

Membership and Participation: Defining Features of Inclusive Education



Ashley Harris (right) reads a physics text with peers in her 8th grade science class in North East Middle School, North East, Maryland. Full participation means that students with disabilities have the supports necessary to actively engage in social exchanges and general education instruction.

Two of the key elements of inclusive education are valued membership and full participation. This means that all students are presumed competent and are welcomed as valued members in every general education class and extra-curricular activity in their neighborhood schools. It means that students with disabilities fully participate and learn alongside their same-age peers in general education instruction based on the general education curriculum, and experience reciprocal social relationships. In order for this to happen, schools need to develop a culture of valued membership, create welcoming communities, and build reciprocal relationships between students with and without disabilities.

Valued Membership

Membership is more than simply tolerance; it comprises all the symbols and signs of belonging that are afforded to typical students in a classroom and within the larger school environment. Membership means arriving at and leaving school and the classroom at the same time as other students; having a desk situated alongside others, not in the back of the room; being called on in class; having a classroom job if everyone else does; and having a locker arranged like everyone else rather than in the special education wing of the school. We can think of membership as falling along a continuum of “not included at all” to “having all the

signs and symbols of membership afforded to classmates without disabilities.” A student’s education team can use the membership indicators checklist in Figure 1 to ensure that students with intellectual disability have the same opportunities and sense of belonging as typical students in the classroom.

Create a Welcoming Classroom Community

Regardless of whether a student enters a general education class along with his or her peers as a natural part of moving up to the next grade or whether a student is transitioning from a segregated classroom or school, general education teachers have enormous power to create a welcoming classroom environment in which all students feel like valued members.

If possible, ask the student’s parents or other IEP team members from the previous year if there are visual supports that will help outline her personal space such as colored tape on the floor around her desk or color-coded signs that designate the different classroom work areas. Consider using the student’s interests as part of the classroom environment, such as having certain books in the classroom library or a picture of their favorite character taped to their desk. There may be equipment or other tools that help the student maintain her focus such as adaptive chairs, chew tools (to address the need for oral-motor stimulation), or weighted blankets to help the student regulate her sensory system.

Invite the student and her parents to come for a school tour and classroom visit. Give the student a tour of the space where she will work. For preschool and elementary-aged students, include a short, fun activity and some time to play on the playground. For students who will be changing classrooms, arrange a trial run of the student walking through the schedule for the first day of school.

An important part of creating a welcoming school and classroom community is making sure that the student has all of the symbols of belonging that other students do, such



In an inclusive school, students with disabilities have the same opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities—such as school plays, sports, field trips, and community service activities—as other students.

as her own cubby or locker, and having her name called during attendance. Teachers can promote the development of a classroom community that values diversity by using specific classroom and team-building activities. When teachers focus on identifying everyone’s strengths as a natural part of the classroom culture, they are modeling and building welcoming communities.

Full Participation

When students with disabilities are included in general education classes, their teams should think about all of the participation indicators that regularly occur for students without disabilities and plan for the supports that students with disabilities will need in order to participate in similar ways. They should work to achieve the same general education standards (with personalized accommodations and modifications), as well as other goals that are related to school and community citizenship. Full participation means that students have the supports necessary to actively engage in social exchanges and general education instruction, as well as other inclusive school activities. The indicators of full active participation are depicted in Figure 2.



Co-teaching can help create a classroom environment where a student with a disability participates in classroom instruction in similar ways as students without disabilities, including whole class discussion and/or small group discussion and projects.

Planning for Full Active Participation

Planning for a student's full active participation requires team collaboration to answer five questions:

- What do we want the student to know and be able to do at the end of this week or this unit?
- How will we assess whether the student has achieved the identified learning objectives?
- What supports does the student need to fully participate in usual routines in and out of the general education classroom?
- Which supports are team members responsible for finding or preparing so they are ready when the student needs them?
- Do these supports allow the student to be as independent and engaged in activities as possible?

Following the implementation of supports, teams must have a process for determining the fidelity of their planned supports. When supports are delivered with a high degree of fidelity, then teams can have a high degree of confidence that the student's actual performance is a true reflection of his or her abilities. When the fidelity of implementation of supports is low, the team needs to interpret student performance very cautiously because poor performance may be due to instructional inadequacy.

A team-based process for participation planning can be found in Jorgensen's *Inclusion is More Than Just Being "In": A Step-by-Step Approach for Students with Disabilities*. The results of using this planning process for a 10th grade student with an intellectual disability is depicted in Figures 1 and 2 on the following pages.

▶▶▶ FIGURE 1

**GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM
AND SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP CHECKLIST**

- ☐ The student attends the school she would attend if she didn't have a disability.
- ☐ The student's class and other activities, in which she is involved, have a natural proportion of students with and without disabilities.
- ☐ The student is a valued member of a chronological age-appropriate general education class.
- ☐ The student's name is on all class lists, group lists put on the board, job lists, etc.
- ☐ The student participates in classroom and school routines such as the Pledge of Allegiance, lunch count, jobs, errands, eating lunch in the cafeteria, changing classes, etc.—in typical locations and at the same times as classmates without disabilities.
- ☐ The student receives accessible learning materials at the same time as those materials are provided to students without disabilities.
- ☐ Learning materials are only as different as they need to be to provide access.
- ☐ The student participates in classroom instruction in similar ways as students without disabilities, including whole class discussion and/or small group discussion and projects. The student is called on by the teacher as frequently as other students in the class.
- ☐ The student may ride the same school bus as her peers without disabilities, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- ☐ The student may transition between classes alongside his peers without disabilities, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- ☐ The student progresses through the grades according to the same pattern as students without disabilities.
- ☐ The student learns in outside-of-school, chronological age-appropriate, and inclusive environments before the age of 18, only when such instruction is the norm for typical students.
- ☐ Related services and specialized instruction are provided within the typical routines of a school day in addition to, not in place of, core general academic and behavioral instruction.
- ☐ Related services are delivered primarily through multi-tiered instruction and consultation in the classroom, or prior to or after the school day.
- ☐ The school is physically accessible and/or accommodations are arranged so that the student and other individuals with mobility challenges have full access to all opportunities within the school building.
- ☐ The school accommodates the student's sensory and health care needs.

▶▶▶ FIGURE 2

**ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN
GENERAL EDUCATION INDICATORS**

- The student participates in classroom and school routines in typical locations, such as the Pledge of Allegiance, lunch count, jobs, errands, eating lunch in the cafeteria, etc.
- The student has the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities that are open to most students, such as school plays, sports, field trips, and community service activities.
- A high school student engages in outside-of-school, chronological age-appropriate, and inclusive environments (e.g., service learning) in the same proportion as classmates without disabilities.
- The student participates in classroom instruction, in a similar routine, as students without disabilities.
- The student has a way to communicate the same academic messages that are expected of other students in instructional routines. For example:
 - giving answers
 - asking questions
 - making comments
 - taking notes
 - writing
 - drawing figures
- The student completes similar assignments and other classwork (with adaptations and modifications) as students without disabilities.
- Students in the transition years (ages 18-21) attend post-secondary education, work, make connections to community activities and social groups, learn to live away from their childhood home.

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