

Educating Children with Disabilities - Inclusive Environments

The El Paso Independent School District's mission of excellence in teaching and learning applies to all students. A unified system of general and special education is one that is capable of responding to the needs of all its students by accessing a range of specialized services and supports.

“A unified educational system is based on the principle that each student represents a unique combination of abilities and educational needs and may require individual assistance at varying times during the school years in order to achieve desired outcomes.” (McLaughlin and Warren, 1992)

The unified system stresses a system of standards and accountability for all students, including those with disabilities, and engages in a collaborative process of continual improvement. For students with disabilities, processes are put in place to ensure that the educational services and programs selected are both appropriate and effective. This is achieved through the design, use, and assessment of resources at both the district and school level, which have one intent: to improve student performance.

Least Restrictive Environment and Inclusion

It is clear that the intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is to foster the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education environment. Under the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE), a determination is made by the Admission, Referral, and Dismissal (ARD) Committee as to the extent students with disabilities will participate in general education environments. Within the past ten years, the concept of LRE has been confused with the term *inclusion*; therefore the definition of inclusion and its use in the EPISD must be clearly defined. In the literature,

Inclusion is a *process* which centers around the commitment to educate each student, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom the student would attend if not disabled. Inclusive educational programming means bringing support services, where appropriate, to the student rather than moving the student to the services.

Full inclusion means that all students with disabilities, *regardless* of the nature or severity of the disabling condition, are placed in the general education classroom full time. All services are delivered to the child within that setting.

EPISD does not operate a Full inclusion process. EPISD has promoted the first definition of inclusion since 1993 and has viewed it as a decision making *process, based upon individual student strengths and needs*. The decision making process begins with the premise that all students should be educated in the school they would attend if not disabled, and in the same classrooms as their general education peers. Only when the

needs of the student cannot be met in these environments does the local school Admission, Referral, and Dismissal (ARD) Committee, along with the parents of the student, consider other environments. This interpretation is consistent with IDEA and Texas Education Agency regulations.

Inclusive Education in the EPISD

Inclusive education in EPISD **does not** mean placing children unilaterally into general education settings. The following addresses frequently asked questions that have been generated as a result of the EPISD's efforts at continuing to establish an Inclusive Educational System.

1. **What is inclusion?** Inclusion is a term that refers to educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms alongside their peers to the extent appropriate as determined by the ARD Committee with parental (and when appropriate the student) input. Necessary supports and services are provided to the student in the regular classroom. This option is available to any student who has an IEP regardless of their disability label.
2. **Why should EPISD provide inclusive education?** The final regulations accompanying the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), re-authorized in 1997, state very clearly, "The 1997 Amendments shifted the focus of the IDEA to one of improving teaching and learning, with a specific focus on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) as the primary tool for enhancing the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum."
3. **Who benefits from inclusion? What about non-disabled students?** The research and evaluation data on inclusion indicate a strong trend toward improved student outcomes (academically, socially, and behaviorally) for both the individual student and their non-disabled peers. There is little evidence in the research to support superior student outcomes as a result of placement in segregated settings. Additionally, teachers benefit from the additional supports, collaborative planning and instruction, that must be a part of inclusive education.
4. **What is the difference between inclusion and mainstreaming?** **Mainstreaming** is an older term that may imply a more gradual, partial, or part-time process (e.g., a student who is mainstreamed may attend separate classes within a regular school, or may participate in regular gym and lunch programs only). In mainstreamed programs, students are often expected to fit in the regular class in which they want to participate, whereas in an inclusive program the classes are designed to fit all students.

Inclusion occurs when students with disabilities have their placement in age appropriate general education classrooms where they receive necessary specialized supports and services.

5. **What is the status of inclusion in EPISD?** In 1993, EPISD began inclusive education for students with disabilities. Inclusive process decision-making has expanded since that time. Currently, students with disabilities are included in general education at various elementary, middle, and high schools (e.g., Hornedo, Nixon, Logan, Mesita, Guerrero, Western Hills, Crosby, Coronado, etc.).

6. **What is the difference between the past Inclusion decision making process and the proposed Inclusive Education System in EPISD?"**
The proposed program outlines recommendations to utilize the Inclusion Decision making process as a foundation on which to develop an appropriate IEP considering LRE. As we build a more inclusive District, which supports all of its students, those with disabilities and those without, decisions will be based upon services rather than a 'place'. This will require fundamental changes in the ways that special and general education staff and administrators work together. The main points of the proposed Inclusive Education System are:

Inclusive Classrooms that will be able to meet the educational needs of all students;

Organizational Changes that will be necessary to support inclusive education;

Professional Development that will be necessary to support staff in the skills, planning, and collaboration that will be needed to support students in inclusive classrooms; and

Student/Teacher Assistance Teams that will play a more central role in ensuring appropriate modifications and supports are in place in the general education classroom, the home and community for any student.

The EPISD Community Involvement Centers will play a vital role in assisting parents/families with the Inclusion decision-making process as ARD meetings are conducted.

7. **How will current roles and responsibilities change? What support will be provided?** Specific job descriptions will not be changed. Staff will receive supports in terms of professional development, collaborative assistance in the assessment, planning, and instruction of students with disabilities, and the necessary time and resources to integrate both successfully.

8. **How will the expertise of special educators (teachers, bilingual teachers, psychologists, speech/language specialist, etc.) be utilized in an Inclusive Educational System?** An inclusive education system places great emphasis on utilizing a consultative model, where classroom teachers, specialists, and families work closely together to better support each other and to better serve the students they are jointly serving. Consultation may involve collaborative (team) teaching, and collaborative planning time.

9. **Aren't children with disabilities the responsibility of the Special Education Department?** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) '97 mandates that children be given an appropriate education in the "least restrictive environment". When appropriate education can be provided, the least restrictive environment is the general education classroom. It is the District's responsibility to educate all of its students. Special education can no longer be looked at as a "separate place" to educate children with its own set of problems or issues, nor can the responsibility to educate children be divided among departments. For students with disabilities placed in general education classrooms, their special education classroom support will be provided in such ways as having personnel provide direct instruction, co-teach, develop instructional adaptations, as well as through consultation and participation in collaborative planning.

10. **What will an inclusive classroom look like?** Inclusive classrooms will not all look the same. There are however some similarities that will be consistent across all-inclusive classrooms. There will be students with a wider range of abilities and needs. In addition to the general education teacher, there will be other staff members (such as paraprofessionals, general education teachers, special education teachers, and specialists, etc.) in the classroom to directly assist students, consult and collaborate with teachers and other staff members, and to participate in co-planning and team teaching.

11. **Is every child going to be included? What about the students who need specialized services and supports?** It is the goal of EPISD to be able to offer inclusive education, with necessary supports, to all students with disabilities, when appropriate. Some students may need to receive instruction and support that takes place outside the general education classroom (e.g., regional day school for the deaf). Students who need specialized services and supports, either within the general education classroom or in other educational placements, will receive them. EPISD will continue to offer the full continuum of services to all its students with disabilities.

- 12. Will each included student have his/her own 1:1 paraprofessional?** Each included student will not automatically receive 1:1 paraprofessional assistance. The degree of individualized support that students' receive, including paraprofessional assistance, will be determined by the ARD committee, with parental participation. In inclusive settings, paraprofessionals play an important collaborative role, which benefits the entire class. Paraprofessionals work to implement instruction and adaptations as designed by the general education teacher, special education teacher and with the student's input, when appropriate, during an ARD meeting.
- 13. What are the criteria for inclusion?** Individuals knowledgeable of the child (which may include the principal, regular education teacher(s), bilingual teachers, special education teacher(s), therapists, assessment personnel, school nurse, etc.) as well as the parent(s) will review the student's abilities and strengths, assessment measures, health information, educational data, etc. to determine individual needs and the appropriate services to meet those identified needs in the least restrictive environment. As with all decisions regarding educational planning and placements for children with disabilities, appropriate options will be discussed at ARD Committee meetings as IEP's are developed.
- 14. Do "included" students take the same tests?** Modifications to testing procedures or assessment measures may be stipulated in a student's IEP. If there are no required modifications or accommodations mandated by the IEP, then included students should be tested in the same manner as their classmates.
- 15. What should be done when a child with behavioral problems acts out in the classroom?** No single method for helping children with behavioral difficulties is effective for all students, nor are these problems faced solely by students with disabilities. It is the District's goal to provide professional development in these areas, and to work with campuses to plan professional development that will meet arising and ongoing staff needs. Teachers will also receive support and assistance from their peers, including special educators and specialists (e.g., school psychologists, master level social workers, counselors, etc.) many of whom will be experienced in dealing with these types of issues.
- 16. Isn't inclusion more expensive?** While implementing new initiatives does require funding and resources, the elimination of dual general and special education systems will undoubtedly be more efficient and cost-effective in the long run. However, consideration must be given to current

data that indicates that approximately 1500 children with disabilities are not attending their home school and as a result require transportation.

17. **Will all students with disabilities, not attending their home schools, be returned to their home schools this year or next?** Not unilaterally! Such decisions will be made on an individual basis with parent input during an ARD. The ARD decision making process must also involve the receiving (home) school so that appropriate services can be implemented in order to meet the needs of student as identified on the IEP.

Possible Techniques and Strategies Resources

Planning for inclusion may involve a wide variety of tools and techniques. The following are some techniques frequently mentioned in the literature.

Circle of Friends (also called Circle of Support) is a technique used to enlist the involvement and commitment of peers in developing and supporting effective inclusion.

COACH is an assessment and planning tool designed to help educators identify family-centered priorities for their students, define the educational program components, and address these components in an inclusive setting.

MAPS (Making Action Plans) is a creative tool which inclusion facilitators can use to help individuals, organizations, and families move into the future.

PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) is a creative tool, which inclusion facilitators can use to develop long and short range planning by encouraging people to think "backwards."

More information can be found in the Special Education Website at WWW.EPISD.ORG