

# The Principal's Handbook for Leading Inclusive Schools

by

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# About the Authors

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## INCLUSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Inclusive school reform has resulted in all students with disabilities being placed into general education settings (including students with significant disabilities, students with mild disabilities, students with emotional disabilities, students with autism . . . all students) and providing inclusive services to meet their needs while eliminating pullout or self-contained special education programs. In the following subsections, we outline a seven-part process. This process is adapted from the Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) planning process (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993). See Figure 4.1, the Inclusive School Reform Planning Tool. It is important that the steps in the inclusive reform process are carried out in a democratic and transparent manner. We recommend that a representative leadership team consisting of school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, and other staff members go through this process together. It is also important for this team to check in and communicate with the entire staff throughout the process.

### Step 1—Setting a Vision

First, the team sets a vision for the school reform initiative (Step 1 on the Inclusive School Reform Planning Tool, Figure 4.1) around three areas: 1) school structure (i.e., how we arrange adults and students), 2) meeting the needs of all in general education, and 3) school climate. Many schools have gone through this process already; we provide an example of goals that a K–8 school created during its inclusive school reform work:

#### Structure Goals (how we arrange adults and students)

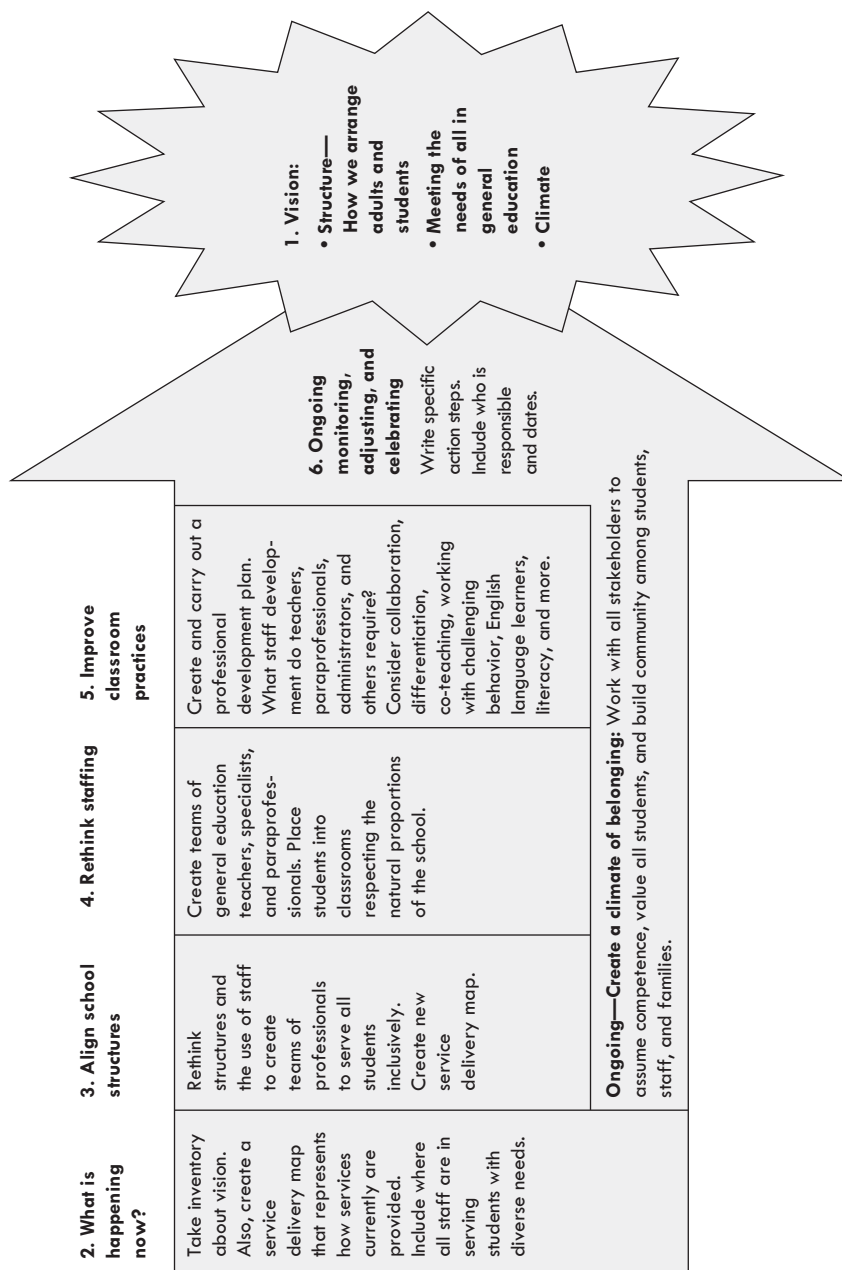
- Students will be placed in balanced classrooms with positive role models.
- The designated person will facilitate efficient monthly communication meetings for staff to discuss various topics surrounding inclusion.

#### School Climate Goals

- Examine the physical structure to determine locations conducive to planning, supporting, and implementing inclusion at each grade level.
- Create a schedule that promotes consistent and common planning time for ongoing communication and dialogue.
- Develop and implement approaches and procedures that promote a professional learning community (e.g., collaboration, consensus, agree to disagree respectfully).

#### Meeting the Needs of All in the General Education Classroom Goals

- Have planned opportunities for vertical communication to provide continuity between grade levels.
- Provide child-centered, differentiated, research-based instruction that challenges children of all abilities, supported by targeted staff development.



**Figure 4.1.** Inclusive School Reform Planning Tool. (Sources: Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993.)



## Step 2—What Is Happening Now?

### Creating Service Delivery Maps

For the second step, we recommend that the leadership team examine the existing way special education services are provided, the way human resources are used, and other important data. This process requires school teams to map out their current service delivery and the way they use their human resources in efforts to meet the range of student needs. In order for the team to understand the current service delivery and to be able to discuss it together, it is necessary to create a visual representation of the classrooms, special education service providers, general education classrooms, and how students receive their related services. An essential part of creating a service map is to indicate which staff pull students from which classrooms, which students learn in self-contained spaces, which paraprofessionals are used where—a complete picture of how and where all staff at the school work.

Figure 4.2 provides an example of this kind of visual map of the service delivery model at an elementary school before inclusive school reform. The rectangles around the edges represent the general education classrooms. The ovals in the middle labeled *Resource* represent resource special education teachers who worked with students with disabilities from many classrooms (as indicated by the arrows) through a pullout model. The circle labeled *Self-contained* represents a multi-age group of students with



disabilities who spent the entire day together, separate from general education peers. One rectangle is marked with *Inclusion: 20 + 8*. This represents what was previously called an “inclusive” classroom. This room had about 20 general education students with an additional eight students with disabilities.

This old service delivery plan concentrated or overloaded intense needs into certain classrooms; other classrooms lacked both students with disabilities and additional adult support. The visual representation captures the way special education teachers were providing support. As you can see, in this model some students were excluded and removed from the general education curriculum, instruction, and social interaction with general education peers for some or all of each school day.

### Step 3—Align School Structures

Step 3 involves rethinking structures and the use of staff in order to create teams of professionals to serve all students inclusively—in other words, creating a new service delivery map. After creating a map of the current service delivery, the staff works to create a new inclusive service delivery plan by redeploying staff to make balanced and heterogeneous classrooms where all students are included in order to enhance inclusion and belonging. Figure 4.3 provides an example of inclusive service delivery.

The new service delivery shown in Figure 4.3 was created by the same school depicted in Figure 4.2. Teachers and administrators reconfigured the use of staff to form teams of specialists and general education teachers to create inclusive teams that





collaboratively plan and deliver instruction to heterogeneous student groups. In this example, the school chose to pair special education teachers as part of inclusive teams with two to three general education classrooms and teachers. It is important to note that no new resources or staff were added to become fully inclusive: if a school builds inclusive service delivery using additional resources, if and when those resources go away, the plan will fall apart. We recognize that every school leadership team wishes it had more resources and more staff to support students. However, it is essential to build the inclusive service delivery with the current resources and staffing.

It is also tempting for some to try to maintain separate programs. For example, one school tried to move toward inclusive services while maintaining its self-contained programs. This resulted in staff being stretched too thin, with some students still being excluded and some being overloaded into certain classrooms. The school leadership realized that they needed to use all of their teachers to make a fully inclusive plan, and for the following year changed their plan. This reminds us that we need to use all of the resources at our disposal to create the new inclusive service delivery and not attempt to keep some students and therefore some resources separate.

#### **Step 4—Rethink Staffing: Creating Instructional Teams**

The fourth step in the process is to rethink the use of staff. This involves creating teams of general education teachers, specialists (e.g., special education teachers, teachers for English language learners [ELLs], others), and paraprofessionals to serve all students inclusively. In the school depicted in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, the special education teacher who was formerly a teacher in the self-contained classroom (Figure 4.2) now is co-teaching and co-planning with two general education teachers (Figure 4.3) and a paraprofessional. Chapter 5 of this book focuses specifically on the collaboration of these teams.

An essential component of this step is placing students into classrooms using the school's natural proportions of students with special education needs or other needs (like ELLs) as a guide. This means that if 13% of the students at the school have disabilities, then the student placement process should mirror that density of students with special needs in each classroom and not create classrooms with high percentages of students with special needs. Part of the task of creating classes for any age group—whether at elementary, middle, or high school—is to not overload or cluster many students with special education needs into one room or section. Using natural proportions as a guide, it is important to strive for balanced or heterogeneous classes that mix abilities, achievement, behavior, and other learning needs.

#### **Step 5—Improving Classroom Practices**

For the fifth step, it is important to change the daily classroom practices that the newly created teaching teams will use. This involves creating and carrying out a professional development plan for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. We recommend that schools consider such topics as collaboration, co-teaching, differentiated instruction, working with challenging behavior, inquiry-based instruction, ELL



methods, and literacy. In our experience, all the schools that have become more inclusive through this process have spent significant professional development time and energy learning about collaboration, co-teaching, and differentiation. See Figure 4.4 for a useful form for providing teams with feedback about the classroom environment. Chapters 7 and 8 in this book focus on how leaders can have an impact on classroom practices in academics and behavior.

## **Step 6—Ongoing Monitoring, Adjusting, and Celebrating**

The sixth component of the inclusive reform process is to monitor and adjust the plan, getting feedback from all staff, students, and families, but without abandoning the plan at the first moment of struggle or resistance. During the summer and into the first few weeks of the year, it is important to iron out logistics and adjust teaching schedules as needed. Then, to continue monitoring and adjusting, the leadership team begins to plan for the following year midway through each school year. In addition, this component involves making time to honor the hard work of school reform—specifically, the new roles and responsibilities that teaching teams have had to adopt—and celebrating successes along the way. Schools going through this process have done a variety of things to this end: mid-fall celebrations for staff to keep momentum, banner-raising celebrations to declare a commitment to this effort while inviting local officials and the press, and end of the year celebrations to finish the year on a positive note.

## **Step 7—Ongoing: Create a Climate of Belonging**

An ongoing part of inclusive reform needs to be creating a climate of belonging. A component of this necessitates involving all staff in the planning and implementation of the inclusive reform. Also, creating a climate of belonging means working with all stakeholders at school to assume competence and to value all students, building community purposefully in each classroom throughout the year, adopting a school-wide community-building approach, and enhancing the sense of belonging for all students, staff, and families. See Figure 4.5 for an observation form to help provide staff with feedback about issues of belonging.

It is important to note that the research and our experience with this process suggest that all seven aspects are needed. We recommend that implementation of reformed inclusive service delivery happens between Steps 4 and 5.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRICTS**

The steps described in the preceding section detail how to create inclusive schooling at the school level; however, many district administrators inquire about how to create an entirely inclusive district. Some district administrators engage in the seven-step inclusive school reform process on a school-by-school basis. Others undertake a large-scale approach. Figure 4.6 outlines some guidelines to use when moving an entire district to greater inclusion and points out common pitfalls.



# Classroom Environment Feedback Form

		<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>
<b>Lesson/content:</b>		<b>Teachers:</b>	
		1. 2.	
		<b>Other adults present:</b>	

	<b>Look for:</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>	<b>Descriptions:</b>
<b>Seating arrangements</b>	Students with disabilities are not all seated together.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	Where are students with disabilities seated?
	Students are provided with choices in where they are seated.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	
	All students are equally spaced throughout the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What types of seating arrangements are used throughout the lesson?
<b>Student ownership</b>	Student work and art are displayed throughout the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What do the walls of the classroom look like?
	Student-written rules, calendars, agendas, and so forth are present in the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	In what other ways is student pride evident in the classroom?

**Figure 4.4.** Classroom Environment Feedback Form.

(continued)

**Figure 4.4.** (continued)

<b>Organizing the space</b>	Quiet areas are available for students.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	Where are these located and what materials are in that space?
	The classroom space is divided up by learning activity.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What learning activities do students engage in throughout different parts of the room?
	Designated space exists for students to engage in movement.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What sensory materials are in this space?
<b>Materials and accommodations</b>	Teachers provide all students with necessary materials.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What materials are used and are they adapted for student needs?
	Students have easy access to their accommodations and communication devices.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What accommodations are used and what communication devices are present in the classroom?
<b>Adult language and tone</b>	Teachers use language and tone that is positive and respectful toward students.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What kinds of verbal interactions take place?
	Teachers use language and tone that is professional and respectful with other adults.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What kinds of verbal interactions take place about and between adults?

**Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_

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# Belonging Feedback Form

		<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>
<b>Lesson/content:</b>		<b>Teachers:</b>	
		1. 2.	
		<b>Other adults present:</b>	

	<b>Look for:</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>	<b>Descriptions:</b>
<b>Friendships</b>	Teachers facilitate classroom friendships.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What strategies do the teachers use to facilitate friendships?
	Friendships throughout the classroom are evident regardless of disability label.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What kinds of friendships exist?
<b>Student interaction</b>	Teachers use cooperative learning strategies.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What strategies are implemented?
	Students interact with a variety of other students in the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What kinds of interactions occur?
<b>Peer support</b>	Teachers provide opportunities for students to tutor and mentor each other.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	Where are these located and what materials are in that space?
	Students are taught and supported by peers.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What learning activities do students engage in throughout different parts of the room?

**Figure 4.5.** Belonging Feedback Form.

(continued)

**Figure 4.5.** (continued)

<b>Classroom community</b>	Teachers employ a democratic curriculum.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	How are issues of social justice reflected in the lesson?
	Students engage in community-building activities.	<input type="checkbox"/> Not evident <input type="checkbox"/> Emerging <input type="checkbox"/> Evident <input type="checkbox"/> Much evidence	What community-building activities are used?

**Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL REFORM

**Q.** I recognize we need to be more inclusive, but I think my staff needs to build their skills to meet the range of learners' needs and in general become more effective first. Should we engage in that professional learning first?

**A.** We have seen many schools try this approach to improve in general before including all students. This has proven largely unsuccessful as most of the time the staff never "improves enough" and still does not feel they have the skills to include all students. This approach also leaves the step of actually including students as off in the future and given the frequent changes in school leaders and priorities, this then rarely happens. We do not recommend this approach. However, if it must be taken, we recommend committing to a time line of not more than 1 year before including all students.

**Q.** Would it be better to take one grade level at a time and slowly move into inclusion?

**A.** We have experienced this approach as well and we have two major concerns with it. First, it takes years and years before all students are included by building a program one grade at a time (i.e., at a K–8 school it would take 9 years). Second, this slow pace often acts as a barrier for full implementation as leaders change, priorities change, staff can create additional barriers to advancing inclusion, and momentum dies. We do not recommend this approach.

**Q.** Would it be better to just start with volunteer teachers and let the rest of the staff see how inclusion can happen?

**A.** It makes a lot of sense to harness the energy advantage of enthusiastic teachers and teams of professionals who want to work together. This is rarely enough to include all students, so it relegates inclusive services to some students in pockets of the school. It then rarely spreads to the entire school and this allows some staff who do not volunteer to maintain the erroneous belief that they are not teachers for students with disabilities.

**Q.** In moving toward more inclusive services, would it make sense to use some of my special education staff to do pullout interventions or functional skills/self-contained programming for students with significant needs?

**A.** We strongly recommend that in moving to inclusive services it becomes a school-wide philosophy and that all resources (namely special education staff and general education staff) are used to build collaborative teams to inclusively meet the needs of all students. We have seen schools move toward inclusion but keep some special education teachers to run separate programs and pullout services. This leaves the teachers who are working to include students spread too thin and



creates fragmented service delivery. We do not recommend this as this approach does not harness all of the available human resources to make effective inclusive services efficient and not spread teams too thin. Maintaining reasonable numbers of general education teachers for special education teachers to co-plan and teach with requires putting the maximum resources (all staff) toward this endeavor.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on the process and leadership involved in inclusive school reform for students with disabilities. It is important to note that students with disabilities historically and currently are not the only subset of students who have been systematically denied access to the general education classroom. Students of color and low-income students (due to overrepresentation in special education and a reliance on more restrictive placements), students learning English as a second language, students who receive related services, and students who have behavioral issues are much more likely to experience exclusion from the general education curriculum, instruction, and peers. The most important thing to note here is that access to the general education core curriculum is paramount.

When students are removed from the general education classroom for any type of service, there is a tradeoff and cost to that. Students miss important content and fall further behind. Inclusive school reform, when done correctly, looks not only at students with disabilities, but also at all other groups of marginalized students, and prioritizes full-time access to the general education curriculum, instruction, and peer groups. The focus is on seamlessly providing students the services and supports that they need within the context of general education in order for all students to reach their social and academic potentials.