All of us involved in education want to do everything we can to enhance children’s chances for success. How do we do this? We do this by increasing all students’ access to meaningful involvement in high-quality education. For students with disabilities, it means ensuring they are included and meaningfully engaged in every aspect of school, community, and life.

Jenny, a 2nd-grader, shared this about her friend Mikey, a student with [unified approach] by Alexa Posny
a disability: “The reason it’s a good idea for kids like Mikey to be with us is because if all kids like Mikey were in the same class, they wouldn’t get to know many people and we wouldn’t get to know anybody like Mikey.” His class echoed this sentiment by adding, “He needs the same things we do—food and comfort, love, friends, a cozy bed to sleep in.”

Most children with disabilities have the capacity to achieve at or exceed the same levels as their peers without disabilities. This means students can be and are successful when included in general education settings, now known as “inclusion.”

Inclusion has had an important impact on the lives of all students. A reflection on the history of special education, the research about it, and current examples of projects that have contributed to creating an inclusive environment for students provides a picture of the inclusion of all students, not just in the classroom but also in extracurricular activities. One such example is Special Olympics Unified Sports®, described later in this article.
**History of Special Education**

It has been just 37 years—from 1975 to the present—since Congress passed the *Education for all Handicapped Children Act* (PL 94-142), which guaranteed for the first time access not only to a public school education for students with disabilities, but also to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). PL 94-142 also guaranteed that a student with a disability would be provided services in what has been referred to as “the least restrictive environment” (LRE). LRE means educating children with disabilities in general education settings to the maximum extent appropriate in order to assure the child receives educational benefits.

Prior to the passage of PL 94-142, over 1 million children with disabilities were denied access to a free and appropriate education, deprived of appropriate educational services, excluded from the public school system, educated separately from their typically developing peers, or undiagnosed as having disabilities. Also, few educational resources were channeled into programs that supported students with disabilities. Today, there are more than 6.6 million students with disabilities who are not only in the public schools, but also are included in general education settings.

Thirty years after its passage, PL 94-142, now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004), has been reauthorized four times. A major premise of this most recent reauthorization was that:

“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.”

This premise ensures that everyone concerned about education in this country holds the same high expectations for children and youths with disabilities as we hold for all children and youths.

The idea of being “meaningfully included” has changed significantly over the past three decades. In 1975, teachers were trained and hired to educate students in specific disability categories. Students were not referred, evaluated, or provided special education and related services until they were already failing in the general education classroom. Once identified and determined to be eligible for special education services, students with disabilities were often taught in segregated classrooms or were pulled out of the general education classroom for part of the day and taught a different and separate curriculum. When students were included, they would interact with their typically developing peers only during lunch, recess, physical education, music, or art classes. This was referred to as “mainstreaming” and was an important—yet insufficient—evolutionary step toward inclusion.

**Special Education Today**

Where are we today? Students with disabilities are spending the majority of their school day in the general education classroom. Consider this: Approximately 60 percent of students with disabilities are in general education classrooms for at least 80 percent of the day, and 95 percent of students with disabilities spend some time in the general education setting. As a result, general educators teach the majority of students with disabilities for at least part of the day.

Today, children identified and eligible for special education and related services are ensured a free and appropriate public education. This includes:

- a continuum of services that include parents and families in the process;
- the same high standards for all students;
- supports and services provided in the LRE, which is the general education classroom, to the maximum extent appropriate;
- teachers working collaboratively and trained to work with any child;
- differentiated instruction; and
- early support to help all students succeed.

We are making progress toward helping students achieve positive results within inclusive settings. To quote Jessica Mausbach, a general education student, “Inclusion means to be included; which is exactly what people with a disability want, to be included. They want to feel like they’re included and are a part of their community, school, and world. Just because someone has a disability doesn’t mean you treat them differently; they want to be treated like everyone else.”
What we know is this: Inclusion benefits both students with disabilities and their typically developing peers, and provides them with opportunities to learn from each other.

**Inclusion**

Based on the law, students with disabilities must have access to education with their general education peers that, to the maximum extent possible, results in educational benefit. In the past, this LRE context was referred to as being mainstreamed, pulled out, pushed in, or included with one’s peers without disabilities. Now, we recognize that inclusion can and does provide benefits for students with and without disabilities. Yet, we must acknowledge that inclusion is not an end-all, be-all solution for the educational challenges of students with disabilities.

The 1990 reauthorization of IDEA stipulates that students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment. A continuum of services—which range from regular classrooms with support, to special classes, to special school placements, as needed—must be made available for students with disabilities to ensure that they are provided with appropriate opportunities to achieve their individualized education program (IEP) goals and learn to their maximum potential. That being said, the research on inclusion indicates that students both with and without disabilities benefit when opportunities are created for them to interact with and learn from one another in a general education setting and when engaged in extracurricular activities.

What does inclusion look like? An inclusive environment provides appropriate supports and services based on effective practices, including:

- using collaborative teaching models;
- providing time for consultation between general and special education teachers;
- promoting university-school partnerships;
- differentiating instruction;
- accessing strong school leadership;
- defining roles clearly for support staff to support inclusion; and
- engaging families in their children’s education at home and school.

When these practices are implemented well, not only do all students benefit, but schools and communities do, as well. For example, school staff experience increased collaboration across general and special education programs, families become acquainted, and families that have children with disabilities are more integrated into the community.

Participation in an inclusive setting brings many important academic, behavioral, and social benefits to students’ lives.

**Academic benefits:** When provided with greater access to the general education curriculum, students with disabilities see increased achievement based on their IEP goals. Students without disabilities also experience greater academic outcomes because they are provided with opportunities to master skills by practicing and teaching them to others.

**Behavioral benefits:** Students with and without disabilities have opportunities to model positive behaviors and engage in positive interactions with one another. In addition, students learn to appreciate and accept individual differences and acquire an increased understanding and acceptance of diversity.

**Social benefits:** Involvement in extracurricular activities has been correlated with social benefits, including increased academic performance and a decreased likelihood of students dropping out of school. It is also tied to positive peer relationships and lower rates of drug use. The amount of time spent in extracurricular activities has been correlated with a lower probability of becoming a teen parent.

The benefits of inclusion are numerous, and involvement in extracurricular activities enriches students’ lives. For example, Alana Nichols, a Paralympic basketball player as well as a skier, was involved in a skiing accident in 2002 that left her paralyzed from the waist down (Paralympics are a counterpart of the Olympic Games designed for athletes who have disabilities). Despite the struggles she faced, Alana did not give up. She was introduced to wheelchair basketball and she thrived on it. She was later reintroduced to skiing and excelled in that, too. While Alana could have seen her accident as a life-ender, she saw it as a life-changer. She became the first American woman to win gold medals in both basketball and skiing, and becoming the first American to win gold medals in both the summer and winter Paralympic Games.
To support inclusion, the U.S. Department of Education awards grants to organizations across the country. One such example of a competitively funded grant is Project UNIFY®, funded by the Department’s Office of Special Education Programs, which provides opportunities for students with and without disabilities.

**Project UNIFY**

Special Olympics Project UNIFY is a project that focuses on social inclusion, a concept that implies a sense of belonging, a feeling that people, other than family and teachers, care about, value, and want to spend time with people with disabilities. As Project UNIFY states, “It is the feeling of being a contributing part of a network of persons whom we know, who know us, and who know each other.”

Project UNIFY was first funded in 2008, and it is a truly collaborative program within school communities that engages young people with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) as leaders. It uses the sports and education initiatives of Special Olympics to promote acceptance and inclusion. Special Olympics is committed to empowering people with ID, both on and off the playing field. Project UNIFY takes a whole-school approach, as it uses sports as its platform to address social inclusion (in addition to academic and physical inclusion) to promote and support academic success and student engagement.

Within four short years, Project UNIFY has engaged over 500,000 youths in 2,100 elementary, middle, and high schools across 42 states. The project raises awareness about students with disabilities by engaging students with ID to get involved in school activities and by providing opportunities for students without ID to work in socially inclusive activities.

A couple of examples, such as Grandview High School in Aurora, CO, highlight the success of this program. Through Project UNIFY, the school’s basketball team and cheerleading squad have become the means to engage all students. Nearly two dozen students with disabilities compete with general education students, called “partner athletes,” in Unified Sports. “Project UNIFY has transformed the culture of this school. It was almost as if these kids weren’t noticed before we began doing this. I don’t think anyone realized how powerful they are,” said Grandview Principal Kurt Wollenweber.

Such a program changes the culture of a school. The interaction of students with and without disabilities supporting each other as part of Unified Sports is what leads to a change in attitude of all students. The results for students with ID include increased confidence, thoughts of not feeling different from other students, and a sense of belonging. The results for students without ID include a better appreciation for students with ID and the ability to see them not only as athletes but also as friends.

Several schools in Georgia are also collaborative partners with Project UNIFY. These schools use sports such as bowling and Partner’s Club activities to encourage interaction between students with and without disabilities. These competitive activities provide opportunities for students to engage with one another, which results in positive social experiences.

“The goal is to have our regular education students and special education students work together on skills,” said Lauren Caldwell, a special education teacher at North Augusta High. “It’s about bringing them together and creating camaraderie, teaching sportsmanship, and building life skills.”

Partner’s Clubs are made up of general education students who teach their peers with disabilities about sportsmanship and the skills needed
for the sports they are playing. They also provide daily encouragement and support. The impact of the club in North Augusta High School has resonated throughout the student body. Caldwell said, “We have so many more students coming and asking our special education students to come and sit with them and their friends during lunch. They are engaging in conversation and including them in activities.”

Project UNIFY takes the goals of Special Olympics and applies them to all students to help them achieve success in extracurricular activities. Project UNIFY not only raises awareness about students with special needs but also provides students with and without disabilities opportunities to interact and learn from one another outside of a typical classroom setting.

**Next Steps**

We need to help reach President Obama’s 2020 goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. This can be accomplished only by ensuring that excellent educational services are available to all students. At the Department, staff know they must help ensure that:

- Early childhood service delivery systems are aligned and providers are highly effective and qualified.
- Teacher training programs are designed to prepare all teachers to teach students with disabilities.
- All students with disabilities have access to differentiated instruction and effective interventions.
- All assessments are accessible by students with disabilities and provide accurate information about what they know and can do.
- Transition services better support students with disabilities’ post-secondary completion and employment.

By focusing on these goals within inclusive settings, we will be better able to help prepare students for success after they leave high school and enter postsecondary educational settings or begin their careers. Research has shown that social skills are paramount to success in postsecondary and employment settings.

Today we educate almost 7 million students with disabilities who are included in general education settings. By promoting educational inclusion along with physical and social inclusion, we can and will create a system that offers the greatest number of students’ opportunities for success as they move beyond secondary education and into college and careers. More research is needed to support the effectiveness of inclusion, as we continue to see its potential for success. Systems, services, and supports need to be put into place to support all teachers and ensure collaboration, and provide students, from an early age, opportunities to demonstrate their skills both within and outside the classroom. President Obama has said, “If you’re walking down the right path and you’re willing to keep walking, eventually you’ll make progress.” We have made progress, yet so much more can be accomplished if we all work collaboratively toward a system that is inclusive of all students.

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**Endnotes**


3Everyone is Included, “Inclusion ’10: Everyone is Included All People All Ways,” http://www.everyonesincluded.us/inclusionquotes10.html.


6Ibid.


8Ibid.

9Ibid.