

# Signs of an Inclusive School

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- Students are sitting together: no particular students are isolated or alone with an adult.
  - Too often, children with disabilities are seated by themselves with an aide or are paired with an adult for group activities. Paraprofessionals can be great in facilitating communication between children, but shouldn't take the place of peers.
  - Sometimes, adults have to get the ball rolling: form a lunch bunch or assign students to groups to make sure no one is left out. But in truly inclusive schools, all students have a role. For middle and high school, students with significant disabilities may have a distinct role: time keeper, or project "starter." They may do a physical part of an experiment while other students take the data or notes.
  
- All students are asked for responses and encouraged to participate in class discussions.
  - Research has shown (source: Lisa Dieker at recent NIUSI training on high school inclusion: look up niusi.org for GREAT inclusive schools materials) that in order for students to be meaningful school participants, they should be called on or give a response **THREE TIMES PER HOUR**. For elementary school, that's about 18 times per day.
  - If your child doesn't speak, you and the school team should be thinking about other ways to participate: yes/no responses; head nods; PECS picture symbols; pre-programmed responses on an assist. Tech device.
  - EVERY part of a school day can offer opportunities to communicate: at lunch time children can be asked whether hot or cold; whether white milk or chocolate; whether a child likes hot dogs or doesn't.
  - Teachers don't have to do it alone: other students can get involved. Students can ask a child with special needs to answer questions or can be paired for a short activity in which a child makes choices, presses a Big Mac button; responds with a Dynavox answer to a question. Children can be asked in music class which song to sing first among several choices; in gym, they can be asked which exercise to do first.
  
- Attitudes and communication about ALL students focus on student strengths and abilities, not deficits.
  - Personally, I never want to hear the word "low functioning" again ☺
  - Teachers talk about students abilities and strengths. Staff do not gossip about families or students, especially to other families.

- Each member of the teaching team expresses ownership for all students.
  - Families shouldn't have to go to the special education teacher to get a quick progress update or have a question answered. Each teacher should be working with all the students.
  
- Leadership positions support and demonstrate commitment to inclusive principles.
  - Madison Partners for Inclusive Education has had as a priority during its 4-year existence a focus on hiring building principals who believe in inclusion and have training/experience in inclusive schools.
  - If your school is losing a principal, ask to be on the search committee for a new one. Ask whether a question on philosophy regarding inclusion is part of the screening/hiring questions asked.
  - Remember: building principals absolutely set the tone for their schools. They also hire teachers and special education assistants. If you want great staff, look for a great principal.
  
- Special education assistants/paraprofessionals are part of the team, not exclusively working with a single student.
  - Preferably, spec. ed. Assistants also would be viewed as a resource for the class, not just for the student assigned. There is a body of research showing that one-on-one aides can actually inhibit student participation and engagement in class activities. They also can be a barrier between social relationships with other students. On the other hand, they also can be wonderful facilitators of relationships and interactions.
  
- There is evidence of active learning. Students are doing more work than the teachers: group activities, discussion, interaction, hands-on experimentation and exploration.
  - The days of teacher-driven lectures are gone. Research has shown that ALL learners (adults and children) learn better by practicing and doing than simply by listening.
  - Students are seated so they can work together, rather than so that all desks face the teacher.
  - Students are given multiple ways to demonstrate what they know: posters, skits, written essays and papers; art work, etc.
  
- All students are working in the same curriculum, but at a variety of levels of complexity.
  - The promise of effective inclusion is that all students will learn at least some elements of the same content, driven by state standards of what students need to know at certain ages.
  - As an example, when I needed to look something up, my fourth grade daughter with a disability yelled up the stairs to me, "Google it." Why? That's what her reg. ed. Teacher was teaching the kids to do as a pre-

cursor to beginning a research paper. She wouldn't do the full paper. But she could learn to google certain words for content and pictures.

- In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, she is doing a careers unit with her classmates. They did a resume (hers is simplified); practiced answering interview questions for a job, and took tours of UW and MATC. She started her interview process planning to answer that after high school, she planned to graduate. After spending time listening to classmates, she changed her plans to, "I'm going to college." Her own expectations for herself were elevated because of hearing what her typical peers' plans were. Many, many students with significant disabilities are never even asked what their plans are after school.
- Curriculum expectations can be greatly modified depending both on the student's ability level and on their specific IEP. Kids can have communication and social goals that they work on in biology when they are doing a lab project with peers. They can work on turn-taking during gym class or at recess playing a cooperative game.
- There are a variety of ways to participate in activities: verbally, written, by using assistive technology; yes/no/I don't know; choice of two or three options.
  - Examples above. Kids with short-term memory and communication challenges often do best with a choice of 2 answers rather than open-ended questions...Who is this story about, John or Terry? Was it a happy ending or a sad ending?
  - The same is true for kids who can read independently but have trouble with open-ended writing. Offer multiple-choice exams and quizzes or projects to assess competence. These can be accommodations listed in the IEP.
- Related services are integrated into regular activities throughout the school day.
  - Students who are challenged by transitions, problems with attention/focus, and who have trouble sequencing are particularly challenged by being constantly pulled from their environment for therapies and special instruction.
  - PT can work on physical skills at gym, at recess, during hallway transitions. OT can work in the classroom on handwriting or keyboarding or at art for drawing/art projects. Or, OT can work on sensory challenges during lunch or at recess. Speech can be integrated into the classroom to rehearse presentations or to work with a student during small group time to encourage participation, conversational turn-taking, voice volume, etc.
  - Think about what a child is missing instructionally every time they are pulled from classtime for therapy. For children who have trouble with abstract thinking and sequencing, this can be especially challenging.

- All students are encouraged to and are seen participating in extra-curriculars and social events at school.
  - Too many times, students with disabilities aren't part of the larger school life. Think about every opportunity that a school presents as a chance to involve your child: after-school clubs; sports teams (maybe there's a manager role if your child can't play the sport); band, chorus; summer MSCR and other recreation programs.
  - Any MSCR programs held at schools have specialized supports available for those who ask. Check with your school's program: they can provide an extra aide or co-facilitator for programs.
  - Think about your child's interests and abilities to look for things at school where they can participate: school store, cafeteria, stage crew for plays; taking tickets or passing out programs at events, etc.
  
- Every student has opportunities to share his/her gifts, abilities and passions.
  - Everybody has at least one thing they either like or are good at. Look for ways to incorporate those things into the school day. We used to bring a revolving door of pets to school for hands-on demos: hamsters, snakes, etc. Now, my daughters make jewelry and we have had several "beading parties" with school friends interested in beading. One of them we set up after school at the school.
  - If your child doesn't like to present or speak in front of others, think of different ways to participate. Sentences can be loaded on a tape recorder or assistive device to play back to the class. If your child doesn't talk, ask a sibling or encourage the teacher to get a peer to record your child's ideas.
  - Motivation is fundamental to effective learning. For children who have physical, cognitive and behavioral challenges, activities must be that much more motivating in order to encourage them to participate. Include in your child's IEP present level a list of things/activities that highly motivate your child that teachers could incorporate into school. My daughter likes frogs and toads, so her elementary school teachers gave her word problems involving frogs and toads or involving her and her friends in class.
  
- Teachers and other staff are working in teams: all building resources are used.
  - Co-teaching or team teaching is increasingly being used in MMSD. It's also recognized as a more effective way to use school resources. Therapists can also be part of the team: my daughter's SLP has taken the lead for lunch groups and some reading groups in her class. Special education assistants can help with small groups, not just the assigned student.
  - At my daughter's middle school, teams of 3 teachers (two reg. ed./ one special ed. team teach a group of 42-45 students in double classrooms (they can pull a divider to divide up the class for some activities). They also almost always take a student teacher, and often have SLP support in

the room. That means for some hands-on lessons, there may be 5 adults at one time helping students and “floating” to groups of kids.

- IEP meetings include time to reflect on student successes and incorporate student interests and strengths into the present level of performance and into goals.
  - Anyone interested in sample present levels and examples of asset-focused IEPs can email me at [swedeen@waisman.wisc.edu](mailto:swedeen@waisman.wisc.edu) for samples from the wonderful resource, “Creating Collaborative IEPs” developed from Virginia Commonwealth University.
  - Students should have some time during the meeting to talk about their interests, favorites (favorite subject/activities/friends at school), least favorites, what would help them learn. For instance, my daughter likes working in small groups better than lectures and large group activities. She also wants larger print (14 pt. type) and will ask for it if simplified reading assignments are too small.
  - Even young kids (7-8-9) can come to the IEP for 5 minutes, say hi or acknowledge the people there; be told the meeting is to plan their next school year; and to share some of their work (drawings, written work, etc.) Keep a portfolio of work that comes home throughout the year for your records and the IEP meeting.
  
- Students at the school feel they are part of a community.
  - In order to learn, any child needs to feel they belong. Encouraging school staff to have your child participating across lessons and in all aspects of school life (sitting with other kids at lunch; playing with them at recess; engaged in extra-curriculars) helps them feel they are part of the community. When students are ignored or not involved day-to-day, both they and their peers pick up messages about who is valued and who isn't; who is expected to do well and who isn't; who can participate and who can't.
  
- Supports to individual students are provided by classmates as well as by staff.
  - THE most under-utilized natural resource in any school is other students. Staff wouldn't feel they had to “do it all” if students were more involved in cooperative learning and helping each other.
  - Last year, my 7<sup>th</sup> grader at the time had trouble getting to different parts of the building on time. She was assigned a peer with a stop watch (a “coach”) to get her there in 60 seconds or less. He had a leadership role (was a kid who struggled with behaviors) and she had the natural support she needed so staff didn't have to get involved.
  - Peers can check each other's work, coach kids or help them practice; assist with opening containers or sticking straws in milk bags at lunch; help a child onto a school bus...the list is endless. Kids want to help and many enjoy being in a leadership role. Suggest ideas if school staff don't think of them.