SOCIAL INCLUSION
What It Is and Why It’s Important?
In the United States, we have identified, implemented, and sustained physical school environments that allow all students equitable access to all facilities, services, and activities. In addition, we understand how to create academic school settings in which all staff and students must incorporate effective teaching and learning practices that nurture inclusive opportunities throughout the school. Using strategies such as co-teaching and differentiated instruction, schools can broaden the learning opportunities that address the needs of a wide range of learners.

Each of these components is necessary in fostering the development of social relationships that are inclusive across the student population. The third component is social inclusion, which relies on students having frequent opportunities to interact with a broad range of peers in a variety of settings within and outside the classroom setting. Unless students have both structured and unstructured opportunities within which to cultivate diverse peer relationships, the social setting will always remain an exclusive environment.

Students with disabilities, who participated with their non-disabled partners in a listening session conducted for the federal government’s Interagency Working Group effort to develop a national Strategic Plan to Improve Outcomes for All Youth, suggested the need for social inclusion when it asked, “What would be the most important thing that could happen in school that could make things better for young people?” The Working Group

What would be the most important thing that could happen in school that could make things better for young people (i.e., someone like you)?

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- Give youth with disabilities time and opportunities to find things they love doing.
- Provide opportunities for youth to engage in the arts so they can express themselves and have something to look forward to.
- Provide mentors, tutors, and coaches to help youth with disabilities participate and do well in school.
- Provide more opportunities for youth with and without disabilities to interact with one another.
- Involve more people in Special Olympics, and align Special Olympics sports with school sports to build shared activities among students with and without disabilities.
responded with a set of recommendations that can, if operationalized, drive policy:

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Inclusive schools, according to the Inclusive Schools Network, are built on the strong philosophical belief that all children can learn and be successful within a shared academic environment. Culturally and linguistically responsive educational strategies, differentiated instruction, social and emotional learning (SEL), community-building activities, and positive behavioral supports are some of the inclusive practices employed in academic and non-academic settings.

An inclusive school nurtures equitable access and social inclusion by creating a climate that fosters inclusion, acceptance, respect, and human dignity for all students and is the foundation upon which school staffs educate, motivate, and activate students. It is a school where students needing extra support receive it without having to be separated from their peers. It is a place where no student is excluded because of the degree or type of disability or the services required to meet their needs. An inclusive school creates and sustains a school climate where all students are supported and encouraged to treat each other in a caring and respectful manner and be “agents of change.” Inclusion should not be an option for schools, but rather a commitment and core value to ensure equitable access and success for students and adults. Inclusive schools have a both a culture and a structure that supports inclusive values and practices.

Art and music classes are often the most inclusive classes in a school. Arts programs are often used in social inclusion strategies because of their reliance on free and individual expression. However, the social aspects of these activities are often diminished by the self-directed and independent nature of art. One specific social inclusion strategy that should not be overlooked is inclusive sports and recreation opportunities, either in physical education classes or in afterschool or intramural sports teams. This strategy provides a high level of interaction, strong team-building and social skill enhancement, and the opportunity for building sustaining peer relationships and friendships. For example, Special Olympics Unified Sports® is a program that combines approximately equal numbers of individuals with (athletes) and without (partners) intellectual disabilities on the same sports teams for training and competition. All participants are of similar age and ability, and sports activities are designed to support the social inclusion framework defined above. Unified Sports can dramatically increase inclusion in the school by helping to break down barriers that have historically kept people apart.

Special Olympics’ Project UNIFY® goes a step further toward school-wide social inclusion in its commitment to engaging the entire school in activities that emanate from the interactive experience gained by young people on the playing field in Unified Sports, and by adding the opportunity for the participating students to act on their new found understanding and friendships as leaders and collaborative advocates for acceptance and respect in their schools. As these leaders develop opportunities for the entire school to learn, become aware, and participate in youth-led activities and campaigns, a tipping point for change is reached in a school.

As schools integrate and sustain socially inclusive strategies, a new set of outcomes and impacts surface that the school needs to pay attention to, measure, and expect from students, teachers, staff, administrators, and community partners.

Socially Inclusive Schools

There are many examples of socially inclusive schools in the United States, including the following schools in South Carolina and Idaho.

Eastside High School in Greenville, S.C. has created and sustained
a socially inclusive school climate beginning with their school goals that include a climate of inclusiveness, shared leadership, and sets of quality inclusive practices. Social inclusiveness is valued and led by the principal, staff, faculty, students, and parents, ensuring an inclusive school community. The socially inclusive practices include:

- The Eagle’s Nest, a special education student-run coffee shop that is a central meeting place for students and adults, demonstrating the talents and skills of students to market their products, serve their customers, and invest their profits.

- Students’ artwork is prominently displayed throughout the school including ceiling tiles painted by special education students with assistance from the art class.

- Inclusive sports opportunities that offer special and general education students the chance to interact on the playing field and create friendships that go beyond the sports arena.

- Special education classes that engage general education students (as an elective) in class projects and academic coursework.

White Pines Elementary School in Boise, ID firmly believes that “all students are our students” and demonstrates this belief by engaging special and general education students in PE Buddies and Reading Buddies programs (and soon to be expanded to Lunchroom Buddies).

Leadership is a critical element in the PE Buddies program, in which the PE teacher organizes the activities but the students are the leaders as they move through a series of peer-led physical exercises. Student leadership is also demonstrated as the 6th grade students train the 5th grade students to be the PE Buddies leaders for the next year.

White Pines School administrator and teacher leadership are critical to integrating and sustaining inclusiveness in the school. The successful PE Buddies and Reading Buddies programs are leading to additional opportunities for special and general education students to work together and build friendships. The school principal is also committed to sharing the school’s inclusive strategies, outcomes, and impacts with fellow principals and with the district administration and encouraging their adoption of inclusive practices.

Social Inclusion Outcomes and Impacts

Socially inclusive schools can produce positive outcomes and impacts on students, schools and communities. The Interagency Working Group listening session referenced above provides a student’s eye view of these impacts.

- Students’ sense of well-being improves. Students with intellectual disabilities told us they are unhappy “when people are disrespected or harmed for being different; when people act in a manner that is hurtful or hateful toward others, sometimes causing others to feel bad and give up; and when people have negative attitudes.” In short, students told us, “There would be greater happiness and a higher level of equality.” These same students told us what made them happy: meeting new people; helping others; attending youth group and faith organizations; watching and engaging in sports; watching others excel and seeing other people when other people are happy. They elaborated on this when asked, “What was the best day in school you ever had?” Answers included:
  - “When I was chosen for Project Unify and went fishing with other students”;
  - “When I found out about Special Olympics”; 
  - “When I went bowling for the first time”;
  - “When I went to a hockey game”;
  - “When I hung out with a friend for the whole day just talking”; and
  - “When I went on my senior picnic, and was socializing and having fun.”

- Schools become communities of acceptance where students with intellectual disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all school activities, opportunities and functions while their non-disabled partners report personal benefits as well. Examples that students with intellectual disabilities provided included: People with and without disabilities would mingle and socialize (e.g., in the lunchroom); teachers would change their teaching styles to meet the needs of more diverse students; there would be more opportunities for students with disabilities to take part in sports. At the same time, their non-disabled peers said that...
in an inclusive situation they develop patience and confidence, as well as “learn leadership, gain friends, and become more outgoing.”

Other indicators can be collected. One type of indicator measures participation. You can measure, for example, the extent to which students with and without intellectual disabilities play sports and participate in other activities together. Another indicator involves examining the extent to which students without and with intellectual disabilities perceive school climate similarly. An increasing number of states, districts, and schools are collecting such data and they can be disaggregated, for example, to examine the extent to which different groups of students feel safe, respected, connected, and challenged.

In addition to these findings, it is important to note there is an increase in the perception of Special Olympics as a school and community partner that offers quality programming that benefits all students.

Social Inclusive Strategies
Special Olympics Project UNIFY has identified a number of strategies for socially inclusive schools. While these strategies play out differently in schools throughout the United States, they are essential components of socially inclusive schools:

- Youth leadership (ensuring special and general education students are in positions to lead their peers and others in deliberations and decisions that impact their classes, school and community);
- School-community collaborations (sustainable school community partnerships that are mutually beneficial and supported by policy, resources and a shared vision);
- Continuous improvement (an approach to data use and evaluation analysis that engages students as full participants, including determining the most effective teaching and learning strategies);
- Communication (between and among students and adults in the school using the most effective mechanisms to share information about inclusiveness and the corresponding impacts on individuals, schools, and communities);
- Professional development (support to teachers and other staff to support inclusion);
- Unifying programming (sports and other activities that engage special and general education students as equal partners in curricular and extra-curricular activities);
- Creating and sustaining relationships (between and among all students and staff); and
- The use of peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and class meetings to foster connectedness between and among students.

There are two overarching conditions relevant to all schools that help ensure every student is educated in a supportive, responsive environment. The school’s stakeholders should consider these as non-negotiable:

Conditions For Learning
All students feel respected as well as safe, supported, and challenged; and student perceptions of these conditions are surveyed consistently and anonymously and reported out transparently and acted upon to ensure the school is perceived as a place of learning for all. Safety includes emotional and physical safety; support includes the experience of care and connectedness; and challenge includes a curriculum that students experience as engaging and relevant. These conditions, which are related to academic achievement, can be monitored by anonymously collecting student perceptions. Vetted versions of instruments to do this work can be found at safesupportiveschools.ed.gov.

Diverse Population Responsiveness
School practices are sensitive to the needs, backgrounds, and strengths (cultural, linguistic, learning styles) of all students so that diverse students feel welcome and included and their families feel comfortable engaging in school activities. Faculty and staff receive training and support to help them become more inclusive.

What Schools Can Do To Create a Socially Inclusive Climate
Below are seven specific actions a school can take to develop and sustain a socially inclusive climate that has positive impacts on all students, teachers, staff, administrators, and community partners.

1. Create a shared vision for a socially inclusive school climate (characteristics, responsibilities, collaborations, programming, etc.).
2. Identify current school and community practices and strategies
that contribute to a socially inclusive school climate.

3. Establish the outcomes and impacts expected from a socially inclusive school climate and develop appropriate ways of measuring, reporting, and improving them.

4. Develop and implement professional development and provide support for all stakeholders to increase their knowledge and skills to successfully integrate and sustain a socially inclusive school climate.

5. Develop school, district, state, and federal policies that encourage, support, and reward a socially inclusive school climate.

6. Use confidential student surveys and inclusive focus groups implemented in a manner that ensures equal participation to identify needs and monitor progress.

7. Strengthen the bond between the home and school through the implementation of meaningful opportunities for family engagement and inclusion.

Policy Options For Schools To Consider, Adopt and/or Adapt That Support and Sustain a Socially Inclusive School Climate

As state boards of education encourage and support the development and sustainability of socially inclusive schools, they should ask districts and schools to consider, adopt and/or adapt one or more of the following policy options. These options are intended to ensure that:

- All students are given opportunities to contribute to a shared vision of an inclusive school climate and assist in its measurement, analysis, and continuous improvement.
- All students' gifts and talents are identified and each student is provided opportunities to demonstrate leadership based upon their interests, skills, and talents.
- Meaningful opportunities for family engagement and inclusion are deliberately incorporated into school schedules and activities, in ways that strengthen the bond between home and school.
- Mutually beneficial school-community collaborations that build trust and respect among individuals and organizations are initiated, supported, and incorporated in sustainable ways.
- Regular and frequent assessments are conducted on the level of inclusiveness in schools, starting with an established baseline and resulting in a commitment to strategies that deepen and broaden inclusive school characteristics, celebrate progress, and continuously improve effective efforts. These assessments include confidential student surveys that are disaggregated to ensure all students feel safe, supported, and challenged.
- Information on aspects of inclusive schools and opportunities for youth and family engagement are a regular part of school communications.
- Special Olympics Unified Sports® or other inclusive sports opportunities are offered as the PE curriculum in all schools.
- Sports are considered and are a deliberate strategy for promoting inclusiveness.
- Formal opportunities for special and general education teachers to plan, implement, and sustain collaborations for inclusive student interactions are supported and scheduled.
- The role of all families at all school functions, meetings, and decisionmaking opportunities is explicitly specified and supported.

Social inclusiveness in schools builds on physical and academic inclusion. When integrated into a safe, equitable, nurturing, and engaging school climate, social inclusion can improve special and general education students’ sense of well-being and help them develop positive attitudes toward those different from them.

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*Youth Listening Sessions Summary,*