Inclusive education is based on the guiding principle that all students should have the same opportunities to learn and grow together within the school environment. In inclusive schools, students with disabilities are educated alongside their age and grade-level peers, thereby removing the divides between special education and general education.

ELEMENTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

There is not a single, agreed-upon definition of inclusive education. Inclusive education refers to an interrelated set of values and practices and exists when each of the following elements occurs on an ongoing, daily basis:

- All students are welcomed in general education. The first placement options considered are the general education classes in the school the students would attend if they did not have a disability.
- Disability is recognized as a form of human diversity. As such, students with disabilities are accepted as individuals and not denied access based on disability.
- Appropriate supports are available, regardless of disability label or severity. Given their portability, supports are provided in typical environments, rather than sending students to specialized settings to receive needed supports.
- Students are educated in classes reflecting the naturally occurring proportion of students with and without disabilities. Therefore, the percentage of students without disabilities in each class would be substantially higher than those with disabilities.
- Students, irrespective of their developmental or performance levels, are educated with peers in the same age group. Students with disabilities need not function at or near the same academic level as their classmates (though some do) to benefit from a chronologically age-appropriate, inclusive placement.

Impact of Inclusive Education

The National Longitudinal Transition Study, the largest, longitudinal study of education outcomes of 11,000 students with disabilities, showed that more time spent in a general education classroom was positively correlated with:

- Higher scores on standardized tests of reading and math
- Fewer absences from school
- Fewer referrals for disruptive behavior

Students with and without disabilities participate in shared educational experiences while pursuing individually appropriate learning outcomes with necessary supports. Educational experiences are designed to enhance both the academic–functional and the social–personal aspects of schooling.

Even in settings that have been deemed by some as inclusive, children with significant disabilities may merely be coexisting with their peers without being truly supported and engaged as equitable.
social and academic learners.

The following details the best practices of inclusive education, as summarized in *Essential Best Practices in Inclusive Schools*, a pamphlet prepared by the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire.

**BEST PRACTICES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

- **High Expectations:** All aspects of a student’s educational programming reflect high expectations. To do otherwise results in harm such as fewer educational opportunities, inferior literacy instruction, a segregated education, and fewer choices as an adult.

- **Social Relationships and Natural Supports:** Students are in an environment that fosters friendships and encourages full participation in all activities.

- **Full Participation and Membership in Age-Appropriate General Education Classrooms**

- **Quality Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC):** Students who are unable to communicate using spoken or sign language have access to accurate and reliable AAC supports and services.

- **Ongoing Performance-Based Assessments:** Assessments identify students’ learning and communication styles, preferences and interests, academic strengths and weaknesses, and needs for support.

- **Differentiated Instruction:** The 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.

- **Family-School Partnerships:** Families are equipped to be primary advocates for their children and connected to accessible, meaningful resources.

- **Team Collaboration:** General and special education teachers and related service providers work together in the design, implementation, and evaluation of students’ educational programs and their IEPs (Individualized Education Programs).

- **Self-determination:** Schools encourage students to identify their own strengths, advocate for the supports they need, and set and pursue meaningful and self-identified goals.

- **Futures Planning:** High school students develop four-year plans of study with their guidance counselors and actively participate in the design and pursuit of plans for the transition from school to post-secondary and adult lives.

- **Ongoing Professional Development for General and Special Education Staff**

- **Special and General Education Reform:** An overarching goal of reform is the creation of a community of learners that is fully inclusive of students with significant disabilities.

**SOURCES**


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