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# CSEF *brief*

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## Resource Implications of Inclusion: Impressions of Special Education Administrators at Selected Sites

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### Abstract

This brief summarizes a preliminary study on the resource implications of inclusion. The movement toward inclusion reflects efforts to enhance the full participation of special education students in regular education classrooms across the country—a concept that is firmly rooted in the initial provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Recent and more active efforts to increase inclusion raise important policy questions related to providing and allocating resources for special education services. Information regarding the cost implications of inclusion is so limited that it is unclear whether districts are moving to inclusion to save money, or whether they perceive inclusionary practices as too costly to be implemented.

This study attempts to fill this information void. Although the findings cannot be generalized beyond the limited number of districts studied, they do shed light on the cost implications of inclusion, related particularly to staffing, transportation, facilities, equipment, and professional development. These findings should be useful to policymakers at all levels of governance and to researchers as they design more extensive studies about the resource implications of inclusion.

**I**nclusion is a concept that is sweeping special education programs across the country. While often viewed as a relatively new phenomenon, inclusion is deeply rooted in the *least restrictive environment* provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It is typified by a student's full participa-

tion in a regular education class with "ownership" of that student shared by both regular and special educators (Sailor, Gee, & Karasoff, 1993). However, implementation can vary widely, from a student having a homeroom assignment in a regular education classroom with some pull-out instruction for specialized skills,

to full-time participation in a regular classroom with instructional support provided on an as-needed basis.

Although inclusion has been extensively discussed in the literature, information is notably absent regarding how allocations of resources change as a result of moving to inclusion. This brief focuses on a study that explored these resource allocation issues through interviews with administrators in twelve school districts. The study also sheds light on concerns about inclusion being used to save money at the expense of students in need of specialized educational services.

### Purpose

The study was designed to examine the resource implications of inclusionary practices in local school districts and schools that were actively involved in bringing students served in segregated special schools or cluster programs back into their home or neighborhood schools. Most of the districts involved in the study were focusing their inclusion efforts on students with severe cognitive disabilities, or physical and multiple disabilities. Several districts had previously instituted a merger of special and general education programs to promote inclusion of students with milder disabilities, including learning disabilities.

Planning and implementation of inclusion had been underway for only two to three years in the schools

and districts under study. Therefore, the reported costs were often of a start-up nature. Most individuals interviewed were not certain what level of resources, such as instructional assistants or special transportation, may need to be maintained over time. Since this study was based on the subjective judgments of administrators in a limited number of districts, it was viewed as only a beginning step in understanding the cost implications of inclusion. Its goal was to attempt to identify some of the major resources impacted by inclusion and derive some general conclusions about how district budgets are affected.

## Findings

■ **Personnel.** When the delivery of special education services changes from a more separate, categorical model to inclusion, substantial changes appear to occur in the ways special education personnel are allocated and used. The predominant responsibilities of the special education staff change from providing direct instruction to interacting with other teachers and specialists and directing the activities of instructional assistants (also called aides or paraprofessionals). In inclusive schools, these aides have increased responsibilities that include more direct support to and instruction of individual students in regular classrooms. These changes in responsibilities have resulted in changes in the allocation of personnel—most notably an increase in the number of paraprofessionals providing direct instructional support. Virtually no sites reported a decrease in professional staff, and only a few sites reported the addition of professional staff.

■ **Transportation.** The impact of inclusion on special transportation arrangements appears to vary and depends on individual student's disabilities and how rural the school district is. Initial increases in the costs of transporting students with disabilities to their neighborhood schools may occur as districts purchase lift-equipped buses or modify existing ones. However, these increases appear to be offset over time by decreased use of special door-to-door transportation and the use of special bus aides. In addition, the time that students with disabilities spend on buses is significantly reduced as students move to their neighborhood schools.

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*Despite additional start-up costs, "when the costs of providing services in home schools are considered relative to the costs of transportation and educational services in specialized schools, inclusion may very well be less expensive."*

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■ **Facilities.** Physical plant modifications are important in creating an inclusive school. This is particularly true when students have mobility impairments. Because most older school buildings are not accessible for these students, school districts may face significant renovation costs. The degree to which a district supports expensive renovations seems related to the general wealth of the district and its commitment to inclusionary practices. Less affluent districts may choose interim solutions such as

moving classrooms to the ground level of a building. Ultimately, however, most of the administrators interviewed believe that buildings will have to become fully accessible in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

■ **Materials and Equipment.** Most of the costs for materials and equipment associated with inclusion appear to be one-time, start-up costs required to equip several local school buildings as opposed to a single special education center. Often the specialized equipment is needed by an individual student during an entire school day, and duplicate equipment would be necessary regardless of where a student is educated. Once duplicate sets of equipment are available, they can be moved around schools as needed and do not need to be purchased again except to upgrade or change.

■ **Professional Development.** All of the districts in the study had invested heavily in professional development. Typically, efforts to develop teachers' skills and change staff attitudes began prior to the actual movement of students. However, in order for inclusion to work, it was apparent that teachers and aides would need consistent professional development, as well as opportunities to talk with one another, problem solve, share strategies, and jointly plan instruction for individual students. This would require time provided through innovative scheduling during the school day, as well as release time that required substitutes.

■ **Other Observations.** Several other interesting findings emerged from the study. Perhaps the most significant was what some administrators perceived as a change in the relationship between parents of students with disabilities and the school system, from

a relationship that was adversarial to one that is more trusting and collaborative. In at least two districts, due process actions noticeably decreased; and parents reportedly expressed a greater sense of trust in school staff. Another observation with cost implications was the degree to which the inclusion activities were related to overall school restructuring efforts, which were occurring in almost a third of the districts studied. In those districts, other special programs, such as Chapter 1, bilingual education, or Head Start, were being restructured; and resources and services were blended with special education to provide a more seamless set of educational programs for all students.

## Conclusions

■ **Does inclusion cost more?** This exploratory study was primarily designed to identify key resources that are impacted when a district moves to inclusion. Results suggest that the initial implementation of inclusion is likely to require additional resources. Whether these costs represent new expenditures or reallocations of existing funds is not fully addressed in this preliminary study. Start-up costs, such as increased professional development, increased use of paraprofessionals, and capital modifications, can put demands on district special education and general operational budgets. However, the ongoing costs of inclusion remain unclear as individual schools continue to increase their capacity to serve all students with disabilities.

When the costs of providing services in home schools are considered *relative* to the costs of transportation and educational services in cluster programs or specialized schools, inclusion may very well be less expen-

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*“...special educators are pushing forward with inclusion because they believe it is the right thing to do, not because they want to save money.”*

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sive. In order for districts to recognize these savings, however, dollars would need to follow the student into the new program. A more detailed and exacting analysis of the costs of inclusion, which is currently being conducted by the Center for Special Education Finance (CSEF), will shed more light on these issues.

■ **Where might significant cost savings or cost increases occur?** Transportation is one area where districts may recognize significant cost savings over time. As more students are able to either walk or use regular school buses to get to their neighborhood schools, the number of routes, buses, and miles of specialized transportation will decrease. These savings can be significant. If transportation savings can be applied to other budget lines, such as personnel or staff development, a district will be more

able to adequately support the instruction of individual students with disabilities in home schools.

Over the long term, the number of personnel will likely increase with a move toward inclusion. The increase will be primarily in the number of paraprofessionals, since additional classroom-based support may be necessary for some students. The number of professional staff do not appear likely to increase or decrease. Several factors, including district policies or state regulations on special education teacher/student ratios and teacher qualifications, could restrict flexibility in allocations of staff. Interestingly, school principals interviewed indicated that they had significant autonomy in how they used existing staff, but were bound by district and state policies that determined the allocations and qualifications of special education teachers in their buildings.

## Method

Interviews with school district staff provided the information for this study. School districts and individual schools were selected for interviews based on their strong efforts to implement inclusion. Sites were also selected to represent urban, rural, and suburban districts in various regions of the country. Several schools implementing inclusive programs that were not necessarily part of a districtwide initiative were also included.

Fourteen interviews were conducted in 12 school districts. Interviews were conducted with 11 local special education administrators and with three school principals who had chosen to implement an inclusive model in their schools. Additional interviews were conducted with two university researchers who had been involved in training and evaluation activities in two of the selected districts. The interview questions focused on issues pertaining to personnel, transportation, facilities, materials and equipment, and professional development.

■ **Why are school districts moving toward inclusion?** A major impression remaining from interviews with this sample of districts is that special educators are pushing forward with inclusion because they believe it is the right thing to do, not because they want to save money. All of those interviewed were strong proponents of inclusion and were involved voluntarily in implementing inclusion in their districts or schools. While they were not specifically asked why they believed in inclusion, some of those interviewed volunteered that they believed that students with severe disabilities had basic rights to be part of the everyday lives of non-disabled students. These individuals also indicated that their communities and school districts strongly supported diversity and believed that inclusion was a model that could help many students. In addition, specific anecdotal information provided by some

administrators clearly reinforced the notion that inclusion has had positive impacts on the communication and social adjustment of some children with disabilities. However, the primary motives in support of inclusion, as reported by the administrators interviewed for this study, appear to be rooted in concepts of social justice and equity of opportunity.

Because of their commitment, district administrators did not appear to let the lack of funds dampen their efforts. If they could garner support from school boards and state education agencies, they enhanced their programs. However, if money for start-up costs was not *readily* available, they somehow found the needed resources. In short, the inclusion effort can be as expansive as the funds available or as constrained as the budget, but where there is a will, it appears that the movement to create inclusive schools will continue.

## Participating School Districts

Chicago Public Schools, IL  
Fayetteville-Manlius Central School District, NY  
Indian Prairie School District, IL  
Lake Washington School District, WA  
Montgomery County School District, MD  
Montgomery County School District, VA  
Prince George's County School District, MD  
Roswell School District, NM  
Ruidoso School District, NM  
Rutland Southwest Supervisory Union, VT  
South Burlington School District, VT  
Weld County District #6 (Greeley), CO

## For Information

This brief summarizes a more detailed report of this preliminary investigation, published under the same title. If you would like a copy of the complete paper, please contact CSEF.

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