

# ESSENTIAL BEST PRACTICES IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword .....	2
High Expectations and Least Dangerous Assumption.....	4
General Education Class Membership and Full Participation.....	5
Quality Augmentative and Alternative Communication .....	7
Curriculum, Instruction, and Supports.....	9
Ongoing Authentic Assessment.....	11
Family-School Partnerships.....	12
Team Collaboration.....	13
Social Relationships and Natural Supports.....	14
Futures Planning.....	15
Self-Determination.....	16
Special and General Education Reform.....	17
Professional Development .....	18
Essential Best Practices Action Planning Matrix .....	19
References .....	21

# FOREWORD

***“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking  
new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”***

– Marcel Proust

To some people, it may seem audacious to print a list of “essential best practices for inclusive schools,” as if such a thing can be known. Surely something as complicated and multi-faceted as inclusive education cannot be reduced to 12 statements and 109 indicators. Yet, when we talk to youth and families, visit schools striving to be inclusive, share notes with colleagues from around the country, and read the research literature, there are indeed some practices that appear over and over again to contribute positively to the creation of classrooms and schools in which all students are valued members, full participants, and active learners.

This document was first developed as part of a model demonstration project called “Beyond Access” that was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs from 2002-2006. It reflects practices that have usually been associated with students with autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and deaf-blindness. Most of the practices are applicable, however, to *all* students with and without disabilities, because they are based on principles of universal design for instruction and learning.

This document might be used in a variety of ways by families and professionals alike. For example:

- ◆ A superintendent might use the document as a guide for working with staff to develop their individual professional development plans or a local school improvement plan.
- ◆ A teacher might organize a reflective practice or study group to read the document and some of the supporting literature listed in the reference section and then to support one another to design and evaluate lessons that are inclusive of diverse learners.
- ◆ A school board member might organize a study committee comprised of community members to consider how closely their schools implement the highlighted practices.
- ◆ A principal might assemble a task force of staff and community members to use the indicators to conduct a self-assessment of their current school practices, followed by the development of a multi-year school improvement plan.
- ◆ A parent might share the document with his child’s educational team to discuss program strengths and those that need improvement.
- ◆ A speech-language pathologist might share the document with his or her supervisor to begin a discussion of how to change the current service delivery model to be more classroom-based.

- ◆ A legislator or state department employee might use the document to guide the review of current educational standards in general and special education teacher certification.
- ◆ Students might use the document as a springboard for discussion in a youth group dedicated to eradicating racism and other forms of social injustice in their schools.

On pages 19 and 20 is a matrix that may be used as an action planning tool by individual student teams, a school building, or a whole district. Regardless of your role—parent/guardian, educator, related service provider, administrator, student, or community member—we hope that you use this document to not only advance your own knowledge, but to take action to improve the lives of your students and their families.

– Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Ph.D.

# HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND LEAST DANGEROUS ASSUMPTION

The inherent value and dignity of students with significant disabilities is respected. All students with significant disabilities pursue the same learner outcomes as students without disabilities. When students do not currently demonstrate content knowledge or skills, the least dangerous assumption principle applies, and all aspects of their educational programs continue to reflect high expectations.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ “People First” language is used (e.g., a child with Down syndrome, not a Down syndrome child).
- ◆ Language regarding the student’s perceived functioning or developmental level is not used as the primary descriptor; rather, descriptions of the student focus on abilities and needs are used.
- ◆ Annual goals on the student’s individualized education program (IEP) reflect content standards from the general education curriculum.
- ◆ Predictions are not made that the student will “never” acquire certain knowledge or skills.
- ◆ People speak directly to the student rather than through a paraprofessional or other person.
- ◆ People use age-appropriate vocabulary and inflection when talking to the student.
- ◆ In order to respect privacy, staff discuss the student’s personal care, medical needs, and other sensitive issues out of earshot of other students, and only with those who need to know.

# GENERAL EDUCATION CLASS MEMBERSHIP AND FULL PARTICIPATION

Students with significant disabilities are members of age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools. There are no programs or rooms just for students with significant disabilities and these students have access to the full range of learning experiences and environments offered to students without disabilities.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ The student is a member of an age-appropriate general education class.
- ◆ The student attends the school he/she would attend if he/she didn't have a disability.
- ◆ The student progresses through the grades according to the same pattern as students without disabilities.
- ◆ The student participates in the graduation ceremony at the average age at which other classmates without disabilities graduate.
- ◆ The student receives a diploma when he/she is discharged from special education.
- ◆ The student learns in outside-of-school, age-appropriate, and inclusive environments *before* the age of 18 whenever that is the norm for typical students; *after* the student turns 18 and participates in graduation, some students continue to receive educational services from the school focused on postsecondary education and/or community living.
- ◆ The student is not removed from general education classes for academic instruction.
- ◆ Related services are delivered primarily through consultation in the classroom.
- ◆ Related services are delivered in typical, inclusive environments.
- ◆ There are no places or programs in the school just for students with disabilities.
- ◆ Students with disabilities are proportionally represented in classes, courses, clubs, and extracurricular activities.
- ◆ The student's name is on all class lists, lists of groups put on the board, job lists, and so forth.
- ◆ The student receives the same materials as students without disabilities, with supports (i.e., accommodations and adaptations) provided as necessary.

- ◆ 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, and so forth.
- ◆ The student rides the same school bus as his/her peers without disabilities.
- ◆ The student passes classes with other students, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- ◆ The student participates in classroom instruction in similar ways as students without disabilities; for example:
  - whole class discussions
  - at the board
  - in small groups
  - when called on by the teacher
- ◆ The student participates in school plays, field trips, and community service activities.
- ◆ The school is physically accessible.
- ◆ The school can accommodate the student's sensory needs.

# QUALITY AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION

Students unable to communicate using spoken or sign language in ways similar to their same age classmates are candidates for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Accurate and reliable AAC supports and services are provided to enable them to communicate about the content of the academic curriculum and in social situations with adults and same age classmates.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ The student has a means to communicate all the time.
- ◆ The student communicates for a variety of purposes.
- ◆ Although the student may have multiple ways of communicating, a primary means of communication is identified.
- ◆ The student's communication system is programmed with messages to demonstrate learning of age-appropriate core academics, commensurate with his/her age-appropriate classmates.
- ◆ The student's communication system is programmed with messages for social communication that promote his/her participation in school and community extracurricular activities with peers without disabilities.
- ◆ AAC systems and supports are provided to enable the student to communicate for the purposes of self-determination and futures planning.
- ◆ The student, his/her family members, and classmates without disabilities participate in the selection of messages programmed into the AAC system.
- ◆ When acting as a facilitator, people clearly engage in a support role, not actively participating in the content of the interaction between the student using AAC and his/her conversational partners.
- ◆ When conversing with the student as a conversational partner, classmates and adults utilize information provided by facilitators to converse directly with the student, not with the facilitator.
- ◆ Training and support to use the AAC system is provided to the student in the contexts and routines in which the student will communicate.



- ◆ Training and support to use the AAC system is provided to the team, including classmates, in the contexts and routines in which the student will communicate.
- ◆ AAC supports take into consideration the communicative functions of challenging behavior.
- ◆ A variety of funding sources and streams (Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance, school funding, etc.) are utilized to acquire and maintain assistive technology and AAC systems, and to support training of the student, his/her family, classmates, and support personnel.

# CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND SUPPORTS

Curriculum and instruction are designed to accommodate the full range of student diversity. Individualized supports are provided to students with significant disabilities to enable them to fully participate and make progress within the general education curriculum. Students learn functional or life skills within typical routines in the general education classroom or other inclusive activities and environments.

## INDICATORS

### Curriculum is...

- ◆ Based on common content standards for all students.
- ◆ Presented in a variety of accessible formats including written information at appropriate reading levels, and in formats as indicated by the student's sensory needs (e.g., video, picture/symbols, actual objects, demonstrations, orally, etc.).
- ◆ Individualized through the development of personalized performance demonstrations for some students.

### Instruction...

- ◆ Reflects the learning styles of all students in the class by the use of visual, tactile, and kinesthetic materials and experiences.
- ◆ Is provided in multiple formats such as individual, pairs, small groups, and whole class.
- ◆ Prioritizes the use of research-based strategies for increasing student achievement, such as:
  - Identifying similarities and differences
  - Summarizing and note taking
  - Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
  - Homework and practice
  - Nonlinguistic representations
  - Cooperative learning

- Setting objectives and providing feedback
- Generating and testing hypotheses
- Questions, cues, and advance organizers

### **Supports...**

- ◆ Are provided within the general education class and other typical environments to enable the student to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum and other inclusive learning opportunities and activities.
- ◆ Are defined by an individualized student support plan, and may include: physical, emotional, and sensory supports; adapted materials; assistive technology and AAC; personalized performance demonstrations; personalized instruction; and individualized grading and evaluation plans.
- ◆ Related to challenging behavior:
  - take into consideration the student's sensory needs.
  - are designed after completion of a functional behavioral assessment.
  - focus on improving quality of life and on teaching new skills, rather than on punishment.
  - are consistent with a school wide positive behavior philosophy.

### **Evaluation and Grading...**

- ◆ Include criteria for judging success that reflects general education curriculum standards and individualized IEP goals and objectives.
- ◆ Reflect benchmarks similar to those of students without disabilities.
- ◆ Reflect evaluation methods similar to those of students without disabilities.
- ◆ Allow the student to receive grades that reflect "personal best" achievement and improvement.

# ONGOING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Authentic, performance-based assessments are conducted within typical activities in inclusive environments for the purpose of identifying students' learning and communication styles, preferences and interests, academic strengths and weaknesses, and need for support.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ Present level of performance statements on the IEP reflect:
  - the student's talents, abilities, skills.
  - the student's learning styles.
  - the student's preferences.
  - the supports that the student needs to learn well.
  - caution about the validity of assessment results if the student has communication difficulties.
- ◆ Assessment reports reflect the student's abilities and needs rather than deficits.
- ◆ If the student has difficulty communicating, assessment tools and strategies are chosen accordingly.
- ◆ Teachers and related service providers use ongoing dynamic assessments instead of discrete, one-time assessment tools.

# FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Families and schools are engaged in partnership to create quality inclusive educational experiences for students with significant disabilities. Families are connected to resources for developing their own leadership and advocacy skills.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ Family priorities are reflected in annual goals on the student's IEP.
- ◆ Families positively acknowledge teachers' efforts on behalf of their child.
- ◆ Families are provided with information about resources for building their own leadership and advocacy skills relative to their child's education.
- ◆ Families attend case management meetings or curriculum planning meetings on a regular basis.
- ◆ Families are provided with information and referral to community based services related to healthy family functioning.

# TEAM COLLABORATION

General and special education teachers and related service providers demonstrate shared responsibility by collaborating in the design, implementation, and evaluation of students' educational programs and their IEPs.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ The roles and responsibilities of all teachers and staff reflect the commitment and skills needed to teach all students, including those with disabilities.
- ◆ Special education staff work within the general education classroom as co-teachers, team-teachers, small group instructors, or one-on-one support teachers for all students in the class.
- ◆ The roles and responsibilities of special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers reflect the provision of supports and services to students to enable them to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum and to teachers to enable them to effectively teach heterogeneous classes.
- ◆ IEP teams meet on a regular basis—optimally once a week—to do instructional and case management planning.
- ◆ Teams use formal processes for conducting meetings, problem-solving, making decisions, and evaluating their own effectiveness.

# SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND NATURAL SUPPORTS

The first essential condition for friendship is full inclusion. When students with disabilities are kept apart from the mainstream of school life there are few opportunities for friendships to develop between students with and without disabilities. Going to recess, eating in the cafeteria, and access to extracurricular activities are recognized as key ingredients to the formation of friendships. Students who experience significant disabilities participate on sports teams, perform in band and choral groups, perform in school plays, and so forth. Accessible transportation and staff support are provided when necessary to enable students to participate successfully.

- ◆ The student with disabilities has the same variety of social networks as students without disabilities: close friends, acquaintances, kids they share activities with, and so forth.
- ◆ The student with disabilities participates in the same variety of inclusive and typical extracurricular activities as students without disabilities.
- ◆ When needed, adults facilitate the building of social networks for the student.
- ◆ Whenever possible, physical, emotional, and instructional supports are provided by non-special educators, including classroom teachers, librarians, classmates, office personnel, and volunteers.
- ◆ The student has the opportunity to provide support and assistance to others as well as to receive it.

# FUTURES PLANNING

High school students with disabilities develop a four-year plan of study with their guidance counselor just like students without disabilities. Their course selection is based on regular graduation requirements. They attend college fairs and are encouraged to apply for post-secondary education.

- ◆ The student has a graduation plan to guide his or her transition from high school that is developed using the principles of person-centered planning.
- ◆ Graduation planning includes choices of postsecondary education, work, community living, leisure, and recreation.
- ◆ When chosen by the student and his or her parents or guardians, the school supports his or her education in non-school, age-appropriate learning environments after the age of 18 and before special education services are discontinued.
- ◆ The student participates with his or her class in graduation ceremonies and receives a diploma when discharged from special education.



# SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination includes personal attitudes and abilities that facilitate an individual's identification and pursuit of meaningful and self-identified goals. It is reflected in personal attitudes of empowerment, active participation in decision-making, and self-directed action to achieve personally valued goals. Within the school curriculum there are opportunities for students with disabilities to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and to begin to advocate for the supports they need with teachers and employers. All students with disabilities are supported to attend their own IEP meetings, join organizations that promote self-determination, and design a post-graduation "futures plan" that has as its goal a fully inclusive life in the community.

- ◆ The student with significant disabilities communicates his or her own thoughts, needs, opinions, and wishes, with support from AAC, friends, family, and educators.
- ◆ The student with disabilities participates in IEP meetings from junior high through graduation.

# SPECIAL AND GENERAL EDUCATION REFORM

Administrators provide leadership to align general and special education reform and improvement with respect to the creation of a community of learners that is inclusive of students with significant disabilities.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ The values of diversity and inclusion are evident in the school's mission statement.
- ◆ General and special education administrators promote the values and benefits of inclusive education at meetings, in school improvement plans or annual reports, in school newsletters or Web sites, and in conversations.
- ◆ General and special education personnel participate together in school wide improvement and reform efforts that benefit students with and without disabilities.
- ◆ School schedules are designed to provide regular common planning time for general and special educators together.

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development for general and special education staff is linked to improved educational outcomes for students with significant disabilities, including inclusion, authentic membership, full participation, typical social relationships, and learning of the general education curriculum.

## INDICATORS

- ◆ Teams use reflective practice strategies and structures to engage in job-embedded learning and professional growth.
- ◆ General and special education staff attend professional development events together.
- ◆ General education staff identify learning about students with disabilities in their professional development plans.
- ◆ Special education staff identify learning about general education topics in their professional development plans.
- ◆ Regular review of student learning data informs the content and format of district, school, and individual professional development plans.

# ESSENTIAL BEST PRACTICES ACTION PLANNING MATRIX

*Instructions: This tool may be used by parents/guardians, educators, related service providers, administrators, students, or community member as a self-assessment and action planning guide to improve inclusive practices in for an individual student's team, a school building, or an entire district. Indicators from this document that "need work" are listed in the first column. Specific action steps to address that indicator are entered into the second column. These action steps might include providing professional development, reviewing and changing policies, assigning new job roles and responsibilities, changing service delivery models, and the like. The person responsible and a timeline for action are entered into columns three and four. This document can be reviewed on a periodic basis to monitor for implementation and outcomes.*

Indicator(s)	Action Steps	Who	Timeline

Indicator(s)	Action Steps	Who	Timeline

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These best practice indicators were drawn from many sources including, but not limited to, the following:

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