

A Guide to Inclusive Education

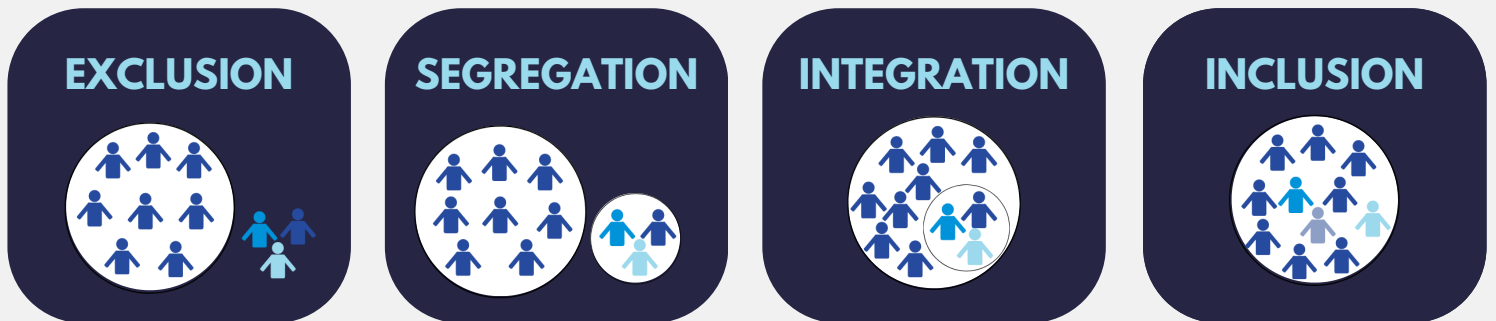
A Guide for Educators

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OVERVIEW

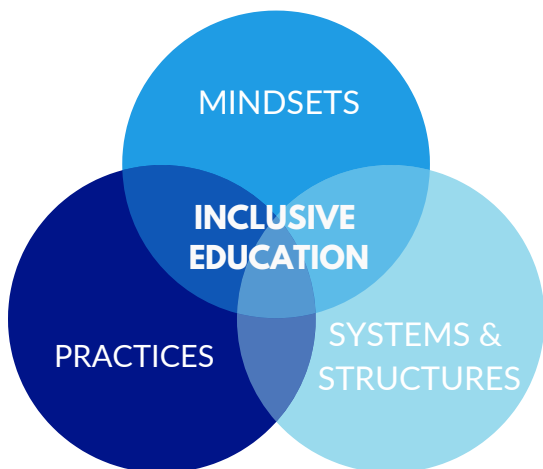
Parents send their children to schools every day with hopes and dreams of belonging to a community that allows each child to reach their full potential. At the same time, educators and school leaders walk into schools and classrooms everyday with the hopes of helping every child achieve their dreams. However, historical data and trends tell us that for certain groups of students, especially students with disabilities, these dreams and goals remain unfulfilled. Throughout history, schools have reckoned with how to meaningfully include students with disabilities into buildings and classrooms, uphold high expectations for them, and ensure they are fully equipped to engage as active members of their communities.



Traditional approaches to inclusion have largely resulted in moving from exclusion to either segregation or integration and not true inclusivity, due to flawed ideas about what it means for students with disabilities to belong and a fundamental misunderstanding about the changes that must occur in service of this. Inclusive Education offers a reimagined approach to ensuring every single student, every single day, engages in the full breadth of community and learning opportunities that schools offer.

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

When Inclusive Education is present in school communities, the instruction, relationships and wrap-around services are designed to meet the needs and enhance the strengths of every learner. Inclusive education brings together three critical elements that shape school culture:



Together, these three elements create school environment that meet the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities.



CASE STUDY

Ralston Public Schools

The Power of Innovative Leadership

When Ralston Public Schools first partnered with us on district-wide inclusion training, the results were mixed—some staff were energized while others wanted more concrete support. But Assistant Superintendent Dr. Harley and Blumfield Elementary Principal Mr. Knight saw an opportunity. **What if they asked staff what they needed?** Through an inventory process, teachers identified their real concerns: only about half felt confident collaboratively planning lessons, using data effectively, or ensuring all students could access grade-level content.

Armed with these honest insights, we worked together with Mr. Knight and designed five sessions that directly addressed what teachers said they needed. Teachers weren't just sitting through another professional development; they were getting practical tools for challenges they'd named themselves. The difference showed immediately, with **94%** of participants reporting that sessions genuinely improved their ability to support diverse learners.

But the real proof came months later when staff completed the same inventory again. Confidence levels had jumped to **85-95%** across every area—some categories saw growth of more than **65%**. Mr. Knight noticed it in everyday moments too:

“Our collaboration has been better and more focused. Our conversations are healthier even when they've been difficult.”

By listening first and responding with targeted support, Blumfield created lasting change that teachers could feel in their daily practice.

Inclusive Education is:

- A school community where all students feel a sense of belonging
- Are provided the highest quality instruction that meets their individual needs and enhances their strengths in the setting that is most appropriate.
- A school community where every adult is invested in the success of every student and the responsibility of supporting students is distributed and shared across teams and staff.
- A team-based process is used for all instructional, behavioral and social-emotional decision making driven by an understanding of student needs and strengths grounded in collected data.
- Equipping all educators and support staff with the skills and knowledge to support unique student needs and the enhancement of strengths.

Inclusive Education is not:

- Eliminating any aspect of the LRE continuum (e.g., removing all self-contained classrooms or resource rooms).
- The use of “inclusion teachers” who take sole responsibility for the learning of students with identified disabilities.
- The use of a unilateral decision-making process regarding student placements or instructional accommodations/modifications.
- Placing students with disabilities into general education settings without a clear transition plan regarding the support they need to access learning and the training needed for educators to address learner divergence.



MINDSETS

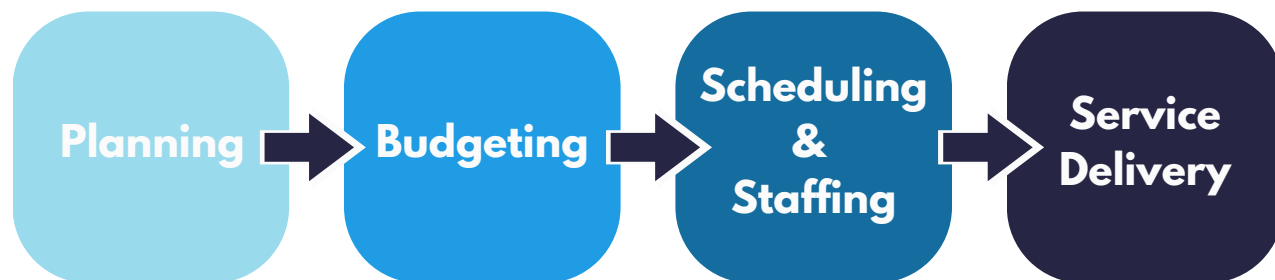
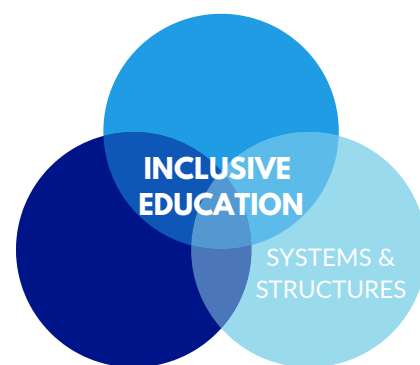
Inclusive education can only occur when education leaders, educators, and support staff approach their work with the following mindsets:

- ✓ All students must have access to grade-level learning every day
- ✓ All educators and staff can be successful in supporting all students with access to grade-level learning
- ✓ School leaders can and must support educators in meeting the needs of every student



SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

District leaders are uniquely positioned to ensure educators and school leaders have the adequate structures and resources necessary to implement an Inclusive Education. The belief that all leaders and all educators can be successful at supporting the needs and enhancing the strengths of all students is established through decision-making and modeled through daily actions by district leaders. Provided below are systems and structures district leaders can implement to actualize inclusive mindsets when **planning**, **budgeting**, **scheduling**, **staffing**, and **designing service delivery** to ensure Inclusive Education is possible.



Planning

- Continuously collect and [analyze](#) student and school performance data with an equity-driven lens. *Focus on sub-group performance through disaggregated data to understand opportunities to target in the upcoming school year.*
- Research organizations offering [high-quality instructional materials](#) and aligned [professional learning](#).
- Reflect on the current use and effectiveness of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS).
- Select and calendar a [universal screening process](#) early for all students each school year.
- Define and reflect on accountability systems to ensure they prioritize learning and growth towards grade-level mastery for all learners, especially those that are historically underperforming.
- Set meaningful and aligned goals and develop a corresponding year-long action plan for the upcoming school year based on trends in historical performance.
- Identify technology that explicitly increases accessibility for students with disabilities.



Budgeting

- Reflect on the previous year's budget in order to make decisions that ensure all funding streams (formula funds such as Title funding, IDEA funding, and Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) funds as well as additional competitive funding sources) are maximized to have the broadest impact in the school setting.
- Examine budgets and expenditures to identify areas of redundancy or identify misaligned programs (e.g., implementing one intervention with Title funding, and a separate or completely opposite intervention from a different competitive grant source).
- Ensure resource alignment and integration by reducing duplication and promoting efficiency and integration of resources.
- Adopt a [student-centered funding model](#) that uses a weighted student formula to allocate education dollars based on students' needs.
- [Creatively braid funding sources](#) to expand the use of traditionally based personnel.
- Maximize the use of high-cost funds to have the broadest impact in the school setting.
- Allocate funding to purchase [high-quality instructional materials](#) and provide aligned [professional learning](#) that are aligned to the year long goals and action plan.
- Prioritize professional learning on instructional and specialized support strategies.
- Reflect on gaps in current district-level personnel to identify additional roles that need to be added or current roles that must be revised.
- Purchase technology (devices and software) that explicitly increases access to core instruction for students with disabilities.
- Purchase and support use of furnishings, decor and organization materials that ensure physical access to learning for all students.
- Increase budget transparency while seeking input from the community and other stakeholders to ensure that schools have the information they need to make sound decisions related to funding that best serves the needs of all students.

Scheduling and Staffing

- Reflect on central office special education practices to see if they present barriers to inclusive practice at the school level. Actively remove barriers by aligning adjustments to identified needs. For example, if speech therapists are centrally scheduled without school input, they might be pulling students out of core content instruction to receive services.
- Through internal and external professional development, deepen an understanding of [effective staffing and scheduling](#) that prioritizes all student strengths and needs.
- Increase principal skill and autonomy on staffing/scheduling decisions to ensure cultural and community relevance.
- Leverage the established year-long goals and action plan to support strategic decisions on staffing/scheduling.
- Perform an audit of school schedules across the district to inform decisions about how to reallocate resources.
- Identify opportunities for creative staffing and/or external partnerships to provide additional staff resources to schools (e.g. student-teaching, [Residency](#) model, non-profit tutoring, etc.).

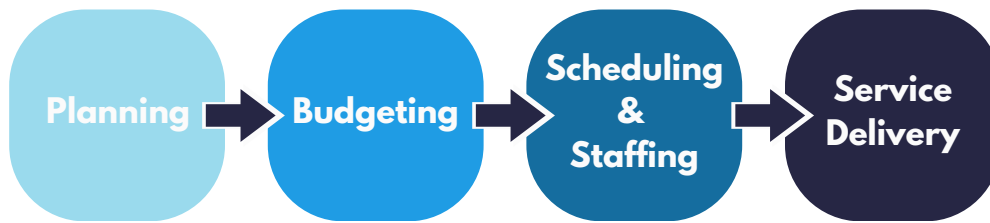
Designing Service Delivery

- Implement an MTSS process that is aligned to the year-long goals and action plan and supports inclusion by ensuring all students receive the highest quality instruction and targeted, timely support.
- Examine and improve identification processes to ensure student evaluations provide valuable information to the IEP team on how to best support individual students in accessing grade-level learning.
- Provide opportunities and strategies for school leaders to problem-solve when challenges with implementation arise.
- Identify success stories within schools and use them as a proof point for other school leaders and educators.



Practices for School Leaders

School leaders serve a critical role in ensuring all educators are equipped and supported with evidence-based practices and school-wide structures to implement Inclusive Education. The belief that all educators can be successful at supporting the needs of all learners must be modeled and reinforced by school leaders. Provided below are inclusive practices school leaders can take to incorporate inclusive mindsets into planning, budgeting, scheduling, staffing, and designing service delivery to ensure Inclusive Education is possible.



Planning

- Collect and [analyze](#) building level student and school performance data on an ongoing basis through an equity-driven lens. Focus on sub-group performance through disaggregated data to understand opportunities to target in the upcoming school year.
- Meet with all educators to understand their strengths, interests, and opportunities for growth, and develop [aligned coaching plans](#) that maximize human resources across the school.
- Revisit school-based accountability systems to ensure they prioritize learning and growth towards grade-level mastery for all learners, especially those that are historically underperforming.
- Revisit the roles and responsibilities of [general](#) and [special education](#) personnel to increase clarity, as needed.
- Collaborate with district leaders on setting meaningful and aligned goals and a corresponding year long action plan for the upcoming school year.
- Examine existing and widely-used technology resources with the intention of integrating assistive technology into general technology planning.
- Create opportunities for educators to receive training and support to effectively implement specialized instruction, high-quality instructional materials, [assistive technology](#), and other scaffolds for students with disabilities.
- Plan for frequent opportunities to build trust through deepening relationships and solicit feedback to understand the needs and experiences of families.

Budgeting

- Identify and reflect on current personnel to identify educators who are under- or over-utilized and make aligned adjustments. For example, the schedule of a speech therapist who is assigned lunch duty for 2 hours during the kindergarten ELA block could be adjusted to better meet the needs of learners, or an occupational therapist who is scheduled across three different campuses in one day could be adjusted to spend more time at an individual campus.
- Reflect on gaps in current school-based personnel to identify additional roles that need to be added.
- Lower the teacher-student ratio through [creative hiring](#).
- Connect funding priorities to the identified year long goals and action plan and set strategic benchmarks to evaluate effectiveness of decisions.



Scheduling and Staffing

- Use collected and analyzed data to schedule students with the greatest support needs first.
- Engage in a continuous cycle of feedback from staff and students to make scheduling adjustments that support the needs of students.
- Protect core instructional time when designing schedules for instruction and related services.
- Create a staffing plan that is aligned to the established year long goals and action plan and prioritizes the use of the highest-quality staff to provide support to the students who need it most. For example, use highly qualified teachers to provide intervention support instead of having a teacher assistant provide intervention support.
- Strategically use teacher assistants and paraprofessionals by ensuring they are given adequate training and support before providing any instructional based support to students.
- [Provide planning time](#) and professional learning on the alignment of instructional materials to grade-level standards and the points of rigor students must master.
- Protect [routine planning time](#) for [related service providers](#), special education, and general education teachers. For example, speech therapists could provide consultative support to teachers during instructional planning focused on integrating speech therapy goals into grade-level instruction.
- Create and implement an [intervention block](#) in the instructional schedule that provides targeted and timely support to all students.
- Create and implement clearly defined roles and responsibilities across general education and [special education personnel](#). Consider adding or refining the role of [interventionist](#).
- Provide strategic ongoing supervision and mentoring for general educators, special educators, and related service providers.
- Communicate any changes in staffing and/or larger school schedules to families in advance to support students with upcoming transitions.
- Prioritize location of physical space utilized by students with disabilities. For example, avoid utilizing isolated classrooms for resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, or related services (e.g., in the basement or in a separate wing).

Service Delivery

- Examine and consolidate current structures to streamline a single school-wide support team that collaborates to support struggling students. Designate team members with expertise across disciplines to monitor student outcomes and make adjustments.
- Ensure decision-making related to the IEP is grounded in collected and analyzed academic and social-emotional data.
- Identify and highlight strong examples of effective inclusive practices across staff members.
- Encourage educators and support staff to [observe colleagues](#) who have been identified as having strengths in focus areas.
- Ensure general education teachers understand how to integrate critical components of a student's individualized education program (IEP) into [daily instructional planning](#).
- [Provide specialized support training](#) to general education teachers to support the unique needs of students with disabilities that fall outside the scope of content pedagogy.
- [Provide curriculum-aligned professional learning](#) to special education teachers that builds their capacity to support students with disabilities in accessing grade-level content.
- Focus observations and coaching to support teachers in ensuring all students, including students with disabilities, engage with the most rigorous components of the lesson.
- Prioritize ongoing supervision and mentoring for general educators, special educators, and related service providers.
- Provide explicit training to paraprofessionals about any medical, assistive technology, or instructional support they are expected to provide to students with disabilities.
- Provide appropriate space and materials needed for delivery of curriculum and related services.



Practices for Educators

Classroom professionals are vital to successfully implementing Inclusive Education. Classroom educators are best positioned to support the needs and enhance the strengths of all learners when they believe in the capacity of all learners, collaborate with colleagues, and implement evidence-based practices.

Provided below are inclusive practices educators must bring to planning, scheduling, and service delivery to ensure Inclusive Education is possible.



Planning

- Develop a deep understanding of individual students through observation, [IEP information](#), [communication](#), and relationship-building with students and their [families](#).
- Set meaningful, aligned, and individualized [goals for student academic and social-emotional skill development](#) for the upcoming school year.
- Get to know colleagues by developing [deep and trusting relationships](#).
- Develop, annotate, or adjust curricular materials with the understanding of how to use a provided curriculum, instructional strategies, accommodations, and modifications that positively impact the learning of individual students.
- Engage in continuous learning about how technology can be used to increase accessibility for students with disabilities.

Scheduling

- Commit to collaboration time with colleagues and families who work with the same learners to seek input on academic, behavioral, and social-emotional decision making.
- Utilize collected data to provide targeted instruction in [flexible](#), small groups during an intervention block.
- Utilize [evidence-based strategies to intensify and individualize intervention](#) throughout the instructional week.
- Provide feedback to school leadership on how schedules might be improved to meet individual student needs.
- Ensure predetermined daily class schedules are consistently followed to ensure support personnel and related service providers have the opportunity to align services for maximization of student learning.
- Communicate any short-term changes in the daily schedule to families and students in advance to support students with any upcoming transitions.



Service Delivery

- Develop targeted support through integrated plans that address individual learners academic, behavioral, and social-emotional strengths and needs.
- Develop [IEPs that facilitate mastery of grade-level content](#).
- Select instructional materials aligned to grade-level standards, and ensure students with disabilities participate in grade-level instruction, daily.
- Utilize [high yield instructional strategies and the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#) to ensure engagement for all learners.
- Collaborate between [general education and special education teachers](#) to co-construct lessons that remove barriers to learning by addressing learner variability through flexible methods and choice.
- [Leverage technology](#) to maximize the accessibility of high-quality instruction. Communication devices or other assistive technology is integrated into academic settings and throughout the school day.
- [Clarify how to meet classroom procedures and expectations](#) across students, general and special education teachers, and related service providers.
- Prepare a learning environment, in collaboration between special and general educators, that reflects the why, what and how of learning, examples of which include:
 - Design the space to match the learning goal.
 - Utilize furnishings, decor and organization materials that facilitate collaboration and movement.
 - Offer resource areas accessible to all.
 - Integrate digital resources and materials.
 - Highlight the learning processes in the environment.
 - Ensure access to target goals in the learning environment.
 - Foster deep and trusting peer-to-peer relationships to support collaboration in the learning process.
 - Set and track progress to individual professional development goals based on general and special educators' reflection on their practice.
- Continually assess and monitor student progress toward grade-level mastery, and collaborate between general and special educators to adjust instructional plans and support to improve student success.

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