



A GOOD SCHOOL IS GOOD FOR STUDENTS OF ALL ABILITIES

How well a school meets the needs of students with disabilities must be part of school-quality discussions.

By Lauren Morando Rhim

In 2018-19, 14% of students in U.S. public schools received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) and advocates propose closer to 20% of all students would benefit from additional supports and services due to how they learn (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Yet, conversations about school quality are often silent on the question of how to ensure the effective inclusion of students with disabilities. For instance, the national school review website Public School Review does

not report any data regarding students with disabilities in neighborhood schools, although it does post information about “special education schools.” Similarly, the rating site Great Schools.org limits data related to students with disabilities to enrollment percentage and, if the school is large enough, standardized test scores. However, neither site provides any data regarding access to the general education curriculum or the quality of special education and related services. This is a strange omission, for how can a school be considered *good* if it does not recognize and embrace the unique learning needs of

LAUREN MORANDO RHIM (lmrhim@ncsecs.org; [@LMRHIM](https://twitter.com/LMRHIM)) is cofounder and executive director of the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools, New York, NY.

students with disabilities, creating an environment in which all students can thrive?

In our work as practitioners, researchers, and advocates for students with disabilities, the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) team has observed and worked in hundreds of public schools across the country. Some are deeply committed to ensuring that students with disabilities are provided with meaningful access to the general education curriculum, and others have a great deal of work to do. Our observations from these schools and our partnerships with education reform and civil rights organizations led us to create the Principles of Equitable Schools, a guiding document that establishes core principles that we believe all schools receiving public dollars should uphold (NCSECS Equity Coalition, 2018).

We have found that the schools that take these principles to heart, and that are most successful in educating students with disabilities, meet four basic criteria. First, school personnel consider and make accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities in all aspects of school operations. Second, teacher development efforts for both general and special education personnel prioritize the needs of all students. Third, schools clearly and explicitly communicate their commitment to providing accessible education to students with disabilities. Finally, leaders develop and apply oversight and accountability structures to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive policies and practices.

From our work, primarily in the charter school sector, NCSECS has encountered numerous schools that have demonstrated a particularly strong commitment to developing robust and inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities. Using these schools as reference points, we can explore the ways in which all schools can make their existing structures more equitable.

Inclusivity in practice

Most schools will tell you they value inclusivity — but good schools can also show you. And true inclusivity extends throughout a student's journey, from enrollment to graduation.

Enrollment

As a first step, schools must adopt equitable and welcoming enrollment practices. This is particularly important in charter schools, which on average enroll fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools (Lancet, Rhim, & O'Neill, 2020). A number of factors contribute to this disparity, including family perceptions, the schools' outreach efforts, and complicated enrollment processes. A good school, particularly if it is a school of choice, proactively works to attract

students with a diverse range of learning needs.

Brooklyn Laboratory Charter School (LAB) is an example of a school that uses active outreach to ensure accessibility to all students, particularly those with disabilities. It aims to enroll a proportion of students with disabilities similar to that of the district by offering enrollment preference to students with disabilities in a weighted lottery. In practice, the school significantly surpasses that goal. LAB's 2016 data showed that students with disabilities made up 28% of its student population, double the 14% of the surrounding district and surpassing the 19% in New York City's traditional public schools. And, once enrolled, LAB's students with disabilities demonstrate greater growth in academic performance than those in the surrounding district.

Identification of students with disabilities

Many students enter schools without having been identified as having a disability, and the Child Find identification process that the federal government requires of all public schools is fraught with potential pitfalls stemming primarily from the degree of subjectivity built into the eligibility determination process. Schools must take proactive steps to ensure that biases during the identification process do not dictate special education decisions (Lhamon, 2016). Funding is a powerful motivator, and it can cut both ways: Funding practices that do not consider level of supports provided can incentivize schools to under-identify students, and conversely, those that provide more funding if students are educated in more restrictive placements can incentivize schools to overidentify students with disabilities.

Schools must adopt transparent identification processes that allow staff to make the best decisions for each child without concern about financial ramifications (Kolbe, 2019). The risk to students of misidentification can be great, and the importance of correctly identifying students' needs and continually modifying services to fit their progress cannot be overstated. Multitiered support strategies, such as response to intervention, can play a central role in providing interventions as soon as a student experiences challenges while introducing helpful data into the identification process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Integrated learning environments

Inclusive enrollment and identification are only the start. All schools are legally obligated to educate students in the least restrictive environment (LRE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This means that schools must educate students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. The LRE for students with disabilities will vary by the nature of their

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disability and the services they need, but the overarching goal remains the same: to teach students with disabilities in high-quality general education settings as much as possible. While many schools adhere to the letter of the law, we have found that the most successful schools go above and beyond in their efforts to integrate all students into the general education setting.

Summit Sierra High School in Seattle, for example, aims to “destigmatize support” while creating individualized learning pathways aimed at preparing students for college (Center on Reinventing Public Education & NCSECS, 2019). They use a proficiency-based online learning platform that gives students the time and space to learn more difficult material and allows teachers to differentiate instruction and identify areas where students need more support. Each student at the school also meets weekly with a mentor and a mentor group, creating an inclusive space for all students. Students with individualized education plans (IEPs) receive additional support from a case manager and attend a weekly study hall where they can work with special education teachers on areas of academic challenge. This structure, in which every student learns at their own pace, creates an inclusive environment without a stark delineation between general and special education.

Of course, not all schools are designed with inclusion in mind. But, it’s never too late to shift approaches. The UP Network, a school management organization that leads school turnaround efforts in Massachusetts, has radically increased inclusion in the schools it manages (Eskow & Rhim, 2016). Before UP took over at James Leonard Middle School (now UP Academy Leonard) in Lawrence, students with significant disabilities were served in separate classrooms and had only limited interactions with their peers without disabilities. UP made several changes to encourage collaboration between general education and special education teachers and to bring more students into the general education classrooms. These included requiring general education teachers to submit their lesson plans to the special education teachers in advance so they could plan their modifications, building time into general and special education teachers’ schedules to co-plan lessons, and scheduling formal check-ins between these teachers to discuss student progress.

Discipline

In far too many schools, students with disabilities are disproportionately subject to disciplinary actions. In fact, federal data show that students with disabilities are suspended at twice the rate of their peers without disabilities (Rhim, Kothari, & Lancet, 2019). Further, 28% of students arrested

in schools have disabilities (Hampton, 2018). For Black students and male students with disabilities, these trends are only exacerbated. As a result, the students who require the most support receive less instructional time than their peers.

Mott Haven Academy Charter School in New York City, which was designed explicitly to meet the needs of students in the child welfare system, takes a proactive approach to discipline to address these risks (Rhim & Lancet, 2018). At Mott Haven, methods of addressing behavior are tailored to individual students: There is no one-size-fits-all solution. When behavioral issues arise, they are treated as opportunities for intentional reflection and growth.

Instead of further marginalizing students already subjected to disproportionate discipline, Mott Haven works to address the root causes of behavioral issues. Their program has a strong focus on inclusion and socio-emotional learning, and staff work actively to create a restorative environment that is safe, stable, structured, and understanding. They provide wraparound services to their families through partnerships with several child welfare agencies and community-based organizations that provide housing, medical, and mental health supports.

Faculty development

While a school’s philosophical underpinnings and pedagogical practices are central to its success, they cannot be brought to life without staff members who are on board — and who have the knowledge and skills to deliver a high-quality education to all students. That kind of buy-in and ability doesn’t appear on its own. While most teacher preparation programs require at least one course focused on educating students with disabilities, recent research indicates fewer than 20% of teachers feel “very-well prepared” to educate students with mild to moderate learning disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2019). Schools must invest both time and resources into attracting, developing, and retaining highly skilled staff members.

One proven method of attracting and retaining high-quality staff is to establish a pipeline of teachers who understand and are committed to an inclusive approach right from the start of their careers. Potential teachers in such a pipeline engage in a mutual learning experience with the school, learning how to provide an inclusive education while in training and applying what they learned when they become teachers in the school.

Partnering with a local college or university is one way to establish such a pipeline. CHIME Institute Charter School, for example, has an ongoing partnership with the nearby College of Education at California State University,

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Northridge (NCSECS, 2016). The college uses CHIME as a teacher training site and assigns 15-20 student teachers and 24 fieldwork students there yearly. This symbiotic relationship works in both the school's and the students' favor.

School leadership must also work to support staff collaboration and ongoing professional development. Community Roots Charter School in Brooklyn, New York, has made a deep commitment to diversity and inclusivity part of its mission, and it ensures that teachers remain engaged with those values. The school's antibias curriculum centers on issues of identity, social justice, and discrimination based on not only race and ethnicity, but also gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, economic class, and physical and mental ability. A self-selected group of faculty members called the Diversity Working Group meets regularly to create a plan for integrating this curriculum into social studies units, read-alouds, and community conversations. The group also designs and facilitates staff training, invites outside agencies to run workshops, and puts together a summer reading list to ensure that the entire faculty remains involved.

Communication of commitment

While communication about inclusivity may seem secondary to actual inclusivity, clear communication of these ideals plays a pivotal role in creating a strong and diverse community. A good school must clearly convey its commitment to students with disabilities, in both messaging and action. And that communication must permeate the work of the school, from recruitment efforts to internal staff work to messaging with parents.

To remain in compliance with federal civil rights statutes, public schools must provide equitable programmatic and physical access to students with disabilities. This means that clear policies should be posted on the school website and effectively shared with all members of the school community, and students' families should have avenues to reach out with concerns and feedback. But good schools will go beyond that in their messaging because, by doing so, they can be more attractive to families and more effective in their efforts to educate all children.

As the role of charter schools in the public school ecosystem has grown, messaging about schools' commitment to students with disabilities has become more and more important. As our research has shown, the content in charter schools' marketing and enrollment materials can significantly affect families' enrollment decisions (Lancet, Rhim, & O'Neill, 2020). Parents of children with disabilities look for suggestions as to whether a school will welcome or be able to educate their child. Even small things, such as welcoming language in enrollment policies or pictures and testimonials of students with disabilities on a school's website, can have a big impact on a parent's perception of a school. Inclusive schools are thoughtful about what they signal to parents, staff, and students.

Paramount School of Excellence in Indianapolis uses a

policy and instruction guide called *Frameworks* that encapsulates the school's commitment to true, intentional inclusivity (NCSECS, 2017). Reflecting the mission and vision of the school, this guide both communicates and shapes teachers' approaches to curriculum, instruction, behavior, school culture, and more. For example, *Frameworks* enables and encourages collaboration and coteaching between general and special education teachers. It also promotes schoolwide adoption of individualized instruction practices that benefit all students. This clear, structured guide makes it explicit to parents and staff alike that students with disabilities are a priority for the school.

Clearly articulating a school's values also makes it easier to bring them to life. Henderson K-12 Inclusion School in Boston, a traditional public school that is deliberate in its approach to equity, has found that clear communication about its disability inclusion program has been a huge advantage in hiring. The school's mission statement lays out its commitment to educating students with diverse learning needs in general education classrooms, so teachers joining the staff know that the school places a strong emphasis on educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Because this necessarily involves a lot of collaboration between teachers, new faculty know from the start that they cannot expect to work in a silo, creating more buy-in to the school's philosophy from the beginning.

Embracing accountability

A good school doesn't rest on its laurels. Instead, it remains committed to constant self-examination and improvement. Rather than simply relying on districts and states to catch failures, a good school holds itself accountable by monitoring its own adherence to inclusive practices. School leaders must consistently benchmark their school's enrollment figures against district and state averages and commit to identifying and addressing the causes of lower-than-average enrollment of students with disabilities. And when they encounter problems, leaders of good schools are willing to reassess school policies and staffing models.

However, strong accountability measures cannot be based solely on test scores and similar measures of performance. For example, while the high-stakes accountability embedded in No Child Left Behind that included reporting related to subgroups raised the profile of the performance of students with disabilities, it also served as a disincentive for schools to enroll and retain complex learners. Research on the growth of alternative education centers during the NCLB years provides one data point confirming this phenomenon (Fedders 2018; Vogell & Fresques, 2017). A good school's academic accountability measures are based on progress against individualized, realistic standards that do not treat students who learn differently as a liability.

Schools must also remain accountable to their students and families and work through a culturally responsive lens that can adapt to students' specific needs. Two Rivers Public

Charter School in Washington, D.C., accomplishes this by making IEP meetings a student-led experience (NCSECS, 2018). This teaches students with IEPs to be active voices in their own IEP process by asking them to set their own goals, discuss their progress, and identify their strengths and needs — with support from faculty and training materials. This direct student involvement ensures that goals are continually reassessed and evolve with the student, with everyone around the student working together toward the same goals. Through this process and others, Two Rivers ensures that instruction remains focused on individual student needs. Regardless of the specific approach a school takes, teachers and administrators must commit to continually reviewing students' progress against their IEPs and addressing family feedback to ensure they are on the right track.

But schools alone — no matter how good they are — should not be solely responsible for assessing their own success. A good school cooperates fully with district and state programs for demonstrating positive and measurable progress in educating students with disabilities. And instead of reacting defensively to identified deficiencies, a good school embraces the opportunity to become better.

Students at the center

A good school is not content to remain a good school — it remains relentlessly committed to continuous growth and improvement and the goal of greatness. It is equitable, inclusive, and responsive. It sees students as individuals with unique needs and measures progress against standards that make sense for each student. It takes federal IDEA requirements to heart but sees them as a floor, not a ceiling. A good school is designed to educate all students and never treats students with disabilities as an afterthought. In fact, it recognizes that what works for students with disabilities benefits all students and that general educators would do well to emulate many of the practices commonly used by special educators. It centers marginalized voices and engages the entire school community — staff, families, and students — in upholding its values. A good school meets students where they are and helps them grow to where they want to be. ■

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