring that all students progress.

## CONCLUSION

In closing, we have established that Inclusion requires leadership for shared ownership, Multi-level Instruction, a schedule and staffing process driven by student needs with protected time for teacher collaboration. When all of these are in place, collaboration can bloom into shared instruction and ownership for student progress. No doubt Inclusion is complex and difficult work. Although we believe that this IS the work of our schools today. Moreover, we believe that schools cannot make adequate progress with all of their students without Inclusion.

School systems that have embraced the multi-faceted, process of inclusion have reaped benefits for both students and staff. Some of these benefits include:

- ✓ Dramatic increases in students with special needs taking and passing rigorous grade level achievement measures,
- ✓ Higher levels of achievement for students without disabilities,
- ✓ School systems meeting state and federal adequate yearly progress targets,
- ✓ General and special education teacher efficacy,
- ✓ Increased attendance rates for both students and staff,
- ✓ Students developing a sense of empathy and a reduction of bullying,
- ✓ Increased graduation rates with students meeting- more successfully, their post-secondary goals, and
- ✓ Full Access and membership for students with special needs to the entire general education academic and extra-curricular curriculum along-side their non-disabled peers.

Written by:  
Toni Riester-Wood, Ph.D.