

Why High School Inclusion Matters: Factors to Consider

Inclusion of students with significant disabilities at the high school level has been long debated and undoubtedly presents challenges for districts and schools. However, there are evidence-based reasons for implementing inclusive practices. And, students with and without disabilities alike will benefit.

Gains in Academic Performance

Studies have shown that when students with disabilities take more general education classes with peers who do not have disabilities, academic gains are made, even with the use of largely modified and adapted curriculum and materials.^{1,2} Think of it this way, any exposure to the general education content is better than none. And, schools that implement inclusion report being pleasantly surprised at the level of participation seen that educators previously thought were not possible. General education classes in high school are also correlated to college attendance and any college attendance is linked to better employment and life outcomes.³

Benefits for Students without Disabilities

Studies have found that the majority of secondary students without disabilities report never or rarely seeing students with significant disabilities at their schools, and having almost no opportunity to interact with peers who have disabilities.⁶ At the same time, the majority also report that they would like to get to know students with significant disabilities. Varied research over a number of years has demonstrated that academic achievement is not negatively affected for students without disabilities when their peers with disabilities are included in general education classes. In fact, there is some evidence that serving in a peer tutor role can provide academic benefits for students without disabilities.⁵

Increases in Social Interaction

Logic dictates that students with disabilities will have more social interactions with peers who do not have disabilities when they are in general education classes and extra-curricular activities side by side. Research confirms that is indeed the case.^{4,5} It just makes sense that it is easier to get to know people if you spend time with them. Two important aspects of providing opportunities for social interactions through inclusion is affording students with disabilities **chances to be in the same places at the same times** as their peers without disabilities and **thoughtful coordination without adult hovering**. In other words, special and general educators should work together to orchestrate seating, expectations, peer supports, materials, content delivery, and participation without the constant presence of adults in close proximity to students with disabilities.

Optimal Practices Require Individualized Planning

The [10 Practical Ways to Foster Inclusion](#), along with this and other resources in the [LGTW Quick Guide](#) provide inclusive strategies drawn from research as well as the direct experiences of several [Let's Get to Work](#) pilot schools. However, there is no one right or best way to implement inclusion. Just as both special and general educational practices are most effective when the needs of individual students are placed at the forefront of thinking and planning, the same is true of inclusive practices. For one student, science classes and related school clubs might be optimal. For another, music and art could be the perfect way to relate to peers through shared passion. Some might be in general education classes most of the day, while others still may need to build up their comfort level or balance small group direct instructional time with time in general education.



1 Browder, D. M., & Cooper-Duffy, K. (2003).
4 Salend, S. J., & Duhaney, L. M. G. (1999).

2 Cole, C. M., Waldron, N., & Majd, M. (2004).
5 Carter, E. W., & Hughes, C. (2005).

3 Landmark, L., Ju, S., & Zhang, D. (2010).

6 Siperstein, G. N., Parker, R. C., Bardon, J. N., & Widaman, K. F. (2007).

Examples from LGTW Pilot Schools

Andy, a young man who uses a wheelchair and communicates in a variety of ways but says very little, has always attended a wide variety of classes at his high school. He particularly likes culinary classes. Often, Andy gets assistance in classes from his peers without disabilities, and is provided valued roles such as delivering notes from the office or reading in the library when he becomes restless and needs to leave class before the end of the period. When visiting his school, it is obvious that many of his peers without disabilities know him and appreciate his presence there. People wave and say hello in the hallways and when he goes for lunch, he sits at a table with some students who do not have disabilities. Andy's favorite hobby is making spirit key chains with friends to sell before school and at school sporting events. The friends he makes key chains with are peers without disabilities.



Chris has always been involved in some general education classes and especially enjoys science and history, but used to have an adult attend most classes with him. Over the past two years, classes have been added to his schedule and adult support simultaneously faded where possible. With daily check-ins and collaboration between his case manager and general education teachers, Chris has been very successful and takes great pride in his ability to complete his work and get good grades. His social interactions have also increased since he has an adult with him less frequently.

Tom had very limited time with peers who did not have disabilities until last year. Then, his high school implemented two specific strategies to increase inclusion: having students with and without disabilities go to homeroom together and the development of classes co-taught by a general and special educator. By the end of the first semester after those changes, Tom had made several friends without disabilities, began eating lunch with them, and started seeing them socially outside of school. Soon after that, Tom invited other students with disabilities to join the group for lunch, thus expanding not only his own social network, but also doing the same for his peers with disabilities.



Sarah had a busy schedule in high school, working in the coffee shop, attending classes, and socializing with friends. It was not always easy, as she sometimes became frustrated and has tough days, even acting aggressively toward peers without disabilities at times. Not being included was never an option at her high school and she got the support she needed from not only special educators, but also general educators and peers without disabilities when she was having a difficult time. The distinction of “those kids” or “your kids” is not apparent in an inclusive environment and she was not permanently removed from classes or activities because of behavioral issues. Sarah had friends who stuck by her in high school and have stayed in touch after graduation – just like anyone would want.

Inclusion is Long-Term Thinking

Incorporating Inclusive practices has short-term pay offs, but also represents long-term thinking that can be closely tied to more positive transition and employment outcomes. Exposure to academic content, increased chances of attending college, learning and practicing social skills, and getting to know more people before leaving high school are among the benefits for students with disabilities. As a result, those who have had more inclusive opportunities are better prepared for work and the adult world overall.^{7,8} Their counterparts without disabilities leave high school better prepared to accept, live, and work side-by-side with individuals who have disabilities, thus helping create more inclusive communities not just during high school, but well beyond.

