Are Principals Ready to Welcome CHILDREN WITH
Inclusion shouldn’t be seen as a threat to a school’s learning environment.

Bronte H. Reynolds

In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act rededicated the provisions of PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, providing that all children with disabilities be afforded a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment. In 2004, it was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), once again reinforcing the concept that students with disabilities are provided access to the general education classroom (Salend, 2005), if such an environment is deemed to be the least restrictive environment for the child. The implementation of these laws over the years has provided both opportunity and challenge for public schools.

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There has been an ever-increasing interest by parents of children with disabilities to have their children educated in the general classroom setting, and parent networks advocating for special needs children have proliferated during the past 20 years. Irrespective of a child’s disability diagnosis—whether it is autism, cerebral palsy, a severe emotional disorder, or attention deficit disorder—parents increasingly want their children to have educational opportunities and social exposure equal to what other children have. Legal coalitions, law firms, and independent attorneys specializing in the rights of students with disabilities have aggressively represented these children and their parents.

A Setting for Confrontation

While one might think the intensity of this movement for inclusion would bring about stepped-up efforts on the part of universities and school districts
to provide effective special education training for general education teachers, administrative training seems to have fallen short of the need to address this compelling area. The absence of this education sets the stage for feelings of defensiveness, reluctance, and apprehension among school administrators.

Principals, to their credit, are protective of their staffs, students, and programs, so it is only natural for them to be vigilant about what they consider to be any potential threat to their schools’ learning environments. The aggressive nature of parents of children with disabilities can lead to confrontation when their advocacy reaches the principal’s office.

There is a tendency for principals confronted with such behavior to defend against what they perceive to be a threat to their schools by demonstrating who is in charge and exercising their authority. Although these parents don’t see themselves as the enemy when they arrive, a threatened principal who gives them a healthy dose of his or her ego and power can make them one in no time—and you can bet the principal’s office won’t be their final stop along the road to full inclusion for their children.

Preparing for Inclusion

Without exception, at some point in their professional lives principals will be faced with a full-inclusion request. Are you ready for it? How well prepared are you, intellectually and emotionally, to proactively address this trend and seek accommodation for special needs students? Here are four recommendations:

Get educated. Acquire an understanding about disabilities and the unique challenges that various conditions present. Knowledge is the antidote to anxiety. It changes the mind-set from outright rejection to objectivity, eliminates fear, and provides the foundation for proactive planning. It also changes the school administrator’s perspective of parents of children with disabilities who aggressively seek full inclusion, from enemy to ally.

Apply the training. Armed with knowledge that comes from effective training, principals will find themselves in a position to promote a coalition of general education and special education teachers and parents, and avoid a climate of confrontation. A parent’s request for full inclusion is an opportunity to build a positive relationship, and adequate training helps the principal focus on parents of children with disabilities as part of the solution, not the problem. Invite them to explore available resources. Involve them in the investigation of similar programs in other schools, and work together to identify challenges that must be overcome.

Investigating the feasibility of a request for full inclusion by a parent must be objective and realistic while maintaining a genuinely supportive climate. Principals who demonstrate acceptance and trust can effectively relieve parents of special needs children of angst and apprehension, and build long-term relationships with them.

Develop an action plan. Once the stage has been set for creating an alliance with parents of children with disabilities, there are important steps a principal must include in a plan for creating a smooth transition to full inclusion of children with disabilities in his or her school:

- Grow faculty support. Teachers work hard to maintain a sense of order and to create a safe learning environment in their classrooms. Integrating students with disabilities can be perceived as a threat to that environment. To lessen concerns and encourage faculty support, the principal must make a compelling case to teachers as to the value to be added to the school through the inclusion of students with disabilities. Teacher input must be solicited and meaningful staff development provided that shapes their attitudes and behaviors.

- Promote parent acceptance. Most parents of general education students are comfortable with their school environment and any change, especially one as complex as the introduction of full inclusion, can be perceived as a threat. Parents need to be educated in order to reduce their anxieties and correct their misperceptions. They need to be made aware that full inclusion, rather than threatening their children’s educational environment, is both
Promote understanding by students in the general classroom. Providing them with advance information will help promote their adaptability and acceptance and give them a sense of partnership. Invite the school psychologist or guidance counselor to conduct sessions so that general classroom students can share their anxieties, thoughts, and ways they can become key players in the success of a full inclusion model. Introduce special needs students who would be a part of the program and invite the parents of special needs children to speak to students in the regular classroom. Allow regular classroom students to become a part of the program design, including the drafting of classroom rules and consequences, and assigning buddies for students with disabilities.

The timing and sequencing of this student component are important. Parent acceptance must come first because parents don’t like to be taken by surprise or feel that their children are being used. However, once students are on board they play a meaningful role in the success of a fully included child, and their advocacy can have a striking impact on their parents’ level of acceptance.

Gather resources. Critical to the acceptance of a full inclusion concept is the provision of fiscal, human, and physical resources to make the plan work. The principal must actively seek assistance from the local school district, special education consortia, and state and federal government agencies in order to accrue the resources necessary to make such a program successful. They include adequate staffing, such as school psychologists, school nurses, and instructional assistants, and one-on-one aides for children with special needs. These resources should be in place when the school year begins.

Mainstreaming students with special needs into the general classroom setting, if done with thoughtful planning and the involvement of all those impacted by the move, places school leaders at the forefront in the effort to meet the spirit of IDEA.

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WEB RESOURCES

The Los Angeles Unified School District’s Division of Special Education offers instructional initiatives for integrating students with disabilities into general education classrooms. http://sped.lausd.net

The Council for Exceptional Children is a valuable source of information and research on special education. www.cec.sped.org

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