

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: Good for Communities

National Institute for Urban School Improvement

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> *Regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all* (Salamanca Statement, 1994).[1]

The National Institute for Urban School Improvement knows that inclusive schools are good for communities, and we've seen strong evidence to support this. Like those at Salamanca, we believe the following:

- Every child has a fundamental right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning.
- Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs.
- Education systems should be designed and educational programs implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs.
- Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools, which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs.

Inclusive schools are inclusive of everybody—each and every child and youth in the community:

> *Inclusive schools accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups. Inclusive schools are those that celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs. Inclusive schools include everybody* (Salamanca Statement 1994).

[1] In the summer of 1994, more than 300 people, representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations, met in Salamanca, Spain, to discuss inclusive education. Organized by the government of Spain in cooperation with UNESCO, conference attendees adopted the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy, and Practice in Special Needs Education, as well as a Framework for Action.

We must "reinvent schools to be more accommodating to all dimensions of human diversity" (Ferguson, 1995). We can no longer say that inclusion "works" only for some children. We must work together with a common vision to achieve the outcomes we desire for *all* children and, by extension, our world. Martha Minow (1990) explains why any other course of action is unacceptable:

> *When we identify one thing as unlike the others, we are dividing the world; we use our language to exclude, to distinguish—to discriminate . . . Classifications express and implement prejudice, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, [and] intolerance for difference (p.3).*

In order for schools to serve as models for a more unified world, inclusive schools must use language and practices that encourage children to honor and respect the diversity in their school communities, which reflects that of the surrounding community. They must also get results.

> *. . . Every child, youth, and adult should be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs, including both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work with dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning* (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

Communities Are Good for Schools

Inclusive schools don't just happen. The creation and nurturing of an inclusive school requires commitment to a vision and the cooperation of many. There is no question about the value of

> *Communities are better models than schools. [Communities] value the differences in individuals. [Such valuing] dispels the lack of familiarity and the perception of the need for expertise when interacting with those whose needs are different. Then people will see the value of diversity. People need exposure to differences, which is why inclusive environments are*

community participation in the work of schools. Inclusive schools depend on the commitment and goodwill of the individuals in society whom they involve in their decision-making and support of students. Inclusion, then, is not just "a set of strategies or a placement issue. Inclusion is about belonging to a community—a group of friends, a school community, or a neighborhood" (Allan & Schwartz, 2001, p. 4).

Just as the community contributes to the schools, so do inclusive schools contribute to the community.

What do we mean by "community"? Is community simply “a group of people living in the same locality”? Is it “a group of people with common characteristics or interests living together within a larger society”? Is it “society at large”? or “persons or nations linked by common policy or having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests (e.g., the international community)”? What about “sharing, participation, and fellowship?” The American Heritage Dictionary (1993) offers all of these definitions. Taken together, they begin to capture the notion of *inclusive communities*–in schools; in our local towns, cities, and neighborhoods; in our nation; and in our world.

Inclusion Is Good for School Communities

School communities include all of the students, teachers, parents and family members, administrators, support people, and others who collaborate, cooperate, or contribute in any way to furthering the vision and mission of the school. The diversity in schools today reflects the diversity in our society and in the global community. Each day offers each member of a school community new opportunities to increase their understanding of the issues related to the diversity to which they contribute.

Inclusive schools are the perfect setting for school community members to not only better understand these issues, but also learn new attitudes and values for interacting with others, whether they are *different* or *similar*. Inclusive schools are good for school communities for a variety of reasons:

- Inclusive schools help change discriminatory attitudes and fear of difference by teaching students and adults to value, accept, and understand human diversity and difference, rather than try to change it.

> *These schools operate on the assumption that human differences are normal and that learning must be adapted to the needs of the child, rather than the child fitted to predetermined assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the learning process* (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

- Inclusive schools encourage achievement and success by demonstrating that all children can succeed if given the appropriate supports. In inclusive schools, students receive the support they need to be successful. Focusing on supporting learning encourages a shift from viewing difference or disability as individual limitations to a focus on how environments constrain and limit learning. A focus on learning supports can lead schools and districts in providing a wide range and variety of supports and services, rather than a continuum of segregated placements. A focus on learning supports also teaches members of the school community that barriers to learning and achievement are not "problems" in children that need to be "fixed."
- Inclusive schools provide learning environments characterized by compassion, equity, social justice, cooperation, unity, and acceptance. Children and adults who learn and work in such environments benefit from the positive and nurturing

atmosphere that values social relationships and a sense of working toward the common good.

- Inclusive schools add to the professional knowledge base. Inclusive practices require new and more flexible ways to assess learning, design curriculum, and teach in order to accommodate and benefit all learners. Professional knowledge emerging from the work of people in schools also supports the ongoing learning of professionals in school communities.
- Inclusive practices minimize the stigma and failure frequently associated with difference and segregation by using student-centered pedagogy and curricula that benefit each student.
- Inclusive schools provide an opportunity for all members of the school community to contribute their unique talents and abilities in a collaborative effort where all can be successful learners, participants, and members.
- Inclusive schools use a student-centered pedagogy that is beneficial to all students and, as a consequence, to society as a whole. Experience tells us that a student focus reduces drop-out rates and grade repetition—so much a part of many education systems—while ensuring higher average levels of achievement.

> *A child-centered pedagogy can help to avoid the waste of resources and the shattering of hopes that is all too frequently a consequence of poor quality instruction and a 'one size fits all' mentality toward education* (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

Inclusive Schools Are Good for Local, State, and National Communities

We've described how inclusive schools rely on community partnerships to achieve learning for all students. This relationship is also reciprocal. Both communities are in the

immediate area and communities defined by town, city, state, and national boundaries benefit from the work of inclusive schools:

- Inclusive schools create people-oriented societies that respect the differences and dignity of all human beings. Everyone who encounters inclusive practices in schools has an opportunity to learn and to carry the message of inclusion into the larger community, making it the norm and communicating the expectation that people will work hard to recognize, honor, and find common cause for action in their differences.

> *Schools are the foundation of how society interacts. Kids spend most of their time in school, providing them with a foundation for how to treat others. If children are taught in inclusive schools, once they enter the community they will be more aware and appreciative of differences in others. This will also directly influence parents and families of children in school.* –A parent

- Inclusive schools further the cause of social justice locally and nationally by demonstrating and practicing the belief that all children have a right to membership in the school community and to develop their potential through equal access to education and other services, regardless of their abilities and needs.
- Inclusive schools produce students who are better educated and better able to participate in and contribute to their communities and to society. As workers, they will take their place in a society where more organizations:

  > *. . . strive to achieve a critical mass of employees with different perspectives. A diverse workforce will enrich problem solving and embody different approaches to work. The end result will be a more productive and creative institution. These organizations must have a well-articulated, widely understood, and inclusive mission, and the leadership and management must model and reward inclusive behaviors* (Inclusion Press International).

- Inclusive schools develop adults that honor diversity, value difference, and recognize the gifts and contributions of all. The children of today will be the employers, employees, doctors, teachers, and policymakers of tomorrow. Children who learn with others who are different expect diversity and will use it to the benefit of their communities.
- Inclusive schools value and practice equity and equal opportunity, involving and teaching community partners the following:

  > *. . . that members of a community . . . look for ways to focus on promoting one another's gifts and capacities in the service of justice. They support, and often must endure, one another's weaknesses by learning ways to forgive, to reconcile, and to rediscover a shared purpose* (Inclusion Press International).

- Inclusive schools build bridges and relationships between diverse groups in the school and their community partners. From such alliances develop friendships and other relationships that are characterized by respect and caring. This sharing, participation, and fellowship creates a sense of unity, a sense of "us," and a group identity.

> *Kids and parents are what make up communities, and so how things happen in schools moves into the community.*
> –A parent

- Inclusive schools provide a variety of supports to families and community members. From classes on parenting, technology, and leadership to links with medical, mental health, and other social support services, inclusive schools provide an important service to many.

Inclusive Schools Are Good for the Global Community

No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive.

– Mahatma Ghandi

Thanks to technologies like the Internet and e-mail, connections between an ever-increasing number of people and countries are growing more rapidly than ever. With the world at our fingertips, even those who may not be eager to travel from one place to another can virtually visit other locations almost anywhere in the world. Yet, such connections can still exclude and isolate:

> *Naming differences to distinguish people isolates those who do the naming as well, and naming differences may deny the humanity of those who seem different* (Minow, 1990, p. 10).

Today's students will be the presidents, kings, prime ministers, and legislators of tomorrow. They will be the next researchers, university professors, and participants in conferences, like the one in Salamanca. They will inherit the legacy of our present work, and they will create the policies and legislation for the next generation. They will have to end the wars and international disputes begun before their time.

Inclusive schools are good for the global community because their graduates will be the best prepared to deal with our future global issues. In the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks in the United States, it is readily apparent that the world's citizens must be able to dialogue with nations and cultures very different from their own. Inclusive schools contribute to the global community by providing an environment that is more culturally diverse, promising that future generations will live in a safer, healthier, more prosperous, and more environmentally sound world which will result

Inclusive schools are learning laboratories for how to have inclusive communities. There would be an expectation of diversity in the community, and people would ask, Why aren't people with disabilities here? The classmates of students with disabilities who were used to having other kids with disabilities engaged in school activities would wonder where are the people with disabilities in our community? –A parent

in social, economic, and cultural progress, tolerance, and international cooperation.

> *The future is not fated, but will be fashioned by our values, thoughts, and actions* (Salamanca Statement, 1994)**.**

Education is the foundation on which individuals and countries will build their futures. This work calls on each of us to discover and contribute our gifts to create a world that values social justice for all people through how we educate one another and how we care for one another's health, welfare, and opportunities for growth.

[Governments must] *give the highest law, policy, and budgetary priority to improve their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties, and to adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education* (Salamanca Statement, 1994).

We each have a responsibility to respect and promote the education of others, to further the cause of social justice, to achieve environmental protection, and to be tolerant of social, political, and religious systems that differ from our own. We each must ensure that commonly accepted humanistic values and rights are upheld. We each must work toward international peace and solidarity in an interdependent world.

Resources and References

Many resources are available for educators and others looking for more specific information, ideas, and strategies about making their practice more inclusive. Here are some suggestions.

Books and Articles

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Videos

The Inclusion Series

This series of eight award-winning videos was created in conjunction with the Illinois State Board of Education's Project Choices. The titles are:

Choices
Families, Friends, Futures
Heather's Story: Highlights
Inclusion High
Inclusion: Issues for Educators
Jackie
Step by Step: Heather's Story
Together We're Better

More information is available on-line at http://www.comforty.com/.

Web Sites

The Inclusion Network
http://www.inclusion.org/

Inclusion Press International Home Page
http://www.inclusion.com

Institute for Community Inclusion
http://web1.tch.harvard.edu/ici/index.html

National Institute for Urban School Improvement
http://www.edc.org/urban/

Renaissance Group Home Page
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