**When Inclusion is Beneficial for Students with Learning Disabilities**

**Introduction**

The issue of inclusion for students with special needs has been a continuing debate with advocates for it, against it, and the rest somewhere in between. No two special needs students are alike, which adds to the difficulty of structuring a successful program. The program requires the special needs teachers and general education teachers to restructure their classroom to provide accommodations among the teachers, students, parents, and the learning institution. The term inclusion is an anomaly of its own. The questions range from what does inclusion mean to whether inclusion of special needs students should be full-time or part-time. Implementing a legal structure to educate children with disabilities is one of the first steps for determining the proper placement regarding inclusion for special needs students. Special needs students should be included in inclusionary courses based on their skills; particularly those courses that are interactive. Inclusionary courses, when implemented properly, facilitates in enhancing the special needs students’ social skills, their learning ability and brings awareness to the general education population.

**Defining Inclusion Courses**

Inclusion is the relationship between two classes that exists when all members of the first are also members of the second. On a narrower level, inclusion or mainstreaming is the act or practice of including students with disabilities in general education classes. The main issue is how this act of inclusion can successfully be accomplished. Special needs students are students with limited abilities, (e.g. speech, cognitive, physical, etc.) however, each student is also unique. Special needs students should be included in courses that match their strengths. If an autistic
student is particularly good in math and can successfully compete with general education
students in this department, there is no reason for the student to be in a self-contained classroom
for this subject area. If this same student, however, struggles in every other subject area, a
special education or resource classroom will be more conducive to his learning needs. Special
needs students should be placed in the least restrictive environment possible.

**Determining the Appropriate Environment**

There are various arguments regarding whether inclusive classes for special education
students should be full time, part time, or not offered at all. Inclusion classes should be based on
the ability for that student to succeed in the course. Some parents of special needs students are
uncomfortable with the idea of isolating the student from the general population. Sometimes
parents are in denial about the students’ academic capabilities and focus solely on the student not
appearing “different.” Full-time academic inclusion is not always the best approach for a special
needs student and self-contained classes are not necessarily insufficient. The best plan for a
student with special needs is generally somewhere in the middle. Part-time inclusion for
students with special needs tends to be the appropriate approach for the issue. Part-time
inclusion works best when the student is placed in an inclusionary course based on the students
strongest course area. Some believe that a student with special needs should be placed in classes
with students without disabilities regardless of the special needs students capabilities because
being around students without disabilities will help the student develop. What tends to happen is
quite the opposite. When students with special needs are inappropriately placed in a general
education class they are unable to keep up with the assignments, be an active participant in class,
can be disruptive and suffer in a reduction of self-esteem. The assistance of an aid or
supplemental support may not be enough support in this instance. There are various tools that
are used to guide special needs students and successfully place them in the appropriate learning program.

The Legal Structure

The implementation of a legal structure is necessary to educate students with educational needs. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) provides for a “free, appropriate public education” (FAPE) and related services necessary to help children with disabilities benefit from the special education programs in school.¹ IDEA states that special needs students are to be placed in the least restrictive environment possible. Every child is different therefore a special needs program has to be able to identify these differences to place special needs students in the proper learning environment. The purposes of the IDEA include: 1) ensuring that every disabled child has available to them a FAPE emphasizing special education and related services “designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living”; 2) protecting the rights of disabled children and the rights of their parents; 3) assisting state, local, and federal educational agencies with providing education to all disabled children; 4) ensuring “that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities”; and 5) assessing and ensuring “the effectiveness of, efforts to educate children with disabilities.”² One of the tools used to improve educational results for children with disabilities are Individualized Learning Plans (IEP). An IEP is a written statement for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting.³ These plans set goals for the student each year and are developed by an assessment in conjunction with the efforts of the special needs teacher, the parents and the administration. At the end of the year another

¹ Melisa C. George, A New Idea: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act After the 1997 Amendments, 23 Law & Psychol. Rev. 91, 93 (WestlawNext, 1999)
² Id.
meeting takes place with the same figures and sometimes the student to evaluate and determine whether the student met their goals for the year. Modifications are implemented as necessary. The IEP plays an important role when it comes to inclusion.

**The Cons of Inclusion Courses**

Inclusion becomes problematic when special needs students are placed in a general education classroom in an inappropriate subject area. In my experience as a Special Education Classroom Assistant working with students with autism, science and physical education were most conducive to inclusionary learning. These classes take a hands-on approach and are interactive. The courses may differ for different students but the important aspect is finding what works. For this to happen, special needs teachers must first discover where each of their students are academically.

Inclusive courses are not necessarily beneficial to special needs students. In *Roncker v. Walter*, the Sixth Circuit established an influential test that requires the school district to justify any decision not to mainstream a student by affirmatively demonstrating that the benefits of mainstreaming for the child are “marginal” and are “far outweighed by the benefit gained from services which could not be feasibly provided in the nonsegregated setting.”⁴ Students must be able to learn in this environment for it be successful; simply being in a class with regular students is not sufficient. For example, one student I worked with was excellent at math. At the beginning of the school year his IEP included him in general education math and science classes. The student was more than capable of executing the material in his math class, however, he was not able to keep up in the class itself. His class participation was nonexistent, he was unable to follow the teachers instructions, and his episodes of random outbursts disrupted the other students. I would accompany this particular student to his math class and found myself

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reteaching the material while in the class because the student was unable to follow. I found this aspect personally frustrating because I was unable to give him the proper guidance without disturbing the other students. The student was at a disadvantage because he was not able to engage with the instructor or students. He was isolated in his “inclusive” math course. In *Sacramento City Unified School District, Board of Education v. Rachel H.*, they looked at two aspects to determine the effect that a special needs student has on others in her regular classroom: (1) whether there was detriment because the child was disruptive, distracting or unruly, and (2) whether the child would take up so much of the teacher’s time that the other students would suffer from lack of attention. The special education teacher and myself discussed these issues and came to the realization that the student was losing more than he gained. We decided, along with his parents and the principal, to have the student continue doing the same work as the general children but instead of going to the general classroom he remained in the autism room for that subject matter. This way, he was able to receive the assistance and the focus he needed.

**The Pros of Inclusion Courses**

The appropriate inclusive courses can help develop the social skills of special needs students. The social benefits of inclusion, and the opportunities inclusive classrooms provide for these interactions, include not only direct social skills and outcomes (such as pragmatic language development, a sense of belonging, and friendships), but also more indirect outcomes such as happiness, self-concept development, and positive behavioral changes. I have also witnessed

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special needs students included in proper inclusion courses gain a higher level of confidence. In contrast to the math class, the same student participated in an inclusionary science course. This class was group oriented and practiced a hands-on approach. The teacher gave the instructions but the students assisted each other. The projects required the students to form groups, problem-solve, and design and build structures. In this setting, the general students were enthusiastic to help the special needs student and the latter was more than receptive. Children learn by being together in a stimulating environment. They talk more, laugh more, and feel like they are a part of something important. In Sacramento v. Board of Education, the court found evidence that the non-academic benefits indicated development in social communications skills as well as self-confidence from placement in a regular class.\(^7\) In his science class, this student was not only learning but developing relationships outside of his comfort zone and taking steps to becoming integrated among the student body of his peers.

Adequate inclusive courses for special needs students can improve their learning skills. The way that children learn are shaped by how conducive their environment is to the learning process. However, not all general education teacher’s understand what it takes to instruct a special needs student. Some feel that they will have to make extreme modifications to their lesson plans, or slow down the pace of the class to properly teach special needs students. In Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education, the Fifth Circuit created a test as equally influential as the one established in Walter, that analyzes first whether education can be achieved in the regular classroom with the help of supplemental services.\(^8\) Even if a child cannot fully be integrated into the regular classroom, the district still must include the child in that classroom “to the maximum

\(^8\) Kaufman and Kaufman, *Education Law, Policy and Practice*, 745.
Some feel that inclusion of special education students into regular classes comes at the expense of the other students’ education. In addition, the school administration does not always have the best attitudes when it comes to the education of students with special needs. Some do not think that inclusion is worth the time or resources. There are general education teachers and administrators alike who do not believe that much learning takes place in the special education classroom and that special needs students cannot possibly learn in a general education classroom. To address these concerns, school leaders have to put in the adequate time and effort to implement a program that the staff and students are comfortable with. Special education teachers need to learn how to interact and teach students with special needs. General education teachers would also need some sort of training to better help them receive the special needs children into their classrooms. General education teachers required to receive special needs students in their classroom need to be included in the progress of the special needs student. This way, they can see how the student grows overtime in their classroom to get a better understanding of the impact an appropriate inclusion class can have on a special needs student. Once the general education teachers, the special education teachers and the administration are working together with a clear and concise plan, the classrooms will become a conducive learning environment that the students need to excel.

**Who Else can Benefit from Inclusion Courses?**

Special needs students are not the only participants who can benefit from appropriate inclusion. General education students can also benefit from the inclusion of special needs students. General education students become more aware of students with disabilities in ways that would otherwise go ignored. Inclusion can teach children how to become more sensitive and compassionate to others who are different from them. In school, students are taught to

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9 Id.
become well-rounded, law abiding citizens. They learn about different cultures and languages. People with disabilities are another aspect to our culture. The concept that all people have strengths and weaknesses, can both teach and learn, and have value, may increase students’ acceptance of their own abilities and difficulties, and increase their tolerance of diversity.\(^{10}\)

When children can learn at a young age how to accept other children with disabilities in the school environment, that understanding can translate to the outside world as well. When special needs children are kept completely separate from the rest of the student body the underlying message is that people with disabilities are outsiders. Effects on students' social skills have been found to include improved attitudes towards peers with disabilities; more sophisticated and improved interpersonal skills in social interactions with a diverse population; and increases in intrapersonal skills such as maturity, self-confidence, and self-esteem.\(^{11}\) I have worked with severe and profound high school students where inclusion was not an option for them. There are many reasons that can easily justify why these students should be kept separate from the other students. This particular high school, however, connected the general education students to the special needs students through a buddy system. Each special needs student was placed with a general education student who would come to the room during their break and interact with their buddy. They would take them to gym and help them with their activities. Over my time there I watched the bonds between these students grow from moderate reservations to genuine appreciation for each other. Most of the special needs students were unable to talk and express how they felt but it was evident in the smiles on their faces when they saw their buddy enter the room and the hugs that ensued when they left. General education students went from staring at

\(^{10}\) Jennifer Katz and Pat Mirenda, INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS: SOCIAL BENEFITS, International Journal of Special Education 2002, Vol 17, No.2. University of British Columbia, 32

\(^{11}\) Id.
the special needs students as they walked or rolled down the hall to greeting them, holding their hand to help them walk, and pushing their wheelchair. Inclusive classrooms provide students with developmental disabilities with greater opportunities to interact with peers without disabilities. Many self-contained classrooms, however, also provide structured opportunities to interact with peers without disabilities, and also arrange for partial integration into typical activities/classrooms. Schools shape the leaders of the future and schools that can assimilate special needs children in courses with regular students whenever possible will provide benefits with lasting effects that only time will reveal.

**Conclusion**

There are many varying views on the subject of inclusion for special needs students. There are also various ways that students with disabilities can be included with the general population. What is certain is that students with disabilities need to be assimilated in some way with general students because the benefits are numerous and life-changing. Full-time inclusion courses for students with special needs are not beneficial if the student struggles in particular courses. The most successful courses are the one’s where special needs students academically perform the strongest. The inclusive courses that are interactive and based on a hands-on approach are more conducive to a successful integration into regular courses for special needs students.

The benefits of inclusion are not only for the student with a disability but also for those without one. Inclusion teaches general education students to appreciate and understand others.

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13 Id.

14 One European study found that typical students who were educated in inclusive classrooms were more likely to enter the helping professions (e.g., social work, teaching, medicine) than were those who did not have this type of school experience. Katz and Mirenda,
who are different from them. When a special needs student is improperly placed in a regular class this message is lost. An example of that problem looks like this: The special needs student walks in his math class along with his supplements and his personal aid. They sit in the back of the class so as not to disturb the other students when the personal aid has to reexplain the information the teacher just taught. The special needs student works diligently, yet alone. When the teacher calls on him with a feeble attempt to include him in the class discussion, he becomes embarrassed and says something seemingly comical instead. The students laugh, not with him but at him. The teacher moves on. The bell rings, the student collects his belongings and follows his personal aid back to the special education classroom. No real inclusion has taken place in this scenario and is too often the reality when a special needs student is improperly placed in a general education classroom.

The goal of inclusion is ultimately assimilation. To bring two separate sides together and make them as one. In an interactive setting the special needs student talks and problem solves with general education students. The general education students are then able to identify the special needs students as children who might not be able to do everything they can but are nonetheless important, integral members of the student body. Classes such as music, art and physical education are usually the primary course for inclusion. This is because such courses require the students to communicate with each other and the classes are physical in nature which increases the chance of personal contact. On the other hand, these classes are not the only ones that can achieve this goal. Any course in which the special needs student is able to do the work and is interactive will prove beneficial to the student.

When general education teachers are properly trained on how to run a successful inclusion class, the majority of the hesitation and resistance that is prominent with general
education teachers will dissipate. When everyone is properly informed, (parents, teachers, administration, etc.) on the inclusion process and the special needs student are properly evaluated, the program will benefit everyone involved. Part-time inclusion in regular classes for students with disabilities based on the students ability to succeed in the particular class is the appropriate approach to the inclusion issue.