

# Research Support for Inclusive Education and SWIFT

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## Introduction

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Thirty years of research shows us that when students with varied learning and support needs learn together, they experience better academic and behavioral outcomes, social relationships, high school graduation rates, and post-school success. Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) is a whole school model, driven by multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) for *all* students. This approach to inclusion creates schools where *all* students, including those with extensive needs, are fully valued, welcomed, well supported, and meaningfully engaged in learning. This brief highlights several studies of inclusive education, MTSS, and four supporting domains of the SWIFT framework.

## Benefits of Inclusive Education for ALL Students

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### Academic Benefits

Schools implementing a schoolwide model of equity-based inclusive education demonstrated larger student growth on annual state reading and math assessments relative to students attending comparable schools (Choi, Meisenheimer, McCart, & Sailor, 2016).

Students without disabilities made significantly greater progress in reading and math when educated in inclusive classrooms (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004). Likewise, engagement in the general education curriculum strongly and positively correlated with math and reading achievement for students with disabilities (Cole, et al., 2004; Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Sermier Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012).

The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education produced either positive or neutral effects on outcomes for their non-disabled classmates (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013).

### Behavioral & Social Benefits

Students with autism who were academically and socially included at school experienced more positive developmental trajectories that extended into adulthood, engaging in fewer antisocial behaviors and demonstrating improved independent daily living skills (Woodman, Smith, Greenberg, & Mailick, 2016). Students with

extensive support needs who spent more time integrated among their general education peers demonstrated improved metacognitive and interpersonal abilities, and established more substantive networks of relationships (Copeland & Cosbey, 2009; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009; Wehmeyer, 2006).

### **Postsecondary & Employment Benefits**

Students with disabilities, including those with extensive support needs, who were educated in inclusive settings experienced greater post-school success than did their segregated peers, attaining meaningful social outcomes within core life domains of education, employment, and independent living (Haber et al., 2016; Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery, & Storch, 2010; Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler, 2009; White & Weiner, 2004).

Students with disabilities who were included in general education classrooms were twice as likely to enroll and persist in postsecondary education relative to their more segregated peers (Rojewski, Lee, & Gregg, 2015).

## **Multi-Tiered System of Support**

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MTSS is a continuum of research-based, systemwide practices of using data to match evidence-based instruction and support to the academic and behavior needs of all students (Sailor, 2016; Wakeman, Browder, & Flowers, 2011). SWIFT MTSS integrates academic and behavior systems (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2009), whereas previous research tended to address the two dimensions separately.

### **Inclusive Academic Instruction**

Multi-tiered, schoolwide approaches to instructional delivery support improved student outcomes. In one district, first grade reading success more than doubled, the proportion of students identified as having reading disabilities was cut in half, and the percentage of students passing the state reading assessment dramatically increased in 4 years (Harn, Chard, & Kame'enui, 2011). A multi-tiered system of support for reading is associated with significantly improved outcomes across all grade levels in an effect size analysis of five elementary schools (Mellard, Frey, & Woods, 2012).

Students with and without disabilities benefit from Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiation practices—two essential features of MTSS (Kennedy et al., 2014; Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2005).

## Inclusive Behavior Instruction

Implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is associated with higher mathematics achievement, reading achievement, and lower truancy (Madigan, Cross, Smolkowski, & Strycker, 2016; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012).

PBIS implementation is associated with reduction of behavior problems for all students (Sugai & Horner 2009), helping students with higher needs through function-based interventions (Steege & Watson, 2009) and positive effects when using an individual student wraparound process (Suter & Bruns, 2009).

Schoolwide PBIS (SWPBIS) led to significant reductions in office discipline referrals and student suspensions (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010), as well as reduced racial disparity in the use of exclusionary discipline (Vincent, Sprague, Pavel, Tobin, & Gau, 2015). Relationship-building and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies implemented within a SWPBIS framework reduced the frequency of school disciplinary practices overall, while also reducing racial disparities in the application of school discipline, ultimately promoting more positive and safe learning environments (Skiba & Losen, 2015).

## Administrative Leadership

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### Strong & Engaged Site Leadership

The presence of strong and engaged site leadership predicts improved academic achievement (Di Paola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Fullan, 2004; Klingner, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001; McLeskey, Waldron, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2014), and is critical to developing and sustaining inclusive school practices (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Collaborative teaming structures both necessitated and reinforced a schoolwide culture of trust, facilitating more efficient resource usage while also positively impacting student achievement (Di Paola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004).

Distributed leadership among teacher leaders is a contributing factor to school success (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

### Strong Educator Support System

Leaders of effective inclusive schools coupled high staff expectations with responsive professional support, purposefully cultivating individual and collective capacity through targeted training and strengths-based coaching (Shogren, Gross, et

al., 2015). In addition, teaming structures facilitated mutually supportive engagement around student data and instruction (Kozleski, Satter, Francis, & Haines, 2015; Lyon, Blue-Banning, & McCart, 2014).

Comprehensive and continuous educator support systems led to improved instruction, increasingly positive and safe school climates in which teachers could engage students in sensitive discourse surrounding human difference and diversity, and greater sustainability of schoolwide inclusive practices (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross, 2016; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Skiba & Losen, 2015).

Instructional coaching greatly enhances the possibility of teachers making desired changes to their habituated behaviors (Knight, 2007). Access to coaching support significantly enhanced the long-term sustainability of SWPBIS (Mathews, McIntosh, Frank, & May, 2014). Targeted training and coaching of paraprofessionals significantly improved their facilitation of social interactions within inclusive settings among students with autism and their peers (Feldman & Matos, 2012; Kretzmann, Shih, & Kasari, 2015).

Positive educator attitudes regarding inclusive practices were associated with increased instructional adaptability in meeting all students' needs, with increased prevalence of such attitudes tending to promote further collegial diffusion through collaboration and mutually supportive development (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). Prior training on teaching students with disabilities was generally associated with more positive teacher attitudes toward inclusive education (Vaz et al., 2015).

Leaders of effective inclusive schools cared for and invested in teachers, providing opportunities for distributed leadership while protecting teachers from the pressures of high-stakes accountability (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010).

Educators in inclusive schools benefit from the presence of a schoolwide professional learning plan that is ongoing, comprehensive, and contextually relevant (Leko & Roberts 2014).

## Integrated Educational Framework

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### Fully Integrated Organizational Structure

A case study of a highly effective inclusive school suggested the significance of establishing a unified schoolwide system of instructional delivery and support. By eliminating segregated classrooms and duplicative practices, special educators and paraprofessionals were able to help general education classrooms facilitate differentiated universal instruction (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014).

Integration of organizational structures can extend the reach of typically segregated resources, removing artificial limitations on who may benefit and enabling all students' access to needed support (Sailor, 2009).

Effective inclusive schools ensured adequate time and attention was dedicated to scheduling and resource allocation (Kozleski et al., 2015; Giangreco, 2013), processes that can be more logistically complex in inclusive schools (Lyon et al., 2014).

Deploying paraprofessionals to support classrooms rather than individual students has allowed inclusive schools to better address all student needs while affording students with disabilities greater space to engage with their peers (Giangreco, Suter, Hurley, 2011).

Increased support personnel (e.g. paraprofessionals, specialized staff) within general education classrooms aided the development of all students (Kurth, Lyon, & Shogren, 2015), and helped foster greater acceptance of diversity and difference (Francis, Blue-Banning, et al., 2016b; Shogren, McCart, Lyon & Sailor, 2015).

Peer-mediated instruction has facilitated positive academic and social benefits for students with extensive support needs within inclusive settings (Carter, Asmus, & Moss, 2014; Watkins et al., 2015; Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013), potentially improving outcomes for their non-disabled peers as well (Schaefer, Cannella-Malone, & Carter, 2016; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997).

Cooperative learning and peer tutoring arrangements have successfully promoted improved social acceptance of students with disabilities among their non-disabled peers (Garrote, Dessemontet, & Opitz, 2017).

Students who provided peer supports for students with disabilities in inclusive general education classrooms demonstrated positive academic outcomes, such as increased academic achievement, assignment completion, and classroom participation (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997).

### **Strong & Positive School Culture**

Effective inclusive schools facilitated meaningful participation and a sense of belonging for all students (Lyon et al., 2014). Students both with and without disabilities said the positive cultures they experienced were related to high expectations, supportive environments in which they could be successful, and feelings of connection to educators and peers within their school communities. This

suggests the need for teachers to strike an appropriate balance of high expectations, encouragement, patience, and support (Shogren, Gross, et al., 2015).

Students with disabilities who attended schools that employed greater use of co-teaching practices expressed a stronger sense of belonging and connection within their school communities, and were more self-efficacious in engaging new experiences (Rivera, McMahon, & Keys, 2014).

Students who received culturally responsive instruction reported feeling safer, experiencing fewer instances of victimization and discrimination, and attaining higher levels of academic achievement (Skiba & Losen, 2015) than those who did not receive culturally responsive instruction.

Reflections by students with extensive support needs who had been successfully included in school and had attained regular high school diplomas indicated the importance of individualized services and supports being implemented within the context of a schoolwide inclusive culture that holds high expectations for all students (Orlando, Klinepeter, & Foster, 2016).

## Inclusive Policy Structure & Practice

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### Strong LEA/School Relationship

A strong and supportive relationship between individual schools and their districts is critical for growing and sustaining the success of school reform initiatives (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

A qualitative study indicated that schoolwide inclusive reform efforts benefit from a school district that allows for flexible use of funds and personnel deployment, making those resources available to address the local needs of the school community (Lyon et al., 2014).

Strong district buy-in and support for schools' inclusive practices enabled conflicting policies to be resolved and resources used more efficiently (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, Sailor, 2015).

### LEA Policy Framework

A policy framework must exist at the school, district, state, and federal levels that is fully aligned with inclusive reform initiatives and removes barriers to successful implementation (Kozleski & Smith, 2009).

## Family & Community Engagement

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### Trusting Family Partnerships

Establishment of trusting family partnerships promotes improved academic achievement among students across all grade levels (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000; Hoy & Tarter, 1997).

Trusting family partnerships form when families and school personnel trust and rely upon one another as they pursue common goals, and families have multiple opportunities for meaningful participation in their children’s education and in the life of the school (Haines, McCart, & Turnbull, 2013).

Parent focus groups often attributed positive and inclusive school cultures to principal leadership (Francis, Blue-Banning, et al., 2016). When visiting the school, parents experienced positive, informal interaction with principals, which promoted parents’ comfort and sense of belonging (Francis, Gross, Blue-Banning, Haines, & Turnbull, 2016; Francis, Blue-Banning, et al., 2016).

### Trusting Community Partnerships

“Research indicates that when a collective group of school, family, and community stakeholders work together, achievement gaps decrease.” (Bryan & Henry, 2012, p. 408). These stakeholders may include community organizations, such as universities, businesses, local municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and social service agencies (Gross et al., 2015).

Principals of effective inclusive schools expressed a strong sense of commitment to local community successes and interests, formed social connections, and actively engaged beyond professional role boundaries (Gross et al., 2015). School-community partnerships motivated many stakeholders to engage with and contribute to the life of the school (Gross et al., 2015; Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, & Turnbull, 2015).

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