

White Paper
A Model for the Education of Children with Exceptional Needs and their Peers:
Evidence-based Inclusive Education for Chattanooga & Hamilton County

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Summary

Inclusion with appropriate supports improves academic and social outcomes for both students with disabilities and their typical peers. This paper outlines the need for evidence-based inclusive education in Hamilton County schools and provides recommendations for inclusion-based school reform.

Background

In 2015, Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) identified 5,573 students as having disabilities—12.7% of all children in our public schools (TDOE, 2015). This is an underestimate of the population of students needing special education because it does not include students who (a) have not been identified or diagnosed, or (b) left public schools for private schools or homeschooling, and (c) we know that approximately 19.8% of U.S. children have special health care needs (National Survey of Children, 2009/2010).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) states that schools and public agencies must provide early intervention and education to children with disabilities. IDEA emphasizes inclusion in terms of access to the general education curriculum, high expectations, and maximal independence in adulthood for children with exceptional needs:

Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by: (A) having high expectations for such children and *ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom* (emphasis added), to the maximum extent possible, in order to (i) meet developmental goals and, to the maximum extent possible, the challenging expectations that have been established for all children; and (ii) be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible (IDEA, 2004).

By contrast, special education in Hamilton County is currently characterized by (a) extensive use of segregated, categorical classrooms with low academic expectations, (b) families told their child cannot attend specific schools, and (c) students being bused to schools outside of their zone (i.e., cluster sites). Further, the State of Tennessee currently considers HCDE out of compliance on state standards on bullying and hazing (Anderson, 2016). And, for the most recent data available, HCDE has suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities that the TN Department of Education considers “discrepant.” When data on suspension/expulsion is disaggregated by race, it is evident that the treatment of African American children with disabilities alone is driving this discrepancy (TDOE, 2014).

Special education inclusion rates in Hamilton County are equally disturbing, and enlightening at the same time. One measure of inclusion is identifying the percent of students with disabilities who spend 40% or more of their day in general education classrooms. The average inclusion rate for students with intellectual disabilities for counties in Tennessee is 35.6%. Hamilton County’s inclusion rate is 16.5%, placing our community in the bottom 10% for inclusion statewide (Gayle, 2016). Similar trends prevail across other disabilities. For example, in 2012-13², a Hamilton Co. student with autism was more than

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² Authors have requested more recent dataset from TDOE and will update this paper with those newer statistics.

four-times as likely to be included less than 40% of the day compared to a student with autism in Williamson Co. (TDOE, 2013).

Solution: Evidence-based inclusive education

Inclusive education is a model where children with exceptional needs and their typical peers learn together, with appropriate supports, modifications and accommodations for every child. National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2000) concluded that inclusive practices “embrace the idea that since everyone is an individual, we need to organize schools, teaching, and learning so that each student gets a learning experience that ‘fits’” (p. 2).

Inclusive education rejects segregated educational models, which cordon off children with exceptional needs from their peers (often at a very young age), and focuses more on life skills and less on academics as children grow older. In short, segregated education is characterized by:

- segregation of children by presumed ability;
- few opportunities for socialization with typical peers;
- reduced academic opportunities in favor of a non-academic "life skills" curriculum;
- special education conceived of as a *place*, rather than a *range of services*.

Inclusive education, by contrast, is characterized by:

- grouping of all children by age, not ability;
- access to the academic curriculum for every child, with need-specific supports, accommodations and modifications;
- provision of supportive services (e.g., speech therapy or reading intervention) in the classroom setting when possible and pullouts for deficit areas only when necessary;
- continual opportunities for socialization;
- presumes competence of all children, and promotes high expectations.

Inclusive education models can fail if children with exceptional needs are not provided with appropriate classroom supports. However, when proper support is provided, inclusive education pays huge dividends. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study (Wagner, et al., 2006), children with exceptional needs who spent more time in general education had, on average:

- higher scores on standardized tests in math and reading;
- less disruptive behavior;
- fewer absences;
- better outcomes after high school concerning employment and independent living.

These results held on average for all students with disabilities, regardless of their disability label, the severity of their disability, gender, or socio-economic status. Other studies have shown a range of related benefits from inclusion:

- significantly higher gains in adaptive behavior relative to comparable exceptional students educated in separate settings (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004);
- increased opportunities for instruction on age-appropriate goals and more goals related to basic skills (Hunt & Farron-Davis, 1992);
- increased social interactions with classmates (Lee, Yoo, & Bak, 2003) and improved social skills (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001);
- greater incidence of friendships (Owen-DeSchreyver, et al., 2008).

By contrast, since the 1970s, no studies have shown any academic benefit for students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities from a segregated education model (Falvey, 2004).

Inclusion's benefits for typical peers

Inclusion in no way limits the educational opportunities or lowers the academic standards available to non-disabled students. The presence of students with *severe* disabilities in general education classrooms do not negatively affect typical peers in terms of allocated instructional time, actual instructional time, or learners' engaged time (Hollowood, et al., 1995). Findings of no negative impact given the inclusion of students with severe disabilities have been replicated elsewhere (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998; Peltier, 1997; Staub & Peck, 1995).

To the contrary, students without disabilities make comparable or greater academic gains (math and reading) in inclusive classrooms (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004). A recent, quasi-experimental study of elementary and middle schools actually shows a substantive and significant positive difference in math scores in inclusive schools compared to non-inclusive ones (Choi, et al., 2016). Typical peers also benefit socially from the inclusion of children with special needs (Staub, 2005; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). If empathy and acceptance of diverse individuals is a goal of public education, then inclusive practices facilitate these goals.

One mechanism by which typical peers receive academic and social benefit from inclusion is through the use of Class-Wide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) models and Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), where typical peers assist peers with special needs in classroom learning (McMaster & Fuchs, 2015). In studies of students with mild disabilities, the implementation of CWPT strategies improved academic outcomes for *all* students, including academically at-risk typical peers (Sailor, 2002). Areas of significant gain include math, reading, spelling, and social studies (Fisher, Shumaker, & Deshler, 1995). Multiple studies show academic gains in both primary and secondary school settings (Stenhoff & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2007).

Case study: Metro Nashville Public Schools³

Several years ago, leaders in Metro Nashville Public Schools realized they had a serious problem with inclusion. In fact, Metro Nashville ranked last among Local Education Agencies (LEAs) according to the state's Indicator 5 measures of inclusion. Over the past several years, Metro Nashville has eliminated cluster sites and self-contained classrooms,⁴ and students with special needs now attend either their home-zone school or their school of choice. Except for students with certain impactful disabilities requiring external placement, all students with disabilities have a general education placement and access to the general education curriculum. Ongoing professional development, collaboration, and transparency have become hallmarks of the system.

Since this transition, Metro Nashville has seen the achievement gap between students with/without disabilities begin to close. They simultaneously addressed their problem with discrepant rates of suspensions/expulsions of children with disabilities. These changes were implemented by reallocating but not adding special education teachers, who now participate as "co-teachers" in general education classrooms. Metro Nashville did invest in more classroom paraprofessionals as part of this transition (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). The Metro Nashville LEA is larger, more urban, and on average poorer than Hamilton Co., which suggests similar changes can be implemented successfully here.

Additionally, Metro Nashville gave more direct control of special education budgeting to its principals using Student-based Budgeting (SBB), allocating dollars instead of staff to schools. For example, in 2015, Metro Nashville gave schools \$4,250 for each student, plus additional dollars per student based on (a) grade level, (b) prior academic performance, (c) English learner status, and (d) exceptional education status (Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2016). A collaboration of each school's general and special

³ This section is based on a series of conversations with administrators from the Exceptional Education Department of Metro Nashville Public School in April-May, 2016. The department's mission statement reads, in part, "Inclusion brings classrooms together by teaching all students as one group, including those with exceptional education needs. In an inclusive classroom, all students learn more and specialized services can be made more readily available throughout the district."

⁴ With exceptions for students with medically fragile conditions and very severe disabilities.

education staff and administrators then mapped out the following year's schedule and supports for each student with exceptional needs, and schools made their own staff adjustments based on student mapping results and teacher input. Metro Nashville administrators indicated they have decreased the achievement gap between special education and regular education students from 40% to 20%.⁵ In 2016, one Metro Nashville student was the system's first valedictorian with a diagnosis of autism.

Next steps

Based on the evidence summarized above, the Chattanooga Inclusive Education Working Group makes the following recommendations for reform in HCDE:

- increase resources for professional development that addresses special education needs for all teachers, paraprofessionals, principals and other administrators;⁶
- eliminate self-contained classrooms, placing students with disabilities in home-zone schools or school of choice;
- redistribute special education instructors based upon home-zone placements of students with exceptional needs;
- allow principals to control special-education funds using a Student-based Budgeting system;
- reduce class sizes and appropriately distribute students in a way that is conducive to effective teaching and learning;
- implement co-teaching models, using savings from the elimination of cluster-site busing to fund additional paraprofessionals for classroom support;
- implement class-wide peer tutoring (CWPT) models;⁷
- review educational resources and opportunities for inclusion of children with medically fragile conditions and low-incidence disabilities;
- expand inclusive pre-K, as pioneered by Westview Elementary School;
- review and revise criteria for the suspension and expulsion of students with exceptional needs;⁸
- initiate a study for year-round schooling to better support students vulnerable to academic and social regression during the summer months;
- provide high-school students with disabilities access to work-based learning, transition coaching, and self-advocacy training to increase post-secondary options and to better prepare them to assume roles as productive citizens;
- enhance transparency and communication between the school and parents by providing parent education on IDEA and IEP/504/IFSP development, thus encouraging parents to be more comfortable as collaborative team members;
- study the efficacy of standardized testing for children with exceptional needs and make recommendations for statewide reforms;
- update and monitor enforcement of bullying policies.

We welcome the opportunity to provide more detailed recommendations and guidance. External funding is available for some of these reforms, while other suggested reforms are revenue neutral. Given the academic, social, character-building, and economic benefits of inclusion for all students, we believe evidence-based inclusive education can be *the* transformative idea for Hamilton Co. public schools.

⁵ We will report specifics on the metrics that go into these statistics in an updated version of this paper.

⁶ Only 1 in 5 teachers feel well prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

⁷ For a review of the research literature on CWPT and peer-assisted learning, see Bui, et al., (2010).

⁸ For example, a significant body of research shows that the most common school disciplinary systems are ineffective with students with autism (Koegel, Robinson, & Koegel, 2009, 157-159).

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Select resources for educators

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About Us

The Chattanooga Inclusive Education Working Group is a committee of parents of children with exceptional needs, teachers, and related education professionals and disabilities advocates. We are committed to bringing evidence-based inclusive education to our community: If possible, through the public school system; if necessary, through a private school alternative.

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