This FACT Folio highlights practices identified by experts in the field of inclusion to further illustrate the emphasized portion of Florida Statute:

A school district shall use the term “inclusion” to mean that a student is receiving education in a general education regular class setting, reflecting natural proportions and age-appropriate heterogeneous groups in core academic and elective or special areas within the school community; a student with a disability is a valued member of the classroom and school community; the teachers and administrators support universal education and have knowledge and support available to enable them to effectively teach all children; and a teacher is provided access to technical assistance in best practices, instructional methods, and supports tailored to the student’s needs based on current research. F.S.1003.57(1)(a)(2)

As diverse student learning needs increase and a focus on universal design for all learners gains momentum, there is a need to expand educational practices to meet the needs of a wider range of students. SWDs are general education students first and represent a subset within this larger population of diverse student learners. As teachers explore ways to meet the needs of all learners, we can draw from the established body of research to leverage best practices for inclusion to teach all students.

It is important to understand that the concept of inclusion is not an add-on to other initiatives of school improvement, but is rather a broader educational approach. Inclusion integrates demonstrated best practices. It is more than just a special education concern.

Ultimately, inclusion supports equitable learning for all students. Maximizing the potential of each individual begins with fostering a collaborative inclusive environment for all students, including students with disabilities (SWDs). Systemic support, collaboration, effective classroom practices, family and community partnerships, and a universal design approach can make inclusive education work so that students with disabilities have the same educational, social, and future opportunities as their peers.

Let’s examine five best practices for inclusion.
Inclusion IS

- A civil right
- All students learning together regardless of labels
- An atmosphere that promotes a sense of belonging, equality, acceptance, and individual worth
- Collaborative, integrated services by education teams
- Supports and adaptations within the general education curriculum and settings
- Highly effective, research-based instruction and assessment

In other words ... it’s good teaching!

Inclusion IS NOT

- Educators working in isolation
- Grouping students by ability
- Scheduling students into general education classrooms without supports for students and teachers
- Watering down curricula
- Expecting all students to do the same thing, at the same time, in the same way

We can’t afford to lower our expectations and standards for students with disabilities!

School and district leaders are also charged with ensuring that evidence-based inclusive practices are implemented effectively for all students in general education settings for a majority of the day – including students with significant cognitive disabilities – as appropriate. Strong leaders understand that complex change takes time. It also requires skill development on the part of everyone involved in the change, the provision of resources to encourage new practices, and development and communication of a collaborative plan of action to achieve sustainable change.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STRUCTURE

In an inclusive school, all students are welcome and seen as contributing and valued members of the school community. Everyone belongs. Positive relationships among staff, families and students are a focus of creating a welcoming, supportive, inclusive environment.

As a school becomes more inclusive, the administrators, teachers and support staff involved will find that their roles and responsibilities shift. All individuals who work with students with diverse needs, including students with disabilities, should participate in high-quality, job-embedded professional development so that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the academic achievement and skills of students with disabilities. Job-embedded opportunities might include activities such as mentoring, modeling, professional learning communities, data analysis, or product examination. The importance of job-embedded opportunities is that learning is grounded in day-to-day practice and allows a direct connection between learning and application.
A school becomes an integral part of the local community when families, schools and community agencies are collaborative partners. These partnerships ensure that parents of students, especially those with disabilities or other diverse needs, benefit from meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children. Communication with these varied stakeholders should be in multiple formats, including verbal, print or electronic, and it should meet the mutual needs of the communicators. The focus of each collaboration opportunity is determined by the participants, such as participation in conferences, advisory councils, support at home, job shadowing or volunteering. In general, families and community agencies should express needs, ideas or suggestions, and schools should seek out ways for their students with disabilities, as well as those without disabilities, to expand their knowledge and skills.

Collaboration is a key variable in the successful implementation of inclusive education. For inclusive education to work, educators must be effective and efficient collaborative team members. They must develop skills in creativity, collaborative teaming processes, collaborative teaching, and interpersonal communication that will enable them to work together to craft diversified learning opportunities for diverse learners who have a wide range of interests, learning styles, and intelligences (Thousand, & Nevin, 2016).

Educators in inclusive schools collaborate to plan for instruction using Florida’s Benchmarks for Excellent Student Thinking (B.E.S.T.) Standards and Access Points, to minimize curricular barriers, to provide access to the general curriculum and to proactively problem solve. The collaborative implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, positive behavioral interventions and supports, early intervening services, and a multi-tiered system of student supports (MTSS) will address learning and behavioral needs and promote an inclusive environment.

Maintaining high standards for students with disabilities or other diverse needs is one of the best ways to increase student performance. Students with disabilities who have access to high-quality instruction and receive needed supports and services in general education classrooms not only learn more, but are better prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives.

Family and Community Partnerships

Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams for students with disabilities must first consider the general education classroom with a full range of supplementary aids and services. Providing an array of services across the continuum of placements ensures that exceptional student education is a service for students with disabilities rather than a place where children are sent.

With this in mind, general educators should be prepared and expect to teach students with a full range of disabilities in their classrooms. Additionally, inclusive schools implement a student-centered scheduling process to facilitate the provision of appropriate specially designed instruction, related services, and aids and supports in the general education setting for students with disabilities.

Accessibility through the development and use of technology, including assistive technology devices and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and services, leads to more flexible learning environments. Natural and formalized peer supports for students with disabilities in the general education setting are also an inclusive best practice, with many lifelong benefits for the students and educators involved in the program.

Use the camera app on your smartphone to scan the QR code and view other F.A.C.T. Folios for more information on inclusion.

For more information or assistance related to planning for best practices for inclusion on your campus, please contact your Florida Inclusion Network facilitator or visit: www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com