



# Mainstreaming in the Public Schools

Special Education > Mainstreaming in the Public Schools

## Table of Contents

**Abstract**

**Keywords**

### Overview

**Mainstreaming & Inclusion**

**The Least Restrictive Environment**

**Historical Perspective**

**Federal, State, & District Mandates**

### Applications

**Impact on Students**

**Role of Teachers**

**Role of Administrators**

### Issues

**Barriers to Mainstreaming**

**Overcoming Barriers to Inclusion**

**Professional Development & Collaboration**

**International Concepts**

### Conclusions

### Terms & Concepts

### Bibliography

### Suggested Reading

## Abstract

Mainstreaming is a term used in public schools to describe ways in which educational strategies are utilized to provide appropriate special education services to disabled students assuring the least amount of disruption in routine, while maximizing relationships and contact with general education peers. In its inception, mainstreaming, was derived from the Civil Rights desegregation movement. Mainstreaming and desegregation assured students with diversity or disability the same rights to equal educational opportunities (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999, p. 10). The role of general education teachers in public education environments in relationship to special education is one of the most challenging obstacles general educators indicate they experience. One of the main concerns that general education teachers express is in carrying out mainstreaming and inclusion is in making appropriate accommodations for special education students.

## Overview

Mainstreaming is a term used in public schools to describe ways in which educational strategies are utilized to provide appropriate special education services to disabled students assuring the least amount of disruption in routine, while maximizing relationships and contact with general education peers. Mainstreaming has also been described as “the act of returning previously removed students back to regular classrooms (Lilly, 2001, p. 86).

## Mainstreaming & Inclusion

A complement to mainstreaming, inclusion can best be described as the “full-time education of students with and without disabilities in regular classroom settings” (Denning, 1995). Inclusion has been described as a total integration process with special education support given according to the special education student’s needs provided primarily within the general education classroom (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999, p. 10). Villa and Thousand (2003), described inclusion as the “principle and practice of considering general education as the placement of first choice for all learners” (p. 20). This approach further encouraged special education teachers to offer services, supplemental intervention

## Keywords

**Curriculum Accommodation**

**Custodial Environment**

**Inclusion**

**Least Restrictive Environment**

**Mainstreaming**

**Individual Education Plan**

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

supports, and other appropriate educational interventions within the general education environment, instead of removing students from the general education classroom for services. At its root concept, inclusion is about valuing everyone's ideas and beliefs and treating everyone equally in such a way that is not excluding others in any capacity (Messiou, 2006, p. 41). Schwartz (2007) described special education supports provided in a general education environment as "adaptations, differentiated instruction, and universal design strategies" (p. 39).

### The Least Restrictive Environment

Central to understanding purposes for mainstreaming and inclusion, "least restrictive environment" can best be described as the general education classroom (Schwartz, 2007, p. 40). Villa and Thousand (2003) interpret the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a federal law that mandated that children with disabilities have the right to an education in the least restrictive environment. They reported ways in which the interpretation of least restrictive environment has changed over the last thirty years. At the laws' inception, educational professionals most likely interpreted IDEA to mean that only individuals with mild disabilities like those eligible for speech would be mainstreamed, because their presence in the general education environment would produce minimal impact. By the 1980s, the interpretation of least restrictive environment evolved to include the practice of mainstreaming students with more moderate and severe disabilities. As the interpretation of least restrictive environment has evolved, many more students have been served in general education environments. However, the methods by which disabled children are served in "mainstreamed" environments remain disproportionate depending upon the interpretation of what constitutes the "least restrictive environment" (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 20).

### Historical Perspective

In its inception, mainstreaming, was derived from the Civil Rights desegregation movement. Mainstreaming and desegregation assured students with diversity or disability the same rights to equal educational opportunities (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999, p. 10). From a historical perspective, former President Gerald

Ford signed a special education bill called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act that established a federal mandate designed to allow "free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities" in 1975. Presently, approximately 6.8 million children are served under what is now called IDEA (Davis, 2007, p. 21). The Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), PL 99-457 (1986, 1991) was enacted in response to the need for early intervention services for families of young children with disabilities. Part H of the statute directed states to develop and implement statewide, family-centered, community based, comprehensive, coordinated, multi-disciplinary interagency programs of early intervention services for disabled children. In 1997, amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act added language that required Individual Education Plans (IEP) for special education students to define how the student would be included with and progress from the general education curriculum. Later in 2004, IDEA amendments, titled the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) retained and augmented access to general education by requiring that a student's IEP would specifically designate accommodations and curriculum modifications to guarantee student involvement with and advancement in the general education curriculum (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007, p. 101).

### Federal, State, & District Mandates

Literally, the idea for changing special education began with IDEA as it was originally described by the federal government 1975. The federal government not only influenced special education through the law, but it also influences states and districts through federal monies directed to the states and districts aimed at upholding the law. This money ensures continuity in delivery of service, but also allows the federal government to dictate, to a certain degree, how special education services are delivered to students in educational environments (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). States are more willing to comply with governmental regulations when money is involved.

At the state level, money is also generated through taxes that are directed to individual districts and schools depending on the numbers of students served through special education services. In most districts, roughly 12 to 15 percent of the overall school population receives special education services. These districts and schools receive a specific allotment from tax monies aimed at providing students with appropriate special education services. These monies are utilized to support districts in providing special assistance and accommodative supports such as paraeducators, interventionists, and specialized equipment to improve opportunities for special education students by allowing them to access the least restrictive environment (Davis, 2007).

## Applications

### Impact on Students

Students are most deeply impacted by how these laws are upheld. Before mainstreaming, children with disabilities were often segre

gated from general education environments and sequestered into special classes, or custodial environments. These custodial environments were not designed to be educational environments, but rather safekeeping environments where little preparation to live actively in a democratic society was offered. With little or no training in real life, individuals housed in these environments were permanently segregated from society (Lilly, 2001, p. 83). It was only after the desegregation movement that the drive toward inclusion was integrated into how we now know public education.

Schwartz (2007) described special education supports provided in a general education environment as “adaptations, differentiated instruction, and universal design strategies” (p. 39). Appropriate and consistent integration of these mandates insures more appropriate and inclusive behaviors on the part of general education students in relation to their interactions with special education students, as these students receive much of their instruction in the same classroom. As general education students witness the inclusive policies dictating interactions with special education students, they also adopt many of these same ways of thinking. Thus, students are the beneficiaries of appropriately integrating lawful practices that govern out interactions.

### Role of Teachers

In schools, teachers must assume varying roles. One of their primary roles is advancing the law and carrying out lawful mandates. Many times, the framework for upholding the law is not well defined, and teachers struggle with how to best make accommodations to initiate best practice. The role of general education teachers in public education environments in relationship to special education is one of the most challenging obstacles general educators indicate they experience. One of the main concerns that general education teachers express is in carrying out mainstreaming and inclusion is in making appropriate accommodations for special education students. Often, appropriate accommodations are not well defined (Lilly, 2001). These obstacles sometimes create difficulties

### Curriculum Accommodations

Curriculum accommodations typically describe the practices utilized by general education teachers in facilitating Individual Learning Plans in the general education settings. Curriculum accommodation is a term used to typically describe differentiated instruction models, curriculum modifications, curriculum augmentation, and specific accommodations that ensure student involvement and access to the general education curriculum. These adaptations and modifications refer to the methods in which curriculum content is “represented or presented to students to promote student engagement, either through pedagogy or the use of technology.” Additionally, these skills often include specific practical, cognitive, and student driven practices that include “shadowing, verbatim notes, graphic or advance organizers, self regulation strategies, semantic maps, mnemonics, chunking, question, and visualizing strategies.” All of these strategies are described to help general educators in supporting

the special education student’s success in a general education least restrictive environment (Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon, 2002; Graham & Harris, 2005, Jitendra, Edwards, Choutka, & Treadway, 2002, Pressley, 2005).

### Role of Administrators

School administrators are leaders in how mainstreaming, inclusion, and least restrictive environment are practiced and supported in schools. Phillips, Alfred, Brulle, and Shank (1990) indicated that healthy guidance and positive support by the principal was critical in upholding the law of inclusion. Principals are central in helping alleviate personality conflicts, providing adequate planning time, providing collaboration among staff, and in allowing special education teachers to spend structured and sufficient time in general education classrooms (p. 334). Daam, Beirne-Smith and Latham (2001) also indicated that all educators should be given more training in collaboration, and special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators should be provided with professional development to help them understand their lawful responsibilities in providing a collaborative environment in which inclusion is made available to all groups (p. 336).

From a school-wide approach, Villa and Thousand (2003) stated that school administrators should carry out a “systems approach” for developing successful promotion and implementation of inclusive education. They recommended a program of “visionary leadership and administrative support” complemented by redefined roles and relationships between students and professionals, and a collaborative, supportive educational environment. Additionally, they advised that inclusive education has been most successful in school communities that already reorganized to meet the diverse needs of students. Best organizational practices that supported an inclusive environment included:

- Trans-disciplinary teaming,
- Block scheduling,
- Multi-age student grouping,
- Looping,
- School-wide positive behavior support and discipline approaches,
- Detracking, and
- School-within-a-school family configuration of students and teachers (Villa and Thousand, 2003, p. 20).

Additionally, these theorists irrefutably stated that in order for inclusive education to succeed, administrators must articulate a new vision of leadership, build consensus for developing the vision, and lead all stakeholders to the shared vision. This shared vision of leadership should be underscored by clarifying the legal requirements of meeting all students’ needs in the least restrictive environment.

## Issues

### Barriers to Mainstreaming

To clarify these issues, it is important to define barriers to mainstreaming and ways of overcoming these barriers. It can be argued that central to many of the difficulties regarding inclusion and mainstreaming in the past has referred to labeling children based on their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Lilly (2001) argued that compulsory education and intelligence testing invoked conflict in a school system originally “designed for the elite.” From intelligence tests, educational professionals could then label students based on their ability and postulate a potential cause for failure if students were not successful as learners. Lilly further indicated that labels invoke educators to over-generalize in regard to individual children (p. 83).

Another main issue that produces difficulty in adequately fulfilling the law is that these terms are not uniformly defined. According to Villa and Thousand (2003), “the nature of inclusion varies.” In some schools, inclusion is best expressed by the physical presence of social integration of special education students within the general education environment. In other schools, inclusion means “active modification of content, instruction, and assessment practices so that students can successfully engage in core academic experiences and learning” (p. 20). This is a significant issue, because it leads to inconsistency in how students are treated as well as in teacher expectations. Until these issues are resolved, barriers to mainstreaming will continue to exist in America’s schools.

A third critical barrier to providing mandated special education practice involves a lack of collaborative communication among all critical stakeholders. New teachers may not be brought into full knowledge of district practices, unless the new teacher seeks out information. Daam, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2001) reported that general education teachers often felt unprepared to teach special education students and both special education and general education teachers often lack the communication skills needed to build a team oriented, collaborative environment to support students who need support the most (p. 332). They further supported research conducted by Phillips, Alfred, Brulle, and Shank (1990) indicating that healthy guidance and positive support by the principal was critical in upholding the law of inclusion. Other barriers that obscured positive collaboration included (a) conflicting personalities, (b) insufficient planning time, and (c) insufficient time in the classroom by the special education teacher (p. 334).

### Overcoming Barriers to Inclusion

Lilly (2001) outlined specific interventions that he argued would produce a mainstreamed environment. These practices included:

- Avoiding over-generalized labels that imply general deficits;
- Setting specific, achievable objectives and teaching directly to those objectives;

- Establishing firm, fair classroom rules and enforcing them consistently;
- Identifying students with self-esteem deficits and designing activities aimed at developing self-confidence;
- Individualizing assignments to meet the direct needs of each student utilizing a point of reference for the selected student;
- Meeting the needs of students with reading deficits or other academic deficits by providing alternative strategies to help them access the curriculum;
- Seeking advice from other educational professionals and other resources in meeting the needs of the special education student; and
- Providing ongoing self-evaluation to determine teacher progress in meeting the requirements of children with special needs (pp. 87-88).

Additionally, supports to overcome barriers to mainstreaming were described as professional development, in-service opportunities, coursework, professional support groups, and other coaching and mentoring opportunities that would help teachers understand and teach differentiation strategies, current theories of learning that make teaching practices relevant and meaningful, authentic alternatives to paper and pencil tests, a balanced approach to literacy, thematic interdisciplinary curriculum approaches emphasizing differentiation, and infused technology throughout the curriculum (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 22). Overall, this new way of thinking about special education emphasizes “a system of diversity” in response to best practice, inclusion, mainstreaming, and meeting the requirements of the least restrictive environment. This transformed paradigm fits with multiple levels of meeting the needs of a diverse educational environment. Especially necessary for new teachers, it is important to have an understanding of the background of IDEA, definitions for models of inclusion and mainstreaming, and least restrictive environment, and some understanding of how to successfully integrate these models within a positive framework.

### Professional Development & Collaboration

Appropriate professional development and collaboration are central in determining outcomes and success in public education environments. All of the parties interviewed for the Daam, Beirne-Smith and Latham (2001) study indicated that all educators should be given more training in collaboration, and special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators should be provided with professional development to help them understand their lawful responsibilities in providing a collaborative environment in which inclusion is made available to all groups (p. 336).

### International Concepts

Teachers in other countries are also working hard to understand the principles of inclusion and mainstreaming. Researchers from the United Kingdom argued that inclusion in schools has been

delayed because educational institutions are unable to include all children in the least restrictive environment due to the barriers of “lack of knowledge, lack of will, lack of vision, lack of resources, and lack of morality” (Clough & Garner, 2003, p. 87). The solution offered to overcome these barriers included providing adequate support to teachers designed to help them support students. For example, Lieberman (1996) and Spindler and Biott (2000) asserted that professional development was key in providing opportunities for peer coaching, critical friends, appraisal, and collaborative work (Harrison, 2002). Additional studies from New Zealand, Botswana, India, and Greece similarly supported the need for inclusion as a model for providing equal access to equal education for all. Central to this concept, Messiou (2006) argued that marginalized individual’s voices “should have a central role in the process of inclusion” (p. 40). He called for more research to be done in “inclusive education” in order that educators would find constructive methods for valuing everyone’s ideas and beliefs (p. 41).

## Conclusions

As educators, one of our primary responsibilities in a public school environment is a continued pledge to uphold the law by providing and protecting equal opportunities for all students regardless of the academic, emotional, or behavioral needs of the student. This essay has purposed to help readers better understand mainstreaming and inclusion from a public school, general educator’s standpoint to insure that the law is understood, supported, and hailed as a guideline of collaborative conduct, because such a substantial gulf exists in providing differentiated education strategies and in producing a classroom environment that provides an inclusive, mainstreamed access to the least restrictive environment.

## Terms & Concepts

**Curriculum Accommodation:** Curriculum accommodation is a term that typically describes differentiated instruction models, curriculum modifications, curriculum augmentation, and specific accommodations that ensure student involvement and access to the general education curriculum.

**Inclusion:** Inclusion is the total integration process of special education students in general education classrooms offered according to the special education student’s needs. It is also the principle and practice of considering general education as the placement of first choice for all learners.

**Least Restrictive Environment:** Least restrictive environment can best be described as the general education classroom.

**Mainstreaming:** Mainstreaming is the provision of appropriate special education services to students while simultaneously assuring the least amount of disruption in routine, and maximizing relationships, and contact with general education peers.

**Individual Education Plan:** Practical, cognitive, and student driven practices documented in a formalized plan during an annual meeting that are aimed at supporting the special education student’s success in the general education classroom.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law mandating that children with disabilities have the right to an education in the “least restrictive environment.”

## Bibliography

- Baker, S., Gersten, R., & Scanlon, D. (2002). Procedural facilitators and cognitive strategies: Tools for unraveling the mysteries of comprehension and the writing process and for meaningful access to the general curriculum. *Learning Disabilities: Research and Practice, 17*, 65 – 77. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=5889248&site=ehost-live>
- Clough, P., & Garner, G. (2003). Special education needs and inclusive education: Origins and current issues. In S. Bartlett and D. Burton (Eds), *Education Studies: Essential Issues*. London: Sage Press.
- Daam, C. J., Beirne-Smith, M., & Latham, D. (2001). Administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of the collaborative efforts of inclusion in the elementary grades. *Education, 121*(2), 331 – 338. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=4025826&site=ehost-live>
- Davis, M. (2007). Special education was signed by Ford, despite reservations. *Education Week, 26*(18), 21. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=23653880&site=ehost-live>
- Denning, W. V. (1995). *An analysis of the effects of full-time inclusion on the academic achievement of elementary general education students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1995. Dissertation Abstracts International, 11904.
- Graham, S., & Harris, K. (2005). *Writing better: Effective strategies for teaching students with learning difficulties*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Harrison, J. K. (2002). The induction of newly qualified teachers in secondary schools. *Journal of In-Service Education, 28*(2), 255 – 275.

- Jitendra, A. K., Edwards, L., Choutka, C. M., & Treadway, P. S. (2002). A collaborative approach to planning in the content areas for students with learning disabilities: Accessing the general curriculum. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 17*, 252 – 267. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=7416935&site=ehost-live>
- Lieberman, A. (1996). Practices that support teacher development: Transforming conceptions of professional learning. In M. W. McLaughlin & I. Oberman (Eds.), *Teacher Learning: New Policies, New Practices*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Lilly, S. M. (2001). Special education – a cooperative effort. *Theory Into Practice, 15*(2), 82 – 89. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=5204201&site=ehost-live>
- Messiou, K. (2006). Conversations with children: Making sense of marginalization in primary school settings. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 21*(1), 39 – 54. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19572917&site=ehost-live>
- Phillips, W., Alfred, K., Brulle, A., & Shank, K. (1990). *The will and skill of regular educators*. Eastern Illinois University Charleston, II (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED320323).
- Pressley, M. (2005). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching* (3rd Ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Ritter, C., Michel, C., & Irby, B. (1999). Concerning inclusion: Perceptions of middle school students, their parents, and teachers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 18*(2), 10 – 17. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=3241617&site=ehost-live>
- Schwartz, P. (2007). Special education: A service, not a sentence. *Educational Leadership, 64*(5), 39 – 42. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=23996911&site=ehost-live>
- Soukup, J., Wehmeyer, M., Bashinski, S. & Bovaird, J. (2007). Classroom variables and access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 74*(1), 101 – 120. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=26361619&site=ehost-live>
- Spindler, J., & Biott, C. (2000). Target setting in the induction of newly qualified teachers: Emerging collegiality in a context of performance management. *Educational Research, 42*(3), 275 – 285. Retrieved October 3, 2007 from EBSCO Online Database Academic Search Premier. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=3862751&site=ehost-live>
- Villa, R. & Thousand, J. (2001). *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd Ed.). Baltimore: Brookes.

## Suggested Reading

- Graham, S., & Harris, K. (2005). *Writing better: Effective strategies for teaching students with learning difficulties*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Pressley, M. (2005). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching* (3rd Ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Villa, R. & Thousand, J. (2001). *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd Ed.). Baltimore: Brookes.

---

## Essay by Sharon Link, Ph.D.

Dr. Sharon Link is an educator, presenter, and mother of a child with autism. She has worked extensively in public education and has researched education and its relationship to autism disorders and other disabilities for the last ten years. Dr. Link currently is the executive director for Autism Disorders Leadership Center, a non-profit research center and is co-founder of Asperger Interventions & Support, Inc. a professional development center. Both organizations are education and research centers seeking to improve education by creating a system of diversity and inclusion in America's schools. To learn more, visit: Asperger Help at <http://aspergerhelp.net>.

Copyright of Research Starters Education: *Mainstreaming in the Public Schools* is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.