

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: Good for Families

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Abstract

Inclusive schools are good for families in many important ways. In inclusive schools, families are welcomed and respected. The central question addressed in these schools is how best to include learners with special needs, not whether a particular student belongs in the school. Educators in inclusive schools recognize the unique nature of families, including extended family members, and the complex social system in which they are embedded. Families choose inclusive schooling in order to increase their children's access to typically developing peers and to the larger school community. Educators in these schools respect the diverse ways in which families choose to participate, and develop structures that result in effective school and family partnerships.



What We Believe

Our experiences and work with families in diverse urban and suburban settings have strengthened our conviction that inclusive schools are good for children with and without disabilities and their families. Inclusive education is the result of shared beliefs regarding successful academic and social outcomes for all students, as well as the willingness of educational personnel and others to work with families to effect necessary change (Grenot-Scheyer, Fisher, & Staub, 2001). In inclusive schools, families are welcomed, respected, trusted, and heard. We strongly believe that the success of inclusive education resides in the ability of a community and its members to include and engage all members, including families with children who have disabilities, in meaningful and sustainable ways. We have learned much from the families we know regarding why inclusive education is good for families, for it is usually only in families that we observe individuals with disabilities as fully functioning and appreciated members of a social unit, where they are completely included without regard for ability or experience. Julie's son Victor, now 18, has always been included in family activities. As Julie says, "He's just Little Vic, and everyone knows that." Vic is included in all family activities and has cousins to support him who are around all the time. Whether the family is attending church, the local carnival, or just hanging out in the front yard, Vic is considered an integral and important member of the family. Families have shown us how to fully include their sons and daughters in their lives, and these are important lessons for educators to reflect on as they consider the development and implementation of inclusive schools.

Just as we believe inclusive schooling is good for all children and their families, we believe that inclusive schooling should be as easy to attain as are the separate educational options typically offered to families. The process of obtaining inclusive education suggests that, for many families, it is an "upward battle" (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). Legislative mandates and empirical evidence indicate that the amount of effort necessary for inclusive schooling should not be greater than for any other educational placement. But families continue to report on the rigorous and time-consuming process that leaves many of them "spent" (Grenot-Scheyer, Fisher, & Staub, 2001). In inclusive schools, where all children and families are valued members of the

school community, the central questions revolve around *how* to ensure that a child's special needs can be supported. These questions take precedence over whether this community is the right place for the child.

We know that not all parents choose inclusive education for their children and that current federal law guarantees a full continuum of services and placements. We firmly believe in the integrity of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process, which requires that parents and educators work together to develop an appropriate educational program that will be delivered in the least-restrictive environment. This process is a complicated one, and families are often asked to be patient with schools and the changes that must be made to accommodate all learners. However, families themselves feel a sense of urgency and they cannot be expected to wait for the slow evolvement of service delivery systems. Educational personnel in inclusive schools understand and support these families' needs for things to move more quickly and they collaborate with families in the timely development and implementation of inclusive practices that will benefit students both with and without disabilities.

Educators in inclusive schools recognize the uniqueness and complexity of families. Experiences have shown us that the family unit is a unique social system, embedded in or part of the larger social system of a community. Brofenbrenner's (1979) model of ecological units suggests that the child and his or her nuclear family members (mother, father, and siblings) are at the innermost level. This unit is part of a broader ecological sub-unit consisting of extended family, friends, and other close personal acquaintances. These sub-units are further embedded in even larger social units, including such social organizations as schools, workplaces, and community agencies. The complexity of such systems is beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it to say that it is important that educators view families as unique and as part of a larger social system. Educators in inclusive schools understand that their efforts must sometimes extend beyond the doors of the school building to help transform the environments across all levels, as each of the environments is directly influenced by larger community environments and the systems in which they are embedded.

Educators in inclusive schools also recognize the important contributions that extended family members make to the family unit. Often these extended family members

provide the necessary supports for the individual with disabilities to be fully included in the family and the larger community (Harry, 1998). In inclusive schools, educators depend on strong connections with students and their families that are based on an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of families, including important extended family members.

We have observed children playing in their front yards in the Southwest, visiting the local pool in a northeastern suburb, and attending bible study class in a rural township in the Southeast; in all of these contexts, it appears to us that the child is the family's essential connection to the larger community. Educators in inclusive schools recognize that schools are often the vehicle or means by which families achieve this sense of connection: When the child is included, so is the family. This belief is evident in the reflections of one father we know:

> Attending our neighborhood school has opened the door, allowing our family to be a true part of our community through involvement at our neighborhood school. . . . Most importantly, it has given us [a] belief in our child, Blair, that she can accomplish much more for herself . . . if she is allowed the opportunity of being and learning with her typical peers. It has given us hope that Blair can make a difference for the good and contribute to her community (Brown, 1995).

What We Know

What does the research tell us about what parents think of inclusive schools? Generally, parents—particularly those with young children—are supportive of inclusive education, given their experiences with successful models (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). The literature suggests that the impetus for inclusive schools is often related to dissatisfaction with separate options. We know many parents who have worked collaboratively with school districts and many other families who've used due process procedures to move their children from a special day class or separate school to an inclusive educational setting. Families choose inclusive education for a variety of reasons, but primarily they hope, to increase their children's access to typically developing peers and the larger school community. Typically, these are a family's goals:

- Increased opportunities for appropriate role models

- Increased opportunities to develop and practice basic skills such as communication
- Increased opportunities to develop friendships and other social relationships with typically developing peers
- Access to and interactions with the core curriculum
- Opportunities for differentiated instruction

A second and related reason that parents seek inclusive education is seemingly simple, but in reality quite complex. For many families, inclusive education is not only the "right" thing to do, it is also what their children are entitled to. Families want their children to belong to the school and the larger community and they often think of inclusive education as a basic right. case law has helped in this regard, interpreting the least restrictive environment mandate of the original federal legislation and subsequent reauthorization; however, parents continue to face attitudinal and administrative barriers as they seek what they believe is the least-restrictive environment for their children

What We Need to Do

The organization and functioning of schools both directly and more subtly influence how parents and other family members interact with school personnel and the larger community. Epstein's (1992) concept of separate spheres of influence describes the contributions of both parents and teachers within a school community. In this model, families have traditionally expected that educators will teach their children well, and educators have assumed that families will be responsible for providing the necessary basics (food, shelter, care) that allow a child to learn. Our work with families has shown us that these spheres of influence interact and are mediated on a daily basis by the complex internal and external pressures families' face. A traditional model of the roles and responsibilities of families and educators may not be useful, given contemporary conditions in schools. As suggested by Sailor, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Skrtic, and Oas (1996), there is increasing recognition that educators can effectively meet contemporary challenges only by understanding the complexity of family systems and engaging in authentic and meaningful interactions with families. The following example illustrates this point.

One family that Marquita knows was hesitant to allow Alicia their junior-high-age daughter who has significant disabilities, to engage in after-school activities at her school. Alicia's teachers had indicated that she appeared to get along with a group of girls who participated in the after-school newsletter club and suggested to the support teacher that Alicia might like to participate. Alicia's support teacher visited the home and spent time talking with the family about the kinds of social interactions she observed during the day, the goals of the club, and, most importantly, the kinds of skills and experiences that Alicia would have in such a club. During a lengthy conversation, the parents indicated that they were hesitant to allow Alicia to participate because they were concerned about her safety after school. Without probing their reasons, second-guessing the parents, or dismissing their concern, the support teacher asked if Alicia's cousin (who also attended the school) could participate as well. This seemingly simple solution resulted in two things: First, the support teacher heard and responded to the parents' concern, and second, the support teacher recognized the importance of Alicia's extended family and suggested a support that was comfortable for all of them.

Personnel in inclusive schools not only interact in meaningful ways with families, but have also developed innovative ways to engage all families. As mothers, sisters, and aunts, we have experienced a wide variety of schools, these experiences reflect what many families experience and help to inform our understanding of schools. In inclusive schools, educators develop structures that result in effective school and family partnerships that connect families and schools and ultimately help all children learn and achieve. While many school-based programs for collaborating with families are based on the needs of middle and upper-income families, educators in inclusive schools embrace *all* families and use strategies that assist families of *all* means in their involvement with the school such as the following (Jones, Garlow, Turnbull, & Barber, 1996; Salend & Taylor, 1993):

- Advocating for families within both the educational system and other systems
- Being a liaison between the families and service systems
- Giving families information so that they can make informed choices
- Using language that is free of educational jargon (e.g., no acronyms)

- Arranging for transportation for family members for school meetings and activities
- Conducting activities and meetings at locations within the community
- Arranging for child care alternatives
- Providing activities so that children are not separated from their parents during meetings
- Designing activities based on parent interest and need
- Meeting with parents at times that are convenient for them, such as evenings, weekends, or mornings
- Providing translators for families as necessary

Educators in inclusive schools also honor and provide for different ways for families to be involved in schools and the larger community. These educators respect the diverse ways in which families choose to participate in the activities of the school; they value these choices and work with families to help them understand the important role they can play in traditional school activities. Epstein (1995), a leading researcher in school and family partnerships, identifies six ways that parents can be involved in the life of the schools:

- Parenting: Parents can provide home conditions for learning.
- Communicating: Parents can provide home-to-school communication in their responses to school-to-home communication (such as memos, notices, newsletters, report cards, conferences, and phone calls) and information (about the school, courses, programs, and activities), making a two-way channel for interaction and exchange
- Volunteering: Parents can volunteer their time and talents for classroom and school activities
- Learning at home: Parents can help their children with homework, encourage children to set educational goals, and supplement the instruction received at school.

- Decision-making: Parents can participate in school councils, governance and management teams, and committees on, for example, policy, leadership, and advocacy
- Collaborating with the community: Parents can encourage partnerships with community resources and services to improve outcomes for students.

In inclusive schools, educators create a climate where families are welcomed and regarded as partners in learning, and encouraged to participate in the school through activities that correlate with their comfort level and availability. Parents are recognized as unique individuals who have different contributions they would like and are able to make. Each type of involvement is valuable and contributes to children's educational success. We end this article with an example from Dee that illustrates how families are involved in the life of one school:

> Personnel in my daughter's school have demonstrated that they know how to engage all families in the activities of the school. The school is organized into "houses." A house is like a "school within a school," with smaller groups of students and teachers. There is a weekly school newsletter, with an editorial written by the principal and a calendar of activities, as well as a weekly classroom newsletter. There is also a weekly assembly. Each house of K–8 graders is responsible for facilitating the assembly each week. Parents are invited to share something that is special for them and their family with the class, whether it is a song, a tradition, a book, or a recipe, at the weekly school assembly.
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> There is a monthly Family Night, consisting of a potluck, a time to socialize with parents of other children, a time to view children's work in progress and/or on display, and a participatory activity (e.g., math games or the use of art to teach math concepts). Participatory activities are usually tied to classroom and curricular activities. These activities are a way to share with parents not only what children are learning, but also how they are learning it and how the games and art activities can be used at home to support student learning.

> Participation at Family Night at my daughter's school consistently approaches 100 percent attendance. Parents who do not typically attend governing board meetings and parent council meetings rarely miss a Family Night gathering at their child's school. By contrast, activities that focus on issues of governance, curriculum, staff hiring, physical plant, and other "internal" school issues sometimes have less attraction for families. I am working with a small group of parents and school personnel to increase families' involvement in more traditional school activities by looking at successful models of parent involvement in schools. I believe it is important to challenge the presumption that "lack of involvement" of families in these areas is based on disinterest or apathy.

Educators in inclusive schools recognize various forms of parental involvement and do not place a higher value on more traditional types of involvement. The lack of involvement from some culturally and linguistically diverse families in school governance activities may not be disinterest or apathy, but rather an indication of the trust they have in an administration that has created an environment where parents are welcomed and where children are learning and growing.

It is important to examine and identify the ways in which different families choose to participate in the activities of the school and to value and respect these choices. It is equally important to support families in understanding the significant role they have in the continued success of the school by participating in school governance activities. It is often those relational activities—e.g., Family Night and weekly assembly—that are most attractive to families who do not participate in the governance activities of the school. This raises some questions for us: Are these activities more attractive because of the sense of extended family they create, or because they create a "community within the community," resulting in support networks that might not otherwise have been developed? What can we learn from activities like these that can be incorporated into traditional governance structures, allowing the diverse perspectives of these families to enrich the school to an even greater degree, resulting in stronger school and family partnerships? We continue to seek answers to these questions.

Conclusion

Inclusive schools *are* good for children and their families. Educators in inclusive schools recognize the unique contributions of all families and establish partnerships that support connections and result in effective collaboration. This ultimately increases the family's role in decision-making and governance in schools.

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