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## Inclusive Schooling: Are We There Yet?

Making legal U-turns from outdated principles and practices to better serve students with disabilities

BY **JULIE CAUSTON** AND **GEORGE THEOHARIS**

*“All you need is the plan, the road map, and the courage to press on to your destination.” — Earl Nightingale*

Today, when trying to find our way to an unfamiliar destination, many of us rely on global positioning systems, or GPS technology.

“Recalibrating” and “Whenever possible make a legal U-turn” are now ubiquitous phrases in the audio backdrop to many of our car trips, the modern-day road map. Before embarking, we set our GPS and let it guide us through our journey, checking it often to be sure we are still on course to reach our final location.

We can think about modern-day inclusive education in similar terms. The programming decisions we make to serve the 6.1 million school-age children with disabilities in public schools nationwide serve as our global positioning system in creating and maintaining truly inclusive



**Julie Causton**

schools. These children ask us to examine the question “Are we there yet?”

The two of us have worked with hundreds of schools and districts across the country on inclusive policies and practices. Federal law has mandated inclusion of students with disabilities since 1975, contributing to schools that are much different places today. Yet many schools continue to use outdated models of inclusion, segregating students with disabilities in separate classrooms, wings or buildings.

### **One District’s Approach**

Is the destination of inclusive education within reach today?

“We did inclusion.” “We have inclusion rooms.” “We tried inclusion.” We hear these phrases from educators everywhere. Yet authentic inclusion is not something that exists only for some kids in some classrooms. It is not an experiment. It is not something that happens sometimes, with students removed for therapies.

Inclusion is a way of seeing the world. For schools, inclusion is a guiding philosophy that prompts educators to work together to ensure every student is a full and permanent member of the general education classroom and school community. This begs the questions “Is this even possible?” and “How do schools and districts get to this point?”

We can look to places already doing this work. In Wisconsin, the 1,300-student Hartland/Lakeside School District committed to creating an authentically inclusive district during the 2008-09 school year. The district began with an equity audit, which found students with disabilities were facing a variety of inequities, ranging from achievement to opportunities.

Hartland focused on revising its service delivery, involving the entire administrative team as well as special education and general education teachers. By fall 2009, the district had eliminated self-contained special education rooms and was moving rapidly away from pullout services. Using the teacher mantra of “do it afraid — there is no manual,” Hartland’s educators collectively solved problems as they arose and redeployed teachers to eliminate the former special education rooms.

The district’s focus on service delivery positioned teams of adults to take on new roles together and focused on re-creating classroom environments that worked for all students, even those with significant needs.



**George Theoharis**

This commitment took many forms, not the least of which were structural changes in the school district to eliminate barriers that kept special education and students with disabilities separate. The district combined the teaching and learning department with the special education department and eliminated a significant number of paraprofessionals. Using those same funds, Hartland hired certified special education teachers, three or four teachers for every 10 paraprofessionals. This allowed for greater teacher collaboration and reduced caseloads for special education teachers.

Assistant Superintendent Dacia Hopfensperger concedes the process has not been perfect “but we are at a much deeper place than we were four years ago. We are working now on how to co-teach better and how to differentiate better. We are no longer worrying about if this student should be here. People know and expect all of our students to be in general education.”

Hopfensperger says student data point to improved outcomes. In 2008, students with disabilities started kindergarten performing higher than peers across the state, but by the end of middle school they lagged behind their peers. After four years in inclusive classrooms, she says, this is no longer true. The students with disabilities achieve at higher rates than the state average.

### **A Two-Decade Effort**

Hartland/Lakeside is not alone in this commitment. In the late 1980s, Sandy Creek Central School District, a high-poverty, rural district east of Lake Ontario in upstate New York, made a commitment to include the entire range of students with disabilities. It has become common practice that all students with disabilities in Sandy Creek are served by teams of general education and special education teachers within the general education classrooms.

The district's two-decade-old commitment has resulted in a shared embrace of inclusion across teachers, administrators and the community. A "we can't imagine any other way other than including all students" belief system permeates the district culture and norms, and student achievement has improved for all.

The 900-student Sandy Creek district remains committed to all students with disabilities being full members of their general education classrooms, even in the face of various initiatives imposed by state and federal departments of education on public schools everywhere. Whether adopting Reading First, embracing the Common Core standards or readying new teacher evaluation processes, the district's inclusive philosophy has been central to the implementation of these other initiatives.

The answer to the question "Do schools and districts do this?" is clearly yes. Similar initiatives have been implemented in big and small, urban, rural and suburban school districts from Vermont to California. Creating authentic inclusive schools and districts is hard, ongoing work, but with commitment comes great promise.

### **Programming Your GPS**

The first step on any journey is making sure all fellow travelers share a common understanding of the destination.

With inclusive school reform, many school administrators adopt a commonly used definition of inclusion from Norman Kunc's 1992 essay "The Need to Belong: Rediscovering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Kunc says: "When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become 'normal' in order to contribute to the world. ... We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging."

Inclusive programs are places where children, regardless of ability, race, language and income, are integral members of community, connect with their peers, have access to meaningful educational activities and receive the collaborative support to succeed. Students are not segregated, separated or excluded because of disability. Instead, services and supports are brought directly to them.

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### **Understanding the Benefits**

School staff members should understand the rationale for traveling this path.

A compelling body of research suggests children with and without disabilities benefit both socially and academically from inclusive services, principally in these ways:

Inclusion increases the rates of learning and achievement for students with disabilities;

- Students with disabilities make and maintain friendships;
- Students with and without disabilities have higher performance in areas of social competence;
- Students without disabilities have the same or better achievement.

A second rationale is federal law requiring the "least restrictive environment" for students with disabilities, the term used in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to support inclusion.

Least restrictive environment means that, to the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate

students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports, referred to as “supplementary aids and services,” along with their nondisabled peers in the school they would attend if not disabled.

Under the law’s interpretation, the general education classroom is the first place to be considered for placing a student with a disability before more restrictive options are used. And a child with a disability cannot be removed from a general education classroom merely to meet the needs of the school.

Educators have successfully used supplementary aids and services to modify the regular class curriculum and enhance student learning and cohesiveness. These include preferential seating, large-print materials, peer tutors, graphic organizers, computer software and computer-assisted devices, taped lectures, reduced seat time, assistance of a teacher with special education training, professional development for the general education teacher, and a note-taker or a communication device. (See inclusive schooling checklist below.)

### A Legal U-Turn

Many schools and districts engage in well-intentioned but misguided or outdated practices in pursuit of inclusion. In reflecting on certain common practices, we have to heed the GPS warning to “make a legal U-turn” and abandon these routes.

Six common practices that undermine inclusion and student success are these:



**An inclusive class in Wisconsin's Hartland/Lakeside School District, where students with disabilities achieve at higher rates than those in other systems across the state.**

**PULLOUT PROGRAMS.** One of the most common ways we serve students who struggle is to remove them from general education classrooms for parts of their day and provide pullout services. Remove and remediate; remove and remediate. This pattern leaves the students missing important content, which often is replaced with a reduced version of the content.

Schools have tried this strategy repeatedly, but it has not consistently produced better student learning, attendance or behavior, leading places like Hartland/Lakeside and Sandy Creek to abandon these practices. Equally important are the documented issues of social stigma, social isolation and an over-placement of African-American and low-income students in pullout programs.

**SELF-CONTAINED PROGRAMS.** Either on its own or in collaboration with neighboring districts, almost every district across the country runs separate classrooms, separate programs and even separate schools for students with disabilities. We refer to these as self-contained special education programs.

These programs tend to serve students with more significant disabilities who have more complicated needs by putting them together in separate rooms or buildings. While these programs claim to offer something individualized for complicated students, research has shown that the practices in these classrooms do not individualize, while they do result in higher teacher burnout rates, lead to low postsecondary employment, result in low rates of independent living, lead to over-representation of students of color and low-income students, and rely on an increased use of physical restraint on students.

Such programs sentence certain students to a separate life — one without the richness of the general education teaching and curriculum and their peers.

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**DENSE CLUSTERING OF STUDENTS WITH NEEDS.** Another well-intentioned route is the creation of “inclusive” classrooms. This often results in clustering students with disabilities or other needs into a single room. A 3rd-grade room might have 18 students without disabilities and eight students with disabilities; 50 percent of the students in a co-taught 9th-grade English class might have a special education label or special need.

While well intentioned, these rooms are not truly inclusive, as the disproportionate amount of needs can make them very much like special education classrooms. We recommend using the natural proportion of students with disabilities in the school or in the grade as a guide for each class.

**ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT.** Perhaps the most common strategy for including students is to rely on paraprofessionals. This often is done to appease teachers, principals and parents with the bargain that along with a student with complex needs comes a paraprofessional.

Paraprofessionals are the least trained, yet they are expected to work with students with the most significant needs. When assigned a paraprofessional, students tend to receive much less direct teacher involvement. In their 2005 study of paraprofessionals used in 1:1 assignments, Michael Giangreco and his colleagues at the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont reported on inadvertent negative effects of the practice: separation from classmates, unnecessary dependence, interference with peer interaction, loss of personal control and provocation of negative behaviors. Hartland/Lakeside used this research to move away from a reliance on paraprofessionals.

**AGE-INAPPROPRIATE PLACEMENTS.** Another common but misguided strategy is to include students with significant disabilities with younger students. This typically takes place through the use of a diagnostic assessment that shows, say, a 10-year-old boy doing academic work at a 1st-grade level, so the youngster is placed in a 1st-grade room, not his age-appropriate 5th-grade room.

This is not a productive strategy because “performing at grade level” is not a prerequisite to receive accommodation to the age-appropriate curriculum. Students with significant needs then are at risk of being seen as perpetual little children rather than developing children with complex emotions and desires. These placements deny students with and without disabilities the chance to develop an authentic community where students progress through the grades together, learning from and with each other.

**TRACKING.** While the problem of tracking goes beyond students with disabilities, too often, well-intentioned but misguided inclusion is fit into a tracked school system. This often results in students with disabilities receiving their instruction in low tracks or even special-needs tracks, leading to an overly dense clustering of student needs and a slower-paced curriculum designed to cover 80 percent of the general curriculum.

This contributes to lower learning and diminished future possibilities. As most educators know, compelling research points to the detrimental effects of low tracks.

### **Have You Arrived?**

Over the past 25 years, we have seen schools nationwide include more and more students with disabilities in general education. Today, more than 52 percent are educated primarily in the general classroom, a move that bears on student achievement. Meghan Cosier, in examining national data on students with disabilities in a 2010 doctoral dissertation, found the more time students with disabilities spend in general education, the more they learn.

This evolution of inclusive placement and knowledge that general education can produce stronger social and academic outcomes has led to changes in the inclusion movement. For many years, parents, advocates and educators worked to include one child at a time, fighting and planning child by child. Next came the creation of authentically inclusive schools, and in recent years, we have seen more schoolwide systems to provide inclusive services to all students with disabilities.

The Hartland/Lakeside and Sandy Creek districts show us the destination more districts are heading toward — structurally and philosophically inclusive school systems. To make that journey, leaders will need to set their GPS.

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### **A Checklist for Inclusive Schooling**

Julie Causton and George Theoharis created an inclusive education checklist from their fieldwork with hundreds of public schools on these practices.

In my school or district:

- School administration and leaders are advocates for inclusive education.
- The structure of our district integrates special education into the teaching and learning initiatives across the district.
- We place all students in their home school (the school they would attend if they did not have a disability).
- We educate all students in chronologically age-appropriate general education classrooms.
- We do not send students to self-contained programs.
- We spread out students with disabilities — and don't cluster them in certain classrooms — using natural proportions.
- We have an ongoing service delivery process that adjusts the staffing and collaboration among teachers each year in response to student needs.
- We arrange all educators (general and -special educators) to teams of heterogeneous groups of students.
- We believe related services are portable and deliver them seamlessly in the context of general education classrooms.
- All teachers engaged in collaborative inclusive services have ample co-planning time.
- We teach all teachers to differentiate content, process and assessment.
- We teach all teachers to know how to handle challenging behavior in thoughtful and kind ways.
- We find ways for increased support to come from teachers instead of paraprofessionals and move away from 1:1 types of support.
- We teach our paraprofessionals how to support students in inclusive settings and about the specific needs of the students they are supporting.
- We have built-in time for communication between teachers and paraprofessionals.



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