

MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

National Institute for Urban School Improvement

1. Misperception: Inclusion is just an excuse for dumping students in general education classrooms.

The National Institute for Urban School Improvement believes that inclusion is not a project of "good will"—a debate about where students with disabilities will be educated, or about dumping students into general education classroom. Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students, with and without disabilities, with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement. Contrary to dumping, inclusion is about making sure that each and every student feels welcome and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued. In order to do this, both general and special educators must take part in teaching and curriculum planning. Inclusion is about recognizing that the diverse needs of students are better met when teaching is tailored to their individual abilities and interests and this is

done best when special and general educators work together to that end. Each of these professionals brings talents, skills, and expertise to the table that all children can benefit from and need.

2. Misperception: Inclusion means that students who need and require special education supports and services won't get them.

Not true. Inclusion requires teachers to provide appropriate individualized supports and services to ***all*** students without the stigmatization that comes with separation. Children learn in lots of different places and in lots of different ways. Inclusive schools are flexible in that they allow teachers and students to access the supports and services they need, when and where they need them. Innovative scheduling, collaborating with families, agencies and community members, and teaming are just some of the ways that schools can accommodate the diverse needs of students and make sure that students with disabilities are provided the supports and services they are mandated to receive under the law and need to achieve to state and district standards.

3. Misperception: Inclusion means that students must spend full time–every minute–in general education classrooms.

Not true for any student. Inclusive practices include students as members of the classroom and school, but *membership* is about relationships and learning. Not about place. Every student deserves to learn in lots of different places. Classrooms are one, but so are hallways, computer labs, libraries, cafeterias, playgrounds, sports arenas, and all the neighborhood places that are meaningful and important. Where students are is less important than that they learn, along with their peers, the kinds of things that the community believes all students should learn. Any student needs time and space to do this well—sometimes with the whole classroom group and sometimes with small groups or even one-to-one.

4. Misperception: Students with disabilities in general education classrooms are shunned and mistreated by their classmates.

Research shows that, on the contrary, typical children and children with disabilities in inclusive settings frequently build long-lasting and meaningful friendships with each other. From their friendships with their peers with disabilities, typical students are able to "see diversity as the new reality," a principle that the National Institute believes essential for inclusive schools. Students become more comfortable with and less fearful about people that are different, which helps them get to know students with disabilities in more reciprocal, respectful, and thoughtful ways. Inclusive classrooms become places where students with and without disabilities are treated

kindly, compassionately, and fairly. Of course, teasing—even unkind and hurtful teasing—will always occur among children and youth. But in inclusive settings, students with disabilities experience no more, and sometimes no less, than other of their nondisabled peers.

5. Misperception: Classroom teachers don't know how to teach students with disabilities, and fear lawsuits if they make a mistake or the student doesn't learn.

Teachers use curriculum as a vehicle for teaching important life lessons to their students. Some students, including some with disabilities, may learn these lessons more slowly than others. While teachers cannot expect to have an in-depth knowledge of all curricula offered at any and all levels, they must have a deep understanding of the learning characteristics of their students and use instructional strategies designed to meet the diverse learning needs in their classrooms. Students with disabilities present only one kind of diversity, and whether or not a teacher *knows how to teach* these students is not really the issue. Appropriate assessment and other information about how each of her students learns should provide the teacher with the information to design and implement effective programming for all, including those with disabilities. The IEP defines instructional goals and desired outcomes within the curriculum for students with special needs, and also may provide a network of supports and services to the student if appropriate. As long as a teacher continues to try to understand and address the learning needs of struggling students and to accommodate those needs as best she can, the threat of lawsuits is minimal. And even better, even struggling students will continue to learn toward the desired goals and standards set by the community.

6. Misperception: Typical students won't get the attention and support they need from classroom teachers if students with disabilities are also in the classroom. They won't learn what they need to learn.

Ask any teacher today about the students in their classroom and they will tell you that their classrooms are more diverse than ever. This diversity requires educators to find ways to address the needs of students from different races, classes, cultures, family circumstances, **and** ability levels. Contrary to the notion that students without disabilities won't learn what they need to learn in these diverse classrooms, the National Institute believes that

typical students are actually ***more*** likely to meet their learning goals and have their needs met when the following inclusive practices are used:

- Collaborative teaching arrangements. No one teacher can be skillful at teaching so many different students. Teachers need help from their colleagues.
- Individually tailor learning. Teachers use different approaches and strategies that personalize learning according to each person's learning, abilities, needs, styles, purposes, and preferences.
- Ensure that all students get access to knowledge, skills, and information. Such access improves the life chances, available choices and valued contributions of every person.
- Hold high expectations for student success. All students are entitled to high expectations and challenging curriculum that lead to the same broad educational outcomes regardless of their race, class, culture, ability, gender, language, or family circumstances.

7. Misperception: When students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms, all the lessons and learning get reduced to a lower level to accommodate them.

Inclusive classrooms enhance, individualize, and tailor lessons and learning. When educators use these strategies in their lesson planning, there is no need to "water down" the curriculum. Teachers in inclusive classrooms become adept at gathering information about their students and using that information to design curriculum and daily lesson plans that take into account each students' learning goals and needs. While a teacher might be teaching her entire class a history lesson, what she expects each child to learn from that lesson might be quite different. For some students, writing a paragraph may be the goal, and for others it might be writing a research paper, and for others, it might be working in a group on language skills. The important part about the lesson is not that everyone learns the same thing, but rather, that each student is challenged and held to high expectations that lead to outcomes appropriate to their learning goals. Students may pursue a common set of curricular goals or learning standards, but may accomplish them in different ways and to different degrees of mastery.

8. Misperception: Students with disabilities need to develop relationships with others with the same or similar disabilities. In general education classrooms they are cut off from developing these relationships.

The assumption here is that all people with disabilities are so alike and have so much in common, simply by virtue of having a disability, that a friendship between them is natural. We, at the National Institute, believe that people with disabilities have personalities and personal characteristics that are as widely varied as people without disabilities. Disability may be something that friends have in common, but can and should that criterion be the whole basis for a friendship? While it is important that students with disabilities have the opportunity to choose to have relationships with other students with disabilities, it is also very important that they have the opportunity to build friendships with their non-disabled peers. In an inclusive classroom, students have the opportunity to do both.

9. Misperception: Inclusive schools are a good idea, but not realistic. Teaching diverse groups of students is too hard for teachers and administrators.

It's true that teaching diverse groups of students is hard for some teachers. But it's not the teaching of even very diverse students that most teachers find difficult. It's large class size, minimal support, and limited resources. It's important not to confuse the issue. Good schools need the resources, capacity, and teacher talents to teach each every student well. Teachers are often the most able to engage this task when given the support, tools, and time to do it well. We think that many, perhaps even most—especially as initial teacher preparation better prepares teachers for diversity in their classrooms—general education teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to successfully teach students with disabilities and other diversities. Some of the other challenges schools face in terms of resources, class size, infrastructure, and bureaucracy all present greater threats to achieving inclusive learning communities.

10. Misperception: Inclusion is too expensive–saves special education dollars.

While some districts with inclusive education programs report higher costs associated with these programs, the final determination of cost effectiveness is not an easy one to make. What we *do* know is that the costs of special education have risen more rapidly than the costs of education as a whole. There is increasing recognition that the way special education is funded can create incentives for developing programs that not only cost more but that

also run counter to "best practice," and in some cases to the letter or the spirit of federal and state law. For example, funding provisions can create incentives for placing special education students in more restrictive settings instead of promoting the least restrictive environment provisions of the IDEA. Many recent analyses of the costs of different models of inclusion and traditional special education programs show lower costs associated with more inclusive models as compared to traditional forms of special education. In many cases, costs have been lowered and funds saved due to the avoidance of more restrictive and costly special education settings and the transportation often required to access more restrictive settings instead of having students attend the nearest school.