

## "Stars in Alignment" Article in Brief

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Based on *Stars in Alignment* by Wayne Sailor and Amy McCart, published in 2014, *Research & Practices for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 39(1), 55-64. doi: 10.1177/1540796914534622

### Introduction

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For more than 40 years many organizations, families, and advocates for students with disabilities have worked toward creating a more inclusive public education system. As a result, many more students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) spend 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms. But a closer look reveals that most of this progress toward inclusion is associated with students who require fewer supports, while students who have more extensive needs remain segregated from the other children in their communities.<sup>1</sup>

This brief reviews some of the history of inclusive education that explains the current context, and suggests how to advance inclusion of *all* students to meaningfully participate in the public education system and achieve positive post-school outcomes.

### History of Inclusive Education

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In 1975, Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Amendments (PL 94-142), the predecessor to today's IDEA. In the debates leading to passage of this statute, two competing viewpoints emerged:

1. All students with disabilities should be educated in regular public schools with the greatest possible contact with typical students.
2. Students with disabilities should be educated in more sheltered, protective environments, wherein specialized services could be concentrated to meet their needs.<sup>2</sup>

Congress generally favored the first view by requiring States and districts “to assure that to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions, are educated with children who are not handicapped” (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1412 [5][B]). Some refer to this clause as an “integration imperative” and suggest that needed services and supports for any student could, with few exceptions, be considered “portable” into general education schools.<sup>3</sup> This position calls for a focus on *structural elements* of the education system to ensure that effective instruction and high quality interventions are readily available for all

students, regardless of learning style, disability, or risk factors. The benefits of doing so are better academic, behavioral, and post-school outcomes for all students.<sup>4</sup>

However, Congress also allowed the second view to be maintained by including least restrictive environment (LRE) language in the statute. The LRE concept, in practice, supports placement of students within a “continuum of services” that range from segregated special education schools to grade-level general education classrooms. *Placement* of individual children becomes the focus, as opposed to *systems* that bring the needed services and supports to the students in general education schools.

These two viewpoints are at the heart of current debates about inclusion of students with extensive support needs (i.e., cognitive learning and behavioral or emotional) in general education. The question today is not *whether* integrated education should occur, but *how* it can occur more often and more effectively for all students, especially those with extensive needs for supports and services provided under IDEA.

## Reframing the Discourse: Defining Inclusion Through Structures and Interventions, Not Student Characteristics

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Models of how one thinks about disability have the power to lock us into old and relatively useless frameworks or to liberate us from them and thereby compel us to consider different approaches.<sup>5</sup> The prevailing ideas about disability locate educational “problems” within a student’s characteristics, and the U.S. public education offers parallel systems of programs and services aligned with those problems. Thus, the focus of special education is on individual student problems and *placements* in these systems. Typical inclusion models work to shift the placements back to general education, and students with more extensive support needs who have been placed in general education classrooms are often stationed with one-on-one paraprofessionals conducting lessons wholly disconnected from the general curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

SWIFT Center offers a different approach, a schoolwide approach to inclusive education, driven by a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), guided by design teams of both general and special educators, utilizing universal design for learning (UDL) principles, and implemented in a manner resulting in demonstrable gains for all students. This alternative model focuses on *structural elements*, in particular rethinking school space allocation, coordinating all resources, deploying all school personnel and services, and matching evidence-based practices to meet measured student needs.<sup>7</sup> Schoolwide MTSS involves comprehensive school structures and interventions that support all students, regardless of their characteristics, including those with significant learning or behavioral support needs and those at risk for school failure due to other circumstances.

## MTSS for All Students

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In an MTSS framework, each student in a school is given, based on their measured educational need, what they instructionally need to succeed when they need it, rendering the physical location of supports and services irrelevant (i.e., special education is a service not a place). MTSS provides screening and progress monitoring at three levels of intervention intensity for both behavior and academics, offering purposeful, timed interventions for each student based on their individual needs.<sup>8, 9, 10, 11, 12</sup> Such an approach requires rethinking use of space at the school (possibly including community environments), deployment of all school personnel in the teaching-learning process, and creative, responsive scheduling.<sup>13</sup>

MTSS also incorporates UDL at every level of support. UDL is an approach to curriculum and instruction design with three key features: (a) multiple means of teaching (i.e., multi-modal); (b) multiple means of expression (e.g., oral and written tests); and (c) multiple means of student engagement (i.e., maximizing student motivation to tackle difficult material).<sup>14, 15</sup>

## Sustaining MTSS for All Students

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MTSS is the driver for achieving better student outcomes. However, SWIFT Center identified four domains for installing and sustaining effective and efficient MTSS for all students. These are:

1. Strong and engaged administrative leaders committed to transformative inclusive education from traditional educational practices<sup>16, 17</sup>
2. Integrated educational framework where “silos” located within schools are dissolved and collaborative teaching structures emerge at all grade levels<sup>18</sup>
3. Family and community partnerships, where families are actively engaged in both the organizational makeup of the school as well as their child’s education<sup>19</sup>
4. District level support and integrated policy structure that is fully aligned and removes barriers and misconceptions surrounding effective implementation<sup>20, 21, 22</sup>; and a supportive relationship between individual schools and their district central offices through which school resource decisions can become a matter of trust and mutual respect.<sup>23</sup>

When these domains are nested within and supportive of a schoolwide MTSS that is focused on data-based decision making, where universal student screening and regular progress monitoring using benchmark assessments occur, and curriculum-

based measures and grade-level annual assessments guide academic and behavioral instruction for all student groups.<sup>24, 25, 26, 12</sup>

## Conclusion

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This schoolwide approach to reshaping *structural elements* in order to include all students engages general educators in the task of identifying special education practices that offer benefits to non-identified students as well as those identified for special education under IDEA. General educators value special educators for what they offer the total school applications, and special educators value the instructional and curricular support offered by the general educators. Together, all students, including those with extensive support needs, can meaningfully participate in the general curriculum, achieve their potential, and experience better post-school outcomes.

## Suggested Citation

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