Moving Toward Equity and Access through
Inclusive Schooling

Considerations
for School Administrators

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Learning Together to Live Together

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Maryland Coalition for
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

A Parable on Educational Change

Once upon a time there were regular kids and special kids. Regular kids went to their neighborhood schools, attended regular classes with regular teachers, and participated in regular school activities. Special kids went to special schools, attended special classes in special rooms, and participated in special school activities. Because everything they did was special, they had special teachers.

But then came *mainstreaming*, where special kids were "allowed" into regular classrooms if their work and behavior was, well, almost regular.

This was followed by *integration*, where special kids were still special, but they were allowed into regular classes (usually ones not considered too academic), often with their teacher or a special assistant. This made the adults who worked with the kids talk to each other about teaching methods and sometimes plan their lesson together.

Then came *inclusion*. The special students went to their neighborhood schools; were assigned to regular classes, just like regular kids; were taught by regular and special teachers; and participated in regular school activities. As a result, all schools were regular and all activities were regular. Special kids and regular kids did everything together. They also lost their labels; instead of being "special" or "regular," they were just kids.

But what happened to the teachers? Well, the regular teachers became more special and the special teachers became more regular. They learned from each other and now they are all just teachers of kids – who go to their neighborhood schools.

- *Author unknown*

EXCLUSION   INTEGRATION   INCLUSION

The Role of Building Principal
In Facilitating Inclusive Schools

In the beginning of the 21st century, inclusive education emerged as a schoolwide approach for educating students with disabilities in general education classes. Over the last 17 years, as research continues to demonstrate the benefits of inclusive education, and professional literature describes strategies for success, it has become clear that the successful inclusion of students with disabilities means attending to the needs of ALL learners, especially those at who are academically or behaviorally at risk for removal – for disciplinary or instructional reasons. It has also become clear that successful inclusion requires a systemic change in the organizational structure of the school as well as a transformation in the roles and relationships of all school staff. Toward this end, the school principal is key.

A study as early as 1992 explored administrative strategies that support the successful inclusion of students with disabilities; and a 2002 study of elementary schools working to build inclusive education capacity identified key elements to meet the needs of all learners. These factors are consistent with the recent findings of the Principal Competencies Advisory Group, convened by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the CEEDAR Center in 2016 to develop the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (*PSEL) 2015 and Promoting Principal Leadership for the Success of Students with Disabilities*.

Personal Attributes:
Leaders promote change through practices that are collaborative, intentional, and supportive; they:

- share decision-making power with their staff,
- lead by example,
- extend the core values around inclusiveness and quality to other initiatives and students, and
- actively promote learning communities.

Student Assignments:
Leaders provide clear direction for student grouping that fosters quality instructional practices and does not overload staff through:

- purposeful assignment of students with disabilities to classrooms in natural proportions,
- heterogeneous class composition,
- students assigned to age-appropriate grades,
- active involvement and support of students in non-academic activities, and
- deployment of staff according to student need AFTER scheduling students with IEPs.

In 1998, the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, with the Maryland State Department of Education and local administrators, reflected on 8 years of transforming school practices to include students with disabilities in 10 local school districts. They identified 3 key findings:

- *The most significant factor in building an inclusive educational setting is the **vision and leadership** of the building administrator.*

- *A key element for successful inclusive services is **planning**, which varies in degree and scope throughout the State.*

- ***Collaborative decision-making**, planning, and teaching skills are critical for implementing best instructional practices, and most educators have not had the training or experience in using these skills.*

Attention to Staff:

Leaders attend to both the process and the content of discussions to create a foundation for successful building-wide change by:

- use a process of *reflective inquiry* within existing teams and management groups to promote changes in the culture of the school,
- use information from the school (history, practices, strengths) to engage staff in *discussions* about the values and implications of diversity, inclusion, collaboration, and differentiated instructional practices,
- actively lead and develop systems for effective collaboration and shared ownership and accountability for teaching all learners, and
- *create time and opportunity* for discussion within the school to address issues that affect the development and implementation of inclusive practices.

Other critical key leadership practices for including students with disabilities are:

- Communicating high academic expectations, and presuming the competence of students with limited communication skills.
- Ensure that evidence-based instruction and intervention are implemented with integrity.
- Promote team-based collaboration and data-based decisions for planning and evaluating instructional impact.
- Promote inclusive social environments that foster acceptance, care, value, and belonging in adult-student and student-student relationships.
- Create partnerships with families to gain insight about their child's specific strengths and disabilities to make educationally sound instructional decisions.

Some of the consensus views from structured interviews with administrators are:

1. ***The attitude of the administrator was cited as the most influential factor for the success of an inclusion program***.

2. Administrators at inclusive schools cultivated a school climate that signified that all students belonged at the school site, and that all teachers would teach all students.

3. Administrators must continually redefine the role of both the classroom teacher and special educator based on previous inclusion successes and emerging student needs.

4. In some cases, modifications of the existing school's organizational structure were necessary in order to provide built-in teacher collaboration and planning time.

5. When possible, administrators sought out and hired new teachers who were willing to accept a philosophy of inclusion.

6. Staff members were encouraged to have patience with one another; implementation problems were to be expected.

7. Providing professional learning opportunities for staff members enabled the development of new skills and provided a common language of instruction and assessment.

8. Inclusive education leadership teams were helpful for identifying goals, guidelines and procedures for inclusion. Team members then became instrumental in public relations and sharing information about the transformation process.

9. Administrators promoted the sharing of fears and concerns; an open door policy was in effect for teachers, students and parents.

Barriers and Solutions
For Building Inclusive Schools

1. **ADMINISTRATORS are the key to success.** If an administrator supports their staff, and SENDS THE MESSAGE that all students who live in their jurisdiction belong in their school, then staff will know that they have a shared responsibility and will be accountable as a TEAM for ALL students. If administrators support their staff in collaboration (time and methods), then problem-solving will occur. If administrators see how differentiated instruction, based on Universal Design for Learning frameworks, is good for all students, then they can lead their staff toward high performance expectations for all students.

2. **Educators have CONCERNS AND FEARS.** Special educators worry that "their" students will experience failure and/or will get lost in fast-paced classes with typically developing learners. They worry that classroom teachers will not use specialized instructional strategies or will not implement the supports and services to meet individually designed goals. Classroom teachers worry that they won't know how to teach and meet the instructional needs of a student with a particular disability, and that they may have to spend more time on one student than the rest of the class. They worry that they are being asked to do something that they are not prepared to do. While listening to and acknowledging educator concerns, these can be translated into action by supporting them in planning time, professional learning and in-school coaching.

3. **The biggest staff development need is COLLABORATION skills for data-based instructional planning and co-teaching.** Teachers are expected to work together, but are often not given the time or the knowledge of how to collaborate effectively and efficiently. Data systems may be obtuse and teachers may need support to translate student performance into strategies for success. Educational teams can benefit from learning collaborative problem-solving strategies and methods for running efficient team meetings.

4. **PLANNING is crucial to success.** Traditional school schedules do not always afford educators the collaboration time needed to co-plan instruction and co-assess the effectiveness of strategies and interventions. Collaborative planning time for grade level teams with specialized educators prior to the beginning of the school year and regular planning meetings throughout the school year will lead them to success.

In 2004, the Maryland State Department of Education Task Force on Inclusive Education reviewed summaries from focus group discussions in fourteen local school districts. Barriers and solutions were identified to help school leadership teams as they worked strategically to improve inclusive practices.

BARRIERS to School Transformation:

- o **Leadership**: *lack of vision and support for a shared understanding through dialogue, resources, or skill development.*

- o **Attitude/Beliefs**: *lack of comfort or unwillingness to embrace a philosophy of inclusion or change existing practices.*

- o **Instructional Practices:** *lack of sound general education practices and a lack of understanding about how students with disabilities can participate in general education instruction while providing specialized instruction in unique educational goals.*

- o **Professional Development:** *lack of adequately skills personnel and limited investment in training for professionals to assist them in learning and implementing inclusive practices.*

- o **Resources:** *funding shortages for materials, equipment, and technology as well as barriers resulting from overcrowded facilities and inadequate time for planning/collaboration.*

- o **Personnel Preparation:** *disconnect between university course content and program focus with the skills and knowledge required to successfully teach students with disabilities in general education classes.*

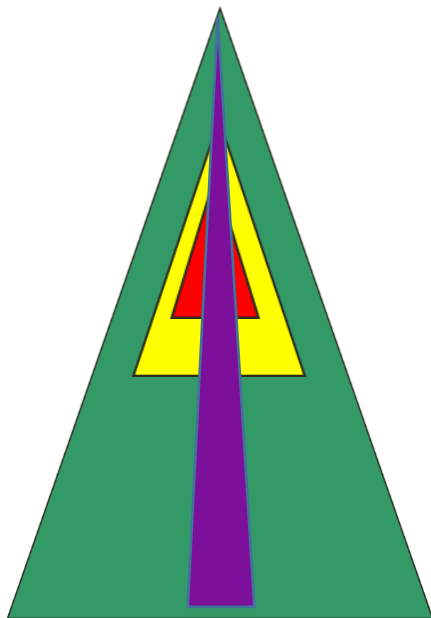# Changing School Structures to Teach ALL Learners

Integrated Multi-Tiered System of Supports

In the last several years, education reform efforts recommend that the resources and efforts toward Response to Intervention (RtI) systems and Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) systems be braided to address the complex social, emotional, behavioral, and academic learning needs of a wide variety of learners (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Lane, & Quirk, 2017). Such an integrated system emphasizes the value of research-based core general education, with specific interventions provided for struggling students that match their specific performance development needs with sufficient intensity to learn the grade level curriculum.

In a "multi-tiered" system, schools use universal screening tools to identify students at risk, and based on a combination of data points (e.g., attendance, academics, behavior data, etc.), identify students to receive supplemental services. In an inclusive school, ALL students receive high quality core instruction and are a part of the screening process and are eligible to receive supplemental support based on their unique status. Using a data-informed decision model, educators select or design supplemental interventions for students at risk for failing or demonstrating performance below expectations.

> A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a school-wide "system" to use data to identify students who are at risk for academic or behavioral problems, identify the research-based instructional strategies and interventions that will help students to succeed, and monitor the quality of implementation of those practices and student progress. In a school-wide MTSS framework, there are multiple levels or intensities of support for students who need it, the use of research when developing or selecting curricula and interventions, and a focus on data to align interventions with student need and evaluate the impact of those interventions

An inclusive school designs their master schedule with an eye toward providing time that matches intervention integrity and affords all students the opportunity for participation in extension activity, clubs, interest groups, OR for those who need it: interventions. Decision rules are used to determine when a student no longer needs an intervention, or when they need more intensive and uniquely designed interventions for academic, social/emotional, or behavioral needs.. An integrated tiered system of supports addresses students who struggle because of academic learning needs AND also students with disabilities, those whose first language is not English, students coming from cultural backgrounds that differ from the majority of families and educators in the school community, and students living in poverty who may have access to fewer resources. Key to an integrated tiered system of supports are planning TEAMS who know how to use effective collaborative data-based decision structures in a culture with shared responsibilities for all learners (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). For students who have disabilities, specialized instruction is infused and embedded within the core general education instruction and elective classes, as well as provided within interventions to address the learning needs impacted by the disability.

Changing Roles of Teachers

Shared Ownership of all students

When schools move toward changing their culture and instructional practices to fully include each and every student in their community, collaborative teaming of professionals leads to improved instructional practice. With increased collaboration, overlapping and sharing of roles and responsibilities replaces role isolation. CHANGE is essential.

As such, inclusion is a change process rather than an event. The process involves fundamental changes in the work-lives of teachers, with *significant* impact on their identity. Both principals and teachers will be challenged to monitor student progress and teacher satisfaction, as well as to continue to make adjustments as necessary.

Collaboration!

Teachers will work together to plan instruction and evaluate the effectiveness of their work and changes in student performance. General education classroom teachers work with special educators to create lessons that are based on Universal Design for Learning frameworks, further differentiate instruction based on the unique learning needs of students in the class, and identify where student accommodations, program modifications and specialized instruction will be embedded. When teachers share the delivery of instruction and supports for a student who requires intensive behavioral or academic supports, they need to talk to each other about strategies and student performance on a regular and predictable basis. Teachers will:

- *Share common beliefs and work toward common goals*
- *Sit facing each other at meetings*
- *Share group tasks, responsibilities, and leadership*
- *Use collaborative practices and problem-solving strategies*
- *Meet regularly and consistently*
- *Encourage each other to interact and participate in decisions*
- *Make decisions by consensus, poll each other for understanding of issues and ideas, and criticize ideas but not each other*
- *Set rules for methods to deal with controversial issues or subjects*
- *Review how they are doing and give each other feedback on how they are doing as a team*
- *Continue to change and grow*

Co-Teaching!

When students with disabilities are included in general education, they may receive their special education services from the classroom teacher, a special educator, an interventionist, a related service provider, or even from a peer or paraprofessional under the guidance of a qualified teacher. Based on the scheduling of students and teacher assignments, special educators may regularly co-teach a subject, or may be assigned as a collaborative planner or in a consultative role to the classroom teacher.

Inclusion asks us to change …
*our attitudes, our behavior, and
for some, our belief system.*

**How will you manage the
changes ahead?**

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