



Debunking Myths about Inclusive Education for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities



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Controversy often surrounds the inclusion of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in the general education classroom and curriculum. This is the case even though the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is clear in its Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provisions that the presumed education setting for all students with disabilities is the general education classroom. A student can only be educated in a more restrictive setting if the student cannot receive a satisfactory education when all needed supplementary aids and services have been provided in the general

education classroom. A more restrictive setting means less time with peers who do not have disabilities. With appropriate supports, services, and staff development, it should be very rare that a student with a disability needs a more restrictive environment.

There are many myths about including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in general education classrooms. This Brief debunks six of them. (Another resource addressing inclusion myths is available at <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/specialed/inclusion/>)

[Myths-Facts-Inclusionary-Practices.pdf](#).) At the end of each myth there is a short list of related resources.

Myth 1. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have too many challenges to benefit from inclusion in the general education classroom.

This myth cites the *low intelligence quotient (IQ)* of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, and possible *challenging behaviors*, as reasons why students cannot benefit from inclusion. However, supplementary aids and services and appropriate staff development can address challenging behaviors. Also, there may be an incorrect assumption that these students have challenging behaviors.

Low IQ is often mentioned even though a student's IQ should not be considered in making placement decisions. In addition, IQ often is not an accurate measure of intellectual functioning. This is especially the case for students whose speech-language delays are a barrier to showing what they know and can do on an IQ test. (IDEA allows, but does not require, an IQ test to contribute to determining the intellectual functioning of a student.) IDEA Regulation 300.34 makes an important point about intelligence testing, stating that a full evaluation must include more than just a test designed to provide a single IQ score.

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) that supports access to the general education curriculum, as well as inclusion in the general education classroom, needs to address perceived *challenging behaviors*. Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) are useful in identifying causes of certain student behaviors. A Behavioral Implementation Plan (BIP) based on the results of the FBA teaches and rewards positive behaviors. The BIP also can help educators address their own behaviors contributing to classroom issues. In addition, the BIP can direct attention to the classroom environment as a cause of challenging behaviors. For example, is the student seated somewhere too distracting?

Many available resources address these issues. In fact, **all students** need positive and consistent behavioral supports, not just those with significant cognitive disabilities. For some students, these supports are vital for meaningful engagement in the classroom. By intentionally identifying, collaboratively communicating, and consistently following through on needed supports, students with significant cognitive disabilities are more able to participate meaningfully in inclusive education.

A universal design for learning (UDL) approach can make instruction more accessible and engaging. With UDL, educators can break down instructional barriers that can cause frustration. It is also critically important to evaluate the need for communication supports. Students without adequate communication support can be mistaken for students who have challenging behaviors. Myth 2 discusses communication supports in greater detail.

Resources for Myth 1

Behavior Intervention Plans: What You Need to Know. Understood. <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/behavior-intervention-plans-what-you-need-to-know>

Functional Assessment and How It Works. Understood. <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/evaluations/evaluation-basics/functional-assessment-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Center on PBIS. <https://www.pbis.org/>

Universal Design for Learning. CAST. <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

What Does the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Say about IQ Testing? <https://www.ndscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/IL-IQ-Testing-Brief.pdf>

Myth 2. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have too many needs for support to be included in the general education classroom.

Proponents of this myth may say that students who need communication supports, social and emotional skill development supports, and toileting supports cannot be included in the general education classroom. These needs should not be a barrier to inclusive education.

Communication support needs are often misinterpreted as behavior challenges. A student's behavior may be an effort to communicate when proven communication strategies are not being used. The need for *communication supports and services* should not be a barrier to inclusive education. An inclusive classroom has potential to facilitate the use of all communication modes, including Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. Peers play an especially important role in supporting AAC users. At the same time, peers provide a wonderful opportunity to develop relationships. The IEP should address communication supports and services, including AAC if needed.

Some people believe that students with significant cognitive disabilities need more supports for *social and functional skills* than can be provided in the inclusive general education classroom. However, these skills are best taught within the context of the grade-level general education curriculum. Students with and without disabilities learn social skills by interacting with each other in the general education classroom. Further, the most important functional skills in the 21st century are:

- communication skills
- academic skills such as in math, reading, and writing
- independent and teamwork skills
- age-appropriate social skills
- skills for identifying and requesting supports

Students can learn these and other functional skills in the general education classroom instead of in a separate life skills class. For example, including a student in a chemistry class teaches the student to follow multi-step directions, measure, pour, mix, and use heat safely. A student can apply all of these skills to cooking as well as chemistry.

Needed supplementary aids and services must be provided in the general education classroom to support the student with significant cognitive disabilities. This includes supports to work on *toileting* skills or to ensure that a student who needs toileting or diaper/pull-up assistance receives it.

Resources for Myth 2

Developing IEPs that Support Inclusive Education for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities. TIES Center. <https://tiescenter.org/resource/SW/MycVdjRAOIkwndgsCWDQ>

Supplementary Aids and Services. Center for Parent Information and Resources (CPIR). <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-supplementary/>

How Peers Can Support AAC Use by Students with Significant Communication Needs <https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/communicative-competence-tips/how-peers-can-support-aac-use-by-students-with-significant-communication-needs>

What is Communicative Competence for and with Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Users? TIES Center. <https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/communicative-competence-tips/what-is-communicative-competence-for-and-with-aac-users>

Myth 3. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities need specially designed instruction that is impossible to provide in the general education classroom.

This myth suggests that specialized instruction and supports are *modifications* that are too

difficult to provide in the general education classroom. It also suggests that having a *paraprofessional* in the general education classroom is distracting to students without disabilities and actually represents a more restrictive setting.

This myth is based on several incorrect assumptions. For one, a child with a disability cannot be removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications. IDEA regulation 300.116(e) allows **modifications** in the general education classroom. They cannot be used as a reason to deny the student an inclusive education.

Some people say that a special education class is better for the student's well-being—safer, less distracting, less challenging content, and less stressful. They say that students will find friends “like them” in a special education setting. In the special education class, they are not stigmatized by modified work. All of these reasons disagree with the research on the benefits of inclusive education. In addition, these statements reflect low academic and social expectations. The reasons are generally only true when inclusive education is not done properly. With the right supports and professional development for staff, students with significant cognitive disabilities can academically thrive in the general education classroom. They can build meaningful friendships with their classmates who do not have disabilities.

Another reason some say students with significant cognitive disabilities need a separate setting is that they are educated with an “alternate curriculum.” However, IDEA does not recognize an alternate curriculum. The only curriculum mentioned in IDEA is the general education curriculum. A student may need individualized accommodations, modifications, or adapted materials, but there should not be a separate curriculum for all students who take the state's alternate assessment.

Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities benefit from inclusion in many ways. There is **no requirement that they must keep up academically** with everything

the general education class is doing. The U.S. Supreme Court case *Endrew F.* described a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as meeting challenging academic objectives while taking into consideration the unique circumstances of each student. To ensure this, the IEP should explicitly support inclusive education for the student.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities should have the opportunity to learn far more than “functional academics.” This term usually refers to very basic reading, writing, and math skills. To say that any student does not need challenging academic objectives violates the ruling about FAPE in *Endrew F.* According to the U.S. Department of Education's *Questions and Answers, #12 (p. 6)*, “Each child with a disability must be offered an IEP that is designed to provide access to instructional strategies and curricula aligned to both challenging State academic content standards and ambitious goals, based on the unique circumstances of that child.”

Paraprofessionals help to ensure that the student with the most significant cognitive disabilities receives specially designed instruction (SDI) in the general education classroom. Paraprofessionals may assist the general education teacher with providing appropriate modifications. Further, they can help produce successful interactions between the student with significant cognitive disabilities and classroom peers. With appropriate training, paraprofessionals improve the general education classroom experience for all students in the classroom, including the student with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The paraprofessional will not be a distraction and may be helpful to other students during times when the assigned student is independent.

Paraprofessionals do not make the general education classroom a more restrictive setting. The word “restrictive” in the LRE provisions of IDEA refers to time spent with peers without disabilities. It has nothing to do with the supports a student needs to obtain a satisfactory education in the general education classroom.

Resources for Myth 3

A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education. Institute Alana. https://www.nads.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf

Questions and Answers (Q&A) on U.S. Supreme Court Case Decision: Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Re-1. U.S. Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/qa-endrew-case-12-07-2017.pdf>

Taking the Alternate Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting. TIES Center. <https://files.tiescenter.org/files/Mdg9JhH6n-/ties-brief-2>

The General Education Curriculum, NOT an Alternate Curriculum! TIES Center. <https://files.tiescenter.org/files/TNcTi9iMCX/brief5-the-general-education-curriculum-not-an-alternate-curriculum>

Understanding the Role of Paraprofessionals in Your Child's Education in Inclusive Classrooms. TIES Center. <https://tiescenter.org/resource/understanding-the-role-of-paraprofessionals-in-your-child-s-education-in-inclusive-classrooms-ties-center-brief-7>

Myth 4. Inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities negatively affects students without disabilities and their teachers.

This myth suggests that there are negative consequences for students without disabilities when a student with significant cognitive disabilities is included in their classroom. For example, some people think that students with disabilities will hold back students without disabilities. This myth also indicates that including a student with a significant cognitive disability negatively affects general education teachers.

Research has reached the opposite conclusions. There is evidence that **inclusive schools and classrooms benefit both students with disabilities and students without disabilities.** Of course, the benefit depends on

providing appropriate supports and services in the classroom, along with properly trained personnel. Peer support and modeling improve academic and social outcomes for all students. Many people assume that peers without disabilities are providing all the support and modeling. Instead, the student with a disability often becomes a role model for students without disabilities.

General education teachers benefit from having students with significant cognitive disabilities in their classrooms when teachers have sufficient support and resources from education leaders. In addition to learning how to teach a wider range of student abilities, they also develop higher expectations for what students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn. Supports and resources they need include professional development, shared responsibility, collaborative teaming, and peer support.

Resources for Myth 4

Benefits of Inclusion. Kids Together. <https://kids-together.org/benefits-of-inclusive-ed>

Creating Communities of Belonging for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities by E. W. Carter & E. E. Biggs. Ties Center. <https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/introduction>

Peers Supporting an Inclusive School Climate. Inclusive Schools Network. <https://inclusiveschools.org/peers-supporting-an-inclusive-school-climate/>

Myth 5. Inclusion of students with significant cognitive disabilities requires resources and personnel schools do not have.

This myth reflects a concern about the availability of resources and personnel to support a student with significant cognitive disabilities in an inclusive classroom. It also is based on an assumption that inclusion is more expensive than educating students with disabilities in special education classrooms.

There is some truth to the concern about lack of resources and personnel. For example, students with significant cognitive disabilities might benefit from co-taught classes that many schools do not provide. Although co-taught classes are a valuable practice for educating students with and without disabilities, a special educator can provide support for a student with significant disabilities in the general education classroom without being a co-teacher. Further, general and special educators should plan SDI to meet IEP goals collaboratively. Then a general educator can provide that instruction without the presence of a special educator. In fact, the general education teacher has the most appropriate knowledge and training to provide grade-level academic instruction so that students with significant cognitive disabilities make progress in the grade-level curriculum. However, it is important that the general education teacher does so in consultation with a special educator to meet the student's individualized needs.

Studies show that inclusion is not more expensive than educating students with disabilities in special education classrooms. Further, the LRE provisions of IDEA indicate that cost cannot be a factor in making a decision about placement. It is the responsibility of the school district and school to allocate staff and resources appropriately to meet the needs of students in the least restrictive environment. Cost-benefit analyses indicate that enhancing the skills of teachers to educate an increasingly diverse student population is a good investment in ALL students and educators. They also indicate that benefits outweigh costs for students with significant cognitive disabilities when the post-school outcomes of inclusive education are weighed against the effects of separating students with disabilities from their peers without disabilities. For example, students with disabilities who receive a high-quality inclusive education are better prepared for employment and can contribute financially to their community. There is a financial benefit, not just financial cost, from inclusion.

Resources for Myth 5

Inclusive Education and Meaningful School Outcomes. American Educational Research Association (presentation/chapter). https://aera2017.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/McDonnell_2014_InclusiveEd.pdf

Myth: The High Cost of Inclusion. Inclusive Schools Network. <https://inclusiveschools.org/myth-the-high-cost-of-inclusion/>

Myth 6. Students with significant cognitive disabilities cannot be included in general education classrooms beyond elementary school grades.

Some people argue that the student will “plateau” and cannot be included past a certain grade, usually an elementary school grade. Related to this is the suggestion that students with significant cognitive disabilities who take an alternate assessment cannot be on a regular diploma track, and thus need an alternate curriculum. They say that an alternate curriculum means that the student requires placement in a separate classroom.

The term *plateau* in education means a time when the learner seems to stop making visible progress. The assumption that a student with a significant cognitive disability will plateau at a certain point violates the doctrine of least dangerous assumption. This doctrine holds that educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions that, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on student outcomes and learning. The myth about plateauing has a dangerous effect on educator attitudes and student outcomes. Even if a student starts to fall further behind in mastering grade-level academic standards, modifications to the curriculum as well as adapted materials can support progress in the curriculum. IDEA regulation 300.116 (e) states that a child with a disability should not be removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general education curriculum.

Similarly, the suggestion that students with significant cognitive disabilities cannot be on a regular diploma track is contrary to federal law. The federal elementary and secondary education law, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), says that states cannot prevent students who take an alternate assessment from attempting to complete the requirements of a regular high school diploma. This means that schools should not tell parents that their child is automatically off the diploma track and ineligible to earn a regular diploma. The degree to which the student needs curricula modifications may make it harder to earn a diploma, especially in states where there are no alternative pathways or alternative coursework to earning a diploma. Regardless, students must have the opportunity to work toward the diploma—especially in earlier grades. Students with disabilities have more years to earn a diploma under IDEA (age 21+). In addition, diploma requirements often change. Therefore, it is harmful to make a diploma decision before high school.

It is not accurate to say that students who take an alternate assessment need an alternate curriculum and require placement in a separate

classroom. A student may need individualized accommodations, modifications, or adapted materials, but there should not be a separate curriculum for students who take the state's alternate assessment. Accommodations, modifications, and adapted materials can be provided in the general education classroom. There is no need for a separate classroom.

Resources for Myth 6

Taking the Alternate Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting. TIES Center. <https://files.tiescenter.org/files/Mdg9JhH6n-/ties-brief-2>

The General Education Curriculum, NOT an Alternate Curriculum! TIES Center. <https://files.tiescenter.org/files/TNcTi9iMCX/brief5-the-general-education-curriculum-not-an-alternate-curriculum>

Using the Least Dangerous Assumption in Educational Decisions (TIP #6). Ties Center. <https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/foundations-of-inclusion-tips/using-the-least-dangerous-assumption-in-educational-decisions>

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