

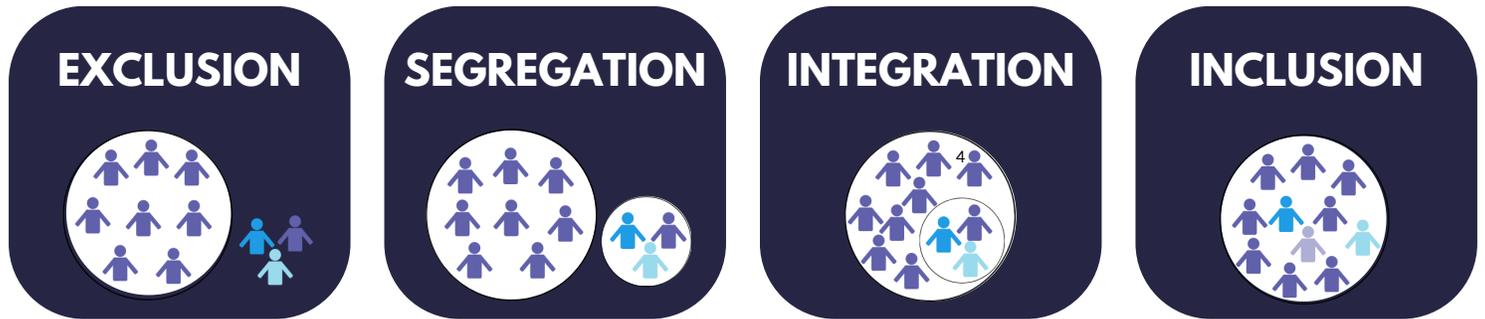
Inclusive Education Illuminated

A Family's Guide to Brighter Futures



Introduction

Families send their children to school every day with hopes and dreams that they belong to a community that builds a strong sense of self, provides the highest quality learning opportunities, and allows them to reach their full potential. **Inclusive Education** offers a reimagined approach to ensuring every single student, every single day, experiences this to the greatest extent possible. Inclusive Education supports schools in shifting from a culture and practice of exclusion, segregation, and/or integration to a culture of true inclusivity where every learner is valued and celebrated.



Inclusive Education happens when school communities:

- ✔ Value the contributions and potential of every learner as part of the school community.
- ✔ Support families, educators and staff in meeting the unique needs of every learner, every day.
- ✔ Embody a culture where every educator is invested in and accountable for the success of every learner.

This Guide Offers Insights Into:

- Why Inclusive Education is so important
- How Inclusive Education is different than previous forms of special education
- Why relationships matter in creating an Inclusive Education
- How to seek out and advocate for Inclusive Education
- Resources for supporting Inclusive Education in your child's school community





Why Inclusive Education

Great progress has been made to ensure all students, those with and without identified [disabilities](#), are included into school communities across the country. Evidence suggests that students with disabilities are increasingly included into general education classroom settings. However, schools are continuing to figure out how to ensure students with disabilities are not only present in classrooms with their peers, but also learning challenging material.

Inclusive Education has opened up a whole new world for our family in so many ways. Seeing our youngest learning and playing alongside her peers, she shares so much joy with us when she comes home each day. She feels like she belongs.

-Monica, a parent of a third grader

Our son is a non-disabled student in an inclusion class and he has truly benefited from his experience at school. Being in a classroom with peers with different abilities, he's able to see himself and our family represented in his classroom, too.

-Robert, a parent of an eighth grader

Unfortunately, we continue to find that students with disabilities are often removed during critical aspects of instruction; only to receive instruction that is less challenging, below grade level expectations and in isolated settings from their peers. In addition, when students with disabilities remain within classes with their peers, we find that many are unable to access the learning happening due to lack of support or guidance provided. Both of these realities result in a negative effect on academic achievement and decreases the likelihood of graduating from high school, pursuit of a college degree, and meaningful career preparation and participation.

Yet, it is important to note that these negative outcomes are not fixed. Our children and our communities deserve better. There is clear evidence that experiencing an Inclusive Education leads to better outcomes for all students, especially those with disabilities.





HOW IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION DIFFERENT?

As you reflect on your own experience in schools, you may remember special education as a separate, usually smaller classroom. You may even remember the students in that room. This outdated approach often isolated students with disabilities, causing them to feel and believe that their differences were to be hidden. Through new research into how we learn, we have discovered that it is not just students with disabilities who learn differently but in fact [all people learn differently](#).

Inclusive Education welcomes the differences of all learners into the same classroom. It prepares teachers and leaders to not just meet their unique needs, but to celebrate their differences. In the remainder of this guide, we will explore different ways that you as a family can get involved in your school's approach to Inclusive Education.

As you explore, consider referencing the following key terms:

advocate

Someone who is familiar with local policies on special education, has a good working relationship with key people in the local school districts and understands your child. Check [here](#) for more information on finding an advocate.

individualized education plan

A plan and legal document that outlines the education attributes that are necessary to ensure that a particular learner is successful in school based on their disability. Check [here](#) for more information on the purpose of an IEP.

need

A particular skill or content that your child is having difficulty with that is based on collected data from the school community. Check [here](#) to learn how to request a free evaluation about your child's needs.

disability

A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. Click [here](#) to learn more about the 13 disability categories under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

inclusion

Educating all students in the same classroom to the greatest extent possible during all academic (e.g. math) and nonacademic (e.g. gym class) portions of an instructional day. Click [here](#) to read more about the benefits of inclusive classrooms.

special education

Instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Check out a resource [here](#) to learn more about special education and how a child is identified with a disability.





WHY DO RELATIONSHIPS MATTER?

As a parent or guardian, you have a deep understanding of your child's physical, social, developmental, and family history. While you may not be an educator yourself, your experiences with your child and in your life are critical to ensuring Inclusive Education is happening in your school community. You may even feel tension between trusting your child's teacher(s) or school and being concerned that your child may need more support. This feeling is natural and there are ways to both build trust with your child's school while ensuring they are able to provide an experience in which your child can be successful.

To ensure your ideas are heard as you work alongside the education staff in your child's school, a **trusting relationship** must be established with the school and the staff members within it. You may have found ways to develop these relationships; nice! You may also be finding this element challenging. Regardless, here are some strategies for approaching relationship building with your child's teacher or their community so that you can be an active contributor.

What is it?

Why does it work?

communicate openly, often

Find ways to communicate with your child's teacher or school staff that best works for them. Ask if they prefer texting, phone calls or email and then use that format to communicate.

Communicating in a way that works for your child's teacher or their school staff demonstrates that you care.

offer support and suggestions

Being around kids all day is hard work! When communicating with your child's teacher or other school staff, share what is working at home with your child (and what isn't!) and offer ideas for what to try when it isn't working at school.

Sharing about what you go through and how you have tried to figure it out opens the door for continued conversations and discussions on potential solutions to any challenge.

be receptive to new ideas and approaches

While you have great insight to share, your child's teacher and school staff do too! If they share a new strategy to try at home or offer an idea, be open to it and give it a shot.

Relationships are a two way street. The more you demonstrate you are willing to try out ideas, the more willing a teacher and other school staff will be to do the same.





While all families should feel empowered to advocate within their school community, families with a child who has a disability have a responsibility. If your child has been identified as having a disability, you play a key role as an active member and the ultimate decision maker of the [IEP team](#), or the group of education staff that work alongside you and your child to create an IEP. Together, families and education staff can come to an agreement on what is best for your child. Want to learn more about this process? [Click here.](#)

HOW DO YOU ADVOCATE FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

So, we have established that Inclusive Education is impactful and that your perspective is very important in facilitating this in your child's school. But what happens when Inclusive Education isn't happening in a way that works for your child?

As a parent or guardian, you can advocate for what you believe your child's needs are. Sometimes, you lead this advocacy. Other times, you can seek out an [advocate](#) to drive these conversations alongside you. Either way, you can work to change what is happening for your child in school. Below are tips to start advocating.



Get The Facts.

Schools are required to prepare and share an [annual report card](#), including information about student and school performance. As you prepare to advocate, [find out](#) how your school is performing.



Prepare for the Conversation.

Asking for something different than what is being provided might feel risky. To ease this feeling, plan out what you want to say and how you want to say it. Consider writing down talking points or pre-planning questions in advance of a meeting to set yourself up for a successful conversation.



Ask Questions.

There are a lot of education terms and policies or structures that may be used in meetings and conversations. Asking questions helps to ensure what is being discussed is clear and that you have all the information you need.



Be Thoughtfully Persistent.

Change doesn't happen overnight. It also isn't easy. As you ask for changes to your child's experience in school, plan to continue to follow-up with the teacher or school staff member you are working with. Ask them when you should expect to hear an update and how that update will be communicated, and then make it a point to check in on how it is going. Work with your school to determine if it's helpful to set up a follow-up meeting.

Need inspiration on what to advocate for? Check out this resource with [strategies](#) to ask for.





NOT SURE WHERE TO START?

Starting a conversation with your child's teacher can feel daunting, especially when you're unsure about how things are going or want to address specific concerns. The key is to approach these discussions as opportunities to build partnership rather than to critique or challenge. The questions below are designed to open dialogue in a positive, collaborative way. Use these as starting points, and don't feel like you need to ask them all at once! Sometimes the most productive conversations begin with just one thoughtful question that shows you're invested in working together.

- What's one way that my child is finding success in school/your class? What is one way they are struggling?
- What strategies are working best for my child? Which have not been as effective?
- What can we do at home to reinforce what is being taught in school?

Beginning of Year Advocacy Checklist

The start of a new school year presents a valuable opportunity to establish positive relationships and set the tone for ongoing collaboration. This checklist provides concrete steps you can take in those crucial first few weeks to demonstrate your commitment to collaboration on your child's education.

- ✓ Proactively reach out to your child's teacher as soon as contact information is available
- ✓ Share your interest in creating a partnership that is ongoing and mutually beneficial
- ✓ Request a meeting or conversation in a way that works best for all parties
- ✓ Pre-plan some questions to ask
- ✓ Consider sharing a top goal you have for your child in the year to come

RESOURCES

As you consider ways to further contribute to Inclusive Education in your child's community or to explore when the outreach and strategies you've tried have not been successful for you or for your child, consider referencing one or more of the following resources.

- [IEP Guide for Parents and Families](#) gives a high-level overview of the IEP process from start to finish
- [How to Advocate For and Participate in an IEP Meeting](#) provides what to expect at an IEP meeting so that you can feel empowered and prepared
- [Disability-Specific Resources and Organizations](#) shares a number of support agencies to reach out to based on your child's specific disability and unique needs

CLOSING

Families play an integral role in a child's experience in a given school community. Working together in collaboration with your child's teacher(s) and school opens the doors to create meaningful change for all students. Thank you for your belief in and commitment to improving your child's school experience.

