

What Are Best Practices in Class for Including Students with Disabilities?

What Does Being Part of the Class Mean?

Students with disabilities have a right to be part of the general education classroom and receive their education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) according to their Individual Educational Plan (IEP). Federal legislation makes it clear that students with disabilities are general education students and are held to high expectations. This means that they are valued members of their general education class.

We know that being part of the general education class means students with disabilities spend more time on academics, resulting in higher achievement. They participate in non-academic activities and develop broader social relationships when they have opportunities to interact with peers without disabilities. Students without disabilities also benefit from the variety of instructional strategies and practices used by teachers. They learn to help and value each other.

Being in the LRE is not just being located in a general education class, it also means that your child is learning and applying meaningful content and meeting IEP goals with same-age classmates without disabilities. Here are some observations you might make about the surroundings in a classroom that uses best practices for including students with disabilities:

- Desks are arranged in groups around the classroom. This allows for peer learning, engagement, and socialization among students. Students who collaborate productively will have more positive outcomes.
- Visual learning aids are used, such as daily schedules, timers, posters, and charts. Many students are visual learners, and even those that aren't can benefit from this support.
- Leveled books, manipulatives and centers with hands-on activities are available, providing a variety of learning materials for all.
- A class-wide behavior program supports positive social skills and behaviors in students. Even if there is a school-wide program, students benefit from supports tailored to their specific needs within the classroom.
- Technology (including assistive technology) is available to support students. These items can be simple, such as pencil grips, reading guides, or sticky notes; or complex, such as text-to-speech software, tablets, or web-based applications.



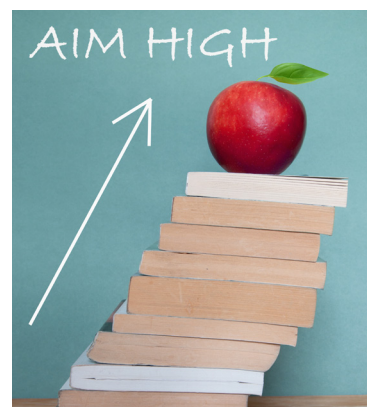
Adapted from <http://www.theinclusiveclass.com/2016/04/5-signs-that-classroom-is-inclusive.html>

Other Elements of Best Practices

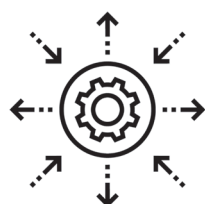
Person First Language – This is the practice of using language that refers to the person before the disability or label. For example, it is more respectful and honors the person to say “The child has special needs” instead of “The special needs child.” Address the person first!

Presumed Competence – Also known as “the least dangerous assumption,” presumed competence is about having high expectations for learning, thinking, and understanding. You can always make things simpler, but no one is harmed by aiming high to start with.

Resilience – Resilience includes skills that helps students learn to persevere through life’s challenges.



Differentiation – Lessons can be changed, or differentiated, using their content, the process of teaching the content, or the product used to measure learning, based on frequent assessment of student learning. Learning environments can also be differentiated.



Differentiation

Accommodations and Modifications – These are components that can be written in an IEP to meet a student’s needs, and they must be provided if they are included in the IEP. Accommodations are changes to how something is taught or assessed, and are often just part of good teaching for all students. Modifications change the content that is taught. Only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can have modifications.

Co-Teaching or Support Facilitation – Schools that provide in-class supports for students with disabilities often have multiple adults as part of their classrooms schedules. When two teachers who meet certification requirements are teaching at the same time, every day, for the whole class or subject, it is called co-teaching. Support facilitation is a support model with two certified teachers teaching on a regular schedule, but not every day for the whole instructional period.

Collaboration – This idea encompasses a way of adults (teachers and paraprofessionals) working together to meet the needs of students in general education classrooms. Teachers plan, implement, assess lessons, and decide what is needed for all students to learn, and paraprofessionals provide support to students under the supervision of a teacher.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – Like wheelchair ramps, curb cuts, and raised lettering in elevators, which everyone can use, UDL in the classroom is a way of designing lesson plans that accounts for learner variability and context, and eliminates barriers to learning for all students.



How Can You Tell If Your Child is Benefiting?

Although you may not be able to see all of the best practices by observing in your child's classroom, the checklist on this page can help you start a conversation about what you'd like to see happen for your child. Sharing your thoughts and wishes with teachers can often help them think of ways to increase participation and learning for your child.

- √ When you visit the classroom, you see your child participate in learning activities with same-age peers that do not have disabilities.
- √ When you attend parent-teacher conferences or IEP meetings, the general education teacher knows your child well and has high expectations.
- √ When you visit the classroom, you see your child's classmates helping each other in academic and other activities.
- √ Your child uses technology to support learning and communicating with classmates who do not have disabilities.
- √ Your child brings home a variety of work that gives him or her a chance to demonstrate strengths and interests.
- √ Your child is usually able to do homework assignments independently.
- √ Your child's seat in the classroom does not separate him or her from peers without disabilities.
- √ Your child's daily schedule is mostly in the general education classroom.
- √ Your child participates in extracurricular activities, such as sports or clubs, with students who do not have disabilities.
- √ The teacher shows commitment to meeting the different needs of learners in the class.
- √ The teacher celebrates the accomplishments of all students throughout the year.
- √ Your child speaks positively about other students in the class.
- √ Your child is greeted by other students in his or her classes.
- √ Your child likes going to school.

It is important to remember that the things you see happening in classrooms that are using best practices can benefit ALL students!

What can you do to support best practices in your child's school and classroom?

Ask your child's teacher what you can do at home to make it easier for your child in the classroom, such as helping with special homework projects or practicing vocabulary and communication skills.

Stay on top of what your child is learning at school. Ask your child's teacher to share the results of his or her weekly progress.

Read stories to your child about friendship and belonging. Talk about how to make friends at school. Ask your child to draw a picture or write about the meaning of friendship.

- How do friends help each other?
- What are some things friends do together?
- How can you make new friends?

Share ideas with the school about what is helping your child at home with learning, communication, or social/behavioral difficulties. Open communication between home and school will help support your child's routine and learning.

Be a school citizen. Participate in activities, such as the Parent Teacher Organization, or the School Advisory Committee. Volunteer for field trips and other activities where family members are needed.

Help support other families, especially those of students with disabilities. Even a small gesture such as a phone call or kind word can mean a lot when a family is struggling.

Thank teachers for efforts to include your child. Send thank you notes. Celebrate successes, no matter how small. Let the principal, superintendent, and school board members know how teachers are helping to include your child.



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