THE SPECIAL EDge

Informing parents, educators, service providers, and policymakers of research-based and promising practices, state and federal laws and policies, and the successes and challenges of dedicated educational partners as they work to improve and strengthen special education services for students with disabilities in California

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Recognizing Rightful Presence

What's Inside...

Letter from the State Director.....2

50 Years of IDEA.....3

Rightful Presence Right Now: A Call to Action for California 5

Teresa's Journey Through School and Into a Career She Loves 7

Orange County Department of Education Joins National Effort 10

Youth Leaders Gather in Sacramento 13

Rightful Presence from the Beginning 15

Seneca's Unconditional Education 18

Rightful Presence in Rural Schools 19

Letter from the State Director

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—one of the most transformative laws in our nation's history. It's fitting that we celebrate this milestone with a renewed focus on rightful presence.

For decades, families, educators, advocates, and individuals with disabilities have pushed our country toward more just and effective models of education. IDEA began by guaranteeing access; then evolved to emphasize progress, early intervention, and smooth transitions across childhood. At its core, the law has always carried a vision of dignity, independence, and meaningful adult lives for every child who once would have been excluded from public schools.

The early years of implementation were far from perfect. Separate classrooms and separate systems emerged, and we quickly learned the limitations—and harms—of segregation. Research made clear that inclusion leads to better outcomes for students and reaffirmed that schools work best when every student truly belongs. Today's conversations about rightful presence represent the next, more ambitious step in that journey.

This issue explores what rightful presence means and why it matters. While definitions vary, students, families, and educators often describe the same feeling—they know it when they experience it. The SWIFT Center at the University of Kansas continues to lead national efforts to deepen our understanding of rightful presence and support districts, including partners in Orange County, in making it a foundation of practice.

Achieving this ideal isn't easy. It requires strong communication, collaboration, and commitment in systems that are often strained. Yet every step toward classrooms where each child feels seen, valued, and included is a step toward a better world.

There is no more important work—and no better way to honor 50 years of IDEA. ▯

Rachel Heenan, Ed.D.
Director, Special Education Division, California Department of Education

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50 Years of IDEA

by Ann Vessey, Training and Support Specialist
for Early Childhood Mental Health, Development and Disabilities at WestEd

November 29, 1975, was probably the most important day in history for parents of children with disabilities. This was the day that the United States Congress passed Public Law 94-142, now known as IDEA or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Many parents advocated for the law. And many would tell you that this was the day they had fought for, cried about, and prayed over.

I remember the day my best friend's mom received the news that her son, David, would finally get to go to a "real" school. She shed tears of joy. David had cerebral palsy and was deaf. His mom would have to take him to several places every day to receive physical therapy and educational services. He had been denied services by the programs for children who are deaf because he was in a wheelchair, and he was denied services by programs for children with cerebral palsy because he was deaf.

It was then that I decided I wanted to be a special education teacher. I looked forward to someday providing educational supports and services for children with physical and cognitive disabilities and doing it in their home schools.

I earned my degree in the late 1970s, and it felt like I was on the edge of something momentous. As I look back, I had been right.

As a new graduate, I taught life and job skills classes at a high school in a small rural town. One of the girls in my class, Dorothy, had Down syndrome and a gift with numbers. She wanted to take an accounting class in the office skills vocational program. This was a first for the school, and the teacher reluctantly agreed. Dorothy aced the class. I then worked with a small accounting firm in town to provide some actual work experience for her. Upon graduation, the firm hired Dorothy—and she is still working there.

Without the passage of IDEA, Dorothy would not have gone to high school, much less have been mainstreamed into an accounting class. I went on to teach at all levels and support children with a wide range of disabilities, from mild to significant, before becoming an administrator. The successes I experienced teaching with the intents and mandates of IDEA made me a better administrator, determined to ensure that all the children received the supports and services they needed in the least restrictive environment—so they could benefit from an education that would lead to a successful and meaningful adult life.

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of IDEA, we can see exactly how far public education has come in this country—and how far we still have to go in meeting the ideals set forth almost exactly two centuries before IDEA became law.

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson outlined his ideas for a system of public education in a comprehensive bill to the Virginia legislature. It was his vision and philosophy that set the foundation for public education as we know it today. Jefferson's philosophy parallels the principles of PL94-142 in the following ways:

Jefferson's Principle	PL 94-142 Connection
Public education is key to democracy.	PL 94-142 guarantees that students with disabilities have access to the same public education system.
Equal educational opportunity.	The law enshrines the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all, including those previously excluded.
Talent and potential should be nurtured.	The Individualized Education Program (IEP) supports each child's unique potential, regardless of disability.
Education should be funded and structured by the state	PL 94-142 mandates federal funding and oversight for state-run special education programs.

The Civil Rights Era of the late 1960s and early 1970s helped to turn the tide for children like David and Dorothy. Organizations and families advocated at local school districts and filed lawsuits on behalf of their children with disabilities. They simply wanted an appropriate education for their children. The resulting landmark court cases led Congress to get involved and demand an investigation into the impact of excluding children with disabilities from the public schools.

Legislators discovered that public agencies and taxpayers spent billions of dollars over the lifetimes of these individuals to maintain them as dependents. They also discovered that with proper educational services, many individuals with disabilities would be able to become productive citizens who contributed to society. Others, through such services, would increase their independence, also reducing their dependence on the federal government and taxpayers. Perhaps the most egregious finding was that the parents of these individuals were frequently—and erroneously—led to believe that their children would not be able to lead meaningful lives—a belief that has been proven false countless times.

IDEA was passed, and Congress intended that all children with disabilities would "have a right to education, and to

establish a process by which State and local educational agencies may be held accountable for providing educational services for all handicapped children."

Initially, the law focused on ensuring that children with disabilities had access to an education and due process of law. Congress included an elaborate system of legal checks and balances called "procedural safeguards" that are designed to protect the rights of children and their parents. The law has been reauthorized several times, most recently in 2004.

From its beginning, IDEA has offered financial incentives for states to comply with the law's mandates. In effect, the law guarantees some funding for the extra services that students with disabilities need when a state follows the law's provisions (see sidebar).

In the early 1970s, most county offices of education and local school districts in California were already providing some services for children with disabilities in their communities, either by local funding or through special grants from the state. California's approach to educating children with disabilities, however, did not yet effectively address the varied needs of students and districts.

From review of existing services and through strong advocacy from families and educators, the California Master Plan for Special Education emerged, reflecting a confluence of legal, political, and social forces as well as a collaborative effort involving state agencies, advocacy groups, and legislative actions. The California State Board of Education adopted the final plan in 1974, a move that reflected a societal shift toward recognizing the educational and civil rights of students with disabilities.

Through key legislation (California Assembly Bill 4040 in 1974 and Assembly Bill 1250 in 1977), the state developed a framework for addressing the needs of children with disabilities by establishing Special Education Local Plan Areas, better known today as SELPAs. The California Department of Education (CDE) and the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) also worked together to ensure the provision of medically necessary services identified in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), when required for a student to learn and mandated by IDEA. Special Education in California was up and running.

As my 40-plus-year career as a special educator comes to a close, I see how far we have come. Originally the law did not address the needs of infants or transition to adulthood. Through several amendments to IDEA, special education now serves preschool through twelfth-grade students, with an eye to success in adult life.

I recently had the opportunity to listen to an attorney who grew up attending public schools in San Diego and now practices law in Washington D.C. She has cerebral palsy. Through the support of an itinerant special education teacher, she was able to fully participate in all general education classes and become a successful lawyer, wife, and mother. Listening to her I couldn't help but think of my friend David and his mom and wonder "What if?"

Today, special education is no longer just about access for students with disabilities. We have learned about the importance of the right to be present and fully participate in all aspects of school and life. In essence, PL 94-142 and its successor amendments have transformed the entire educational landscape. We have become more inclusive, individualized, and accountable for students with disabilities. On the horizon we are working toward the rights of all students to be present in a classroom where they will have the best chance to thrive. ▯

Federal Incentives for PL 94-142

1. Federal Funding for Special Education. Under PL 94-142, the federal government promised to provide states with funding to help cover the excess costs of providing a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to children with disabilities. States were authorized (but not guaranteed) to receive up to 40% of the national average per-pupil expenditure for each child with a disability. Actual appropriations were usually well below that figure (often under 20%, sometimes closer to 10%).

2. Incentive-Compliance Model ("Carrot and Stick"). States were required to comply with the law's procedural safeguards and educational requirements (e.g., FAPE, Least Restrictive Environment, Individualized Education Programs). If a state refused or failed to comply, it could lose eligibility for federal special education funding.

3. Equal Access to Federal Formula Grants. By complying with PL 94-142, states gained access to Part B funding under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) framework. States received funds based on: the number of children with disabilities served, the severity of their needs, and the cost of educational services.

4. Gradual Funding Increases. The funding did not arrive all at once in 1975. The law allowed for a multi-year phase-in, with full implementation expected by the 1977–78 school year. This gave states time to build infrastructure (hire special educators, establish due process systems, create IEP procedures).

See United States Congress. (1975). Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Pub. L. No. 94–142, 89 Stat. 773. The full text can be found at ***https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-89/pdf/STATUTE-89-Pg773.pdf***

Rightful Presence Right Now: A Call to Action for California

By Kevin Schaefer, Director of Supporting Innovative Practices (SIP) at El Dorado County Office of Education

Every child who walks through our doors deserves not just entry, but rightful presence—to be seen, taught, and cherished in the very classrooms they would attend if disability were not in the picture. Rightful presence is not a favor, a placement, or a program.

Rightful presence is a promise of dignity, belonging, and full participation, anchored in California's continuous improvement vision and brought to life by educators who refuse to leave any student at the margins.[1]

It is more than access. As SWIFT's National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence frames it, it's an implementation agenda for culture, systems, and practices that move historically marginalized learners—especially students with significant disabilities—into full classroom membership and growth.[2] SWIFT's Rightful Presence Implementation Guide offers concrete, schoolwide actions to do exactly that.[3]

California has the scaffolding to make this work stick. Our Statewide System of Support coordinates universal, targeted, and intensive assistance—so local educational agencies aren't left to improvise inclusion in isolation. The purpose is explicit: coordinated, needs-based, differentiated supports that close opportunity gaps and improve outcomes for all students. Rightful presence fits hand-in-glove with that purpose.[4]

The work that my colleagues and I do at the Supporting Innovative Practices (SIP) project is explicitly focused on advancing access, inclusion, and rightful presence for students with disabilities. While SIP engages broader educational systems, this work is undertaken solely to address the systemic conditions that directly impact outcomes for students with disabilities, including access to the Least Restrictive Environment and meaningful participation in general education and postsecondary pathways. SIP's scope extends into systems on behalf of students with disabilities, without shifting or diluting its primary focus.

Kevin Schaefer

SIP delivers this through a tiered model: statewide professional learning (Tier 1), hands-on technical assistance to counties, Special Education Local Plan Areas or SELPAs, districts, and sites (Tier 2), and intensive support aligned to state monitoring when needed (Tier 3).

Voices from the Work: Kristin Cinco's Lens

The Orange County Department of Education is working with the SWIFT Center in a national initiative to increase belonging and learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

Kristin Cinco, Senior Director of Special Education Services/ Special Education Local Plan Area at Anaheim Elementary School District, has been leading rightful presence implementation with SWIFT and county partners. Her experience is a useful mirror for all of us charting systems change.

Cinco says the work requires a mindshift, and that special education should not be the face of the work. The biggest barrier is the door to the general education classroom. But as minds shift, changes are made. General education teachers are starting to feel like more students belong in their classrooms, and more educators and administrators are championing the work. To more easily integrate family voice, they pair community advisory council meetings with district parent meetings in the same location on the same date.

Kristin's through-line is instructive: leadership sets conditions; collaboration builds empathy; systems open doors; and families help us keep them open.

In School

A classroom grounded in rightful presence looks like any classroom, but with all students at the center.

A reading mini-lesson, centers for practicing specific skills, and group share-out happen in the same classroom community. The speech-language pathologist pops in during guided reading; the resource specialist teacher co-plans the phonics spiral; peers read together—because fluency grows in community, not separation.

For middle school science, there are many ways in. Students choose

1 See information on California's Statewide System of Support at https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp

2 Find the Center at https://swiftschools.org/towardrightfulpresence/

3 Download the Implementation Guide at https://brandnewbox-files.com/swift/implementation/#/

4 More information on the website for the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence: https://ccee-ca.org/about-the-system/

how to model mitosis: using annotated diagrams, working in clay, or making a narrated screen recording. Lab partners are mixed by interests and strengths. Feedback is part of the process. This is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) 3.0 in action, with activities that involve and engage all students.[5]

A family partnership has everyone at one table. The parent leadership and the community advisory council meetings run back-to-back, in the same space, with translation, childcare, and practical "how to advocate at school" tools. The message is simple: your voice belongs here, and together we redesign school.

Five Moves Toward Rightful Presence

Change like this requires movement at the leadership level and at the classroom level. Here are some places to start.

1. Name the destination together. Convene a small cross-role team (teachers, specialists, family reps, paraprofessionals, site leader). Define what "full and meaningful inclusion and belonging" will look like in one core routine (e.g., reader's workshop, lab, morning meeting). Post the non-negotiables (belonging, access, challenge) in student-friendly language.
2. Run a "rightful presence" learning walk. Visit three classrooms as a team. Collect only evidence tied to belonging/access/challenge (not "gotchas"). Debrief with students first: Where did you feel you belonged? What helped you learn? What got in your way?
3. Move support to where students are. Shift one service into the general education block (co-teach, push-in, peer-mediated routines). Co-plan a single, high-leverage lesson with multiple pathways for expression and a clear feedback routine. (UDL 3.0's learner-centered language is your planning checklist.) udlguidelines.cast.org
4. Close the adult empathy gap. Host a 30-minute "know our jobs" exchange between general education and special education teams—what we do, where we struggle, and how we can be in the room together more often. (Cinco's team saw perspective and empathy grow the minute roles were surfaced.)
5. Pair your parent leadership meeting and Community Advisory Committee (or equivalent) on the same evening in the same room, with a common opening on belonging and access. Co-create a simple "what inclusion looks like at our school" one-pager in the languages your families speak. Changes toward rightful presence stick because SIP staff guide school teams to gather across roles (general ed, special ed, counselors, paraprofessionals, school leadership) to self-assess strengths and gaps, set equity-centered goals, align plans, and track evidence. That coherence is why the work travels from one classroom to many—and from one year to the next.

A Closing Invitation

Let's be the generation that normalizes rightful presence by making it ordinary...

…to see a multilingual autistic kindergartner leading the morning song with a speech device.

…for a fifth-grade team to co-plan supports into the novel study, not around it.

…for families to sit at the same table, shaping the same agenda, for the same children.

…for principals to say, "These are our students," and mean every child.

As Cinco put it, the work spreads organically when it's led by peers, owned by the whole school, and supported by a system that aligns its resources to dignity and belonging. That is the California we are building, classroom by classroom, team by team, family by family.

Let's open the doors—and keep them open. ▪

More information

- The California Collaboration for Educational Excellence: ***https://ccee-ca.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Statewide-System-of-Support-One-Pager.pdf?***
- SIP's Blueprint for Inclusion: ***https://d16k74nzx9emoe.cloudfront.net/37b5228f-ac15-40be-a2f1-7fa611e92962/2025-SIP%20BlueprintREV.webp***

5 Find CAST's UDL Guidelines here: https://udlguidelines.cast.org/

A History of Rightful Presence

Rightful presence as a concept was first introduced by authors like Jonathan Darling, Vicki Squire, Harald Bauder, and Emma Cox, in writings about sanctuary cities and the global refugee crisis. Education scholars like Angela Calabrese Barton and Edna Tan reimagined it as a way to explore issues of educational (in)equity at the classroom level. SWIFT Education Center extended the concept, applying it at the educational systems level as a foundation for building equity and justice for students, families, and communities who often experience the inequities in the current system.[1]

In a December 2024 letter to educators and administrators, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond "reaffirm(ed) expectations and underscores the urgency of ensuring rightful presence and considering early education programs as the first placement option for special education services and supports for children with disabilities in California, inclusive of dual language learner students with disabilities."[2]

1 More information at https://swiftschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rightful-Presence-in-Education-Systems-Brief.pdf

2 See the letter from the California Department of Education at https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/lr/om120424.asp

Teresa's Journey Through School and Into a Career She Loves

By Mark Burnett and Teresa Burnett

What "Rightful Presence" Means to Us

Teresa is 29 years old. She was diagnosed with Down syndrome shortly after her birth and received early intervention services at the first opportunity. I write this as a father who has walked beside her through every stage of life.

From the start, Teresa has brought a joyful spirit, fierce competitiveness, and endless curiosity into our lives. She loves people, music, and dancing, and she's game to try almost anything. At times she struggles with nuance and context, when one approach doesn't fit all situations, but she is inquisitive and always wants to learn from her experiences. Today, she is a working professional DJ, so I am also writing this as her business manager, helping support her thriving career. This article is our shared reflection on how "rightful presence" made that possible.

As her father, "rightful presence" means that a person with a disability is given access to their home school and typical peers. This includes appropriate supports and services so they can socialize, learn from peer models, engage with modified curriculum, and (perhaps most importantly) grow up being seen and known as a person, not someone invisible or apart.

When Teresa was young, rightful presence showed up as being known in the hallways, getting waves and hugs from peers, being invited to birthday parties, joining Girl Scouts, and taking part in talent shows. She was celebrated for who she was, not isolated because of what she couldn't do. That's the power of rightful presence—and it's shaped her path from childhood through her career today.

Teresa's School Years: Becoming Known and Belonging

Teresa began kindergarten at our local public school district in a "noncategorical" special day class at a nearby school rather than in her home school. She did well academically, but her mother and I longed to see her experience school alongside her neighborhood peers—to walk the same halls as the kids on our street, to be known as Teresa the child, not Teresa the diagnosis.

School psychologist Maxine saw that possibility, too. She brought the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team together and said, "She belongs. Let's give her the chance to be included." With Maxine's support, Teresa repeated kindergarten at her home school—this time fully included in a general education classroom with supports and pull-outs as needed. That shift set the tone for the rest of her schooling.

What stands out most is how Teresa became part of the social fabric of her home school. She made friends, participated in activities, and was given opportunities equally with all students. She was treated as a valued member of the class. It wasn't always perfect, and not everyone liked her—just as not everyone likes any of us—but she developed strategies to cope, and she grew. She was seen for who she truly is.

As Teresa remembers it:

- "My classmates helped me be the person I am becoming. My classmates made me feel happy and loved by being included."
- "I felt really included playing basketball at recess time with my classmates."
- "Later, I loved being in drama class and learning about staging and plays. I really liked this group of friends who included me."

What worked was the steady, contagious belief among key members of Teresa's IEP team that inclusion was not only possible but necessary. When even one professional—like our school psychologist—projected that conviction, it influenced the entire group. Her "yes, she belongs here" energy gave others permission to imagine how inclusion could work, not why it couldn't. You could feel the atmosphere change: the general-education teacher began to see a path forward, supported rather than burdened by the effort.

Academically, we set goals within Teresa's cognitive reach, but the delivery of those goals evolved creatively. One aide, on

her own initiative, began creating simplified PowerPoint slides of classroom lessons—pared down but true to the material. These visual summaries allowed Teresa to connect meaningfully to the same curriculum her peers were studying. At home, we would review the slides together, reading through them and discussing questions so she could recall facts and concepts. This simple adaptation became one of the quiet success stories of her inclusion, bridging the classroom and home, and helping her feel part of the same learning experience as her peers.

Socially, rightful presence meant Teresa had a place on the playground, in drama class, and in everyday routines. She wasn't an observer; she took up space, joined games, and participated in performances. Teachers and classmates alike learned how to make room for difference without lowering expectations for belonging.

By contrast, what didn't work were the moments when a single negative attitude took root. Once, a different school psychologist voiced, almost offhandedly, "She doesn't belong here—she's going to embarrass herself." Those words landed heavily. It shifted the room's tone, dampened the team's optimism, and momentarily derailed progress. Negativity, I learned, is contagious too.

We worked through those moments by doing our homework. My wife and I visited the alternative placements being suggested, took detailed notes, and returned to the IEP table able to speak concretely about why those settings weren't right for Teresa. We also armed ourselves with knowledge—knowing the laws and rights surrounding her education gave us the confidence to hold our ground respectfully. Over time, that steadiness helped reset the tone. The best IEP meetings were never about winning arguments; they were about re-anchoring the team in what inclusion could make possible when everyone shared the same vision.

We never expected the school to erase her disability or make her typical—we simply wanted her to

be included, and she benefited most by sharing the overall experience of school with her peers.

There were no formal venues for sharing, no designated "inclusion activities." What made the difference were the friendships Teresa built naturally with her typically developing peers—especially in her early elementary years. Those genuine connections were the saving grace of her inclusion. The friendships happened through everyday school life: at recess, on the basketball court, and later in drama class. The teachers and staff who supported those moments—the ones who simply said "yes, let's make it work"—became quiet heroes in that process.

As Teresa got older, those organically formed friendships shifted, as they often do. In middle and high school, social life became more structured, and programs like Best Buddies began to fill the space where spontaneous friendships once grew. While those organized connections had real value, there was something uniquely powerful about the earlier years when Teresa's belonging wasn't a program—it was just her being part of the mix, known by name, invited to play, and seen as a peer.

She also remembers the harder moments:

"It was hard for me in school when I felt people were mean to me."

Even so, this too was part of rightful presence—because being truly included means being seen as a full participant in all the ordinary experiences of school life, not protected from them. Teresa wasn't just sheltered within a special setting; she was learning, laughing, and sometimes hurting alongside her peers. Being seen as a student first meant she was part of the same human landscape—where kindness and cruelty, friendship and misunderstanding, all coexist. That's what inclusion really looks like: the dignity of being part of the whole picture.

Teresa's Career as a DJ: Inclusion Grown Up

Teresa's passion for music continued into adulthood and blossomed into her becoming a professional DJ—entirely her own idea. She loves knowing the words to every song she plays, and she dances behind her booth as the music energizes her.

Teresa loves dance parties first and foremost, but education conferences have come into our purview over the last few years and have grown to become a new and unexpected favorite of hers.

Over the past several years, she has DJ-ed at a wide variety of events, including inclusive community dances, school festivals, holiday celebrations, and professional education conferences such as California's MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support), where hundreds of educators gather. She has also been hired for corporate functions, recreation department events, and special needs resource fairs.

Audiences respond to her energy with smiles, cheers, and applause. Event organizers often receive glowing feedback, and attendees frequently come up to tell her how much they love her music, her dance moves, or her positive vibe. These moments—when she's treated as the DJ first and foremost—are when she feels most fully seen.

As she puts it:

- "I love it when people come up to me directly to tell me they love my music, my dance moves, or my dress. I feel very welcomed and celebrated."
- "When I DJ, I feel happy and proud. I like it when clients come up to me to talk about the music."

Behind the scenes, I handle the logistical side—booking events, contracts, rates, equipment, and planning. However, Teresa approves the events we take on, so she chooses what brings her joy.

We continually work on building her independence. When clients have a request, I encourage her to respond first, and I only step in if she needs support.

She feels most respected when clients speak to her directly, as they do at the Regional Center of Orange County's annual Spotlight Awards, where event leaders direct all questions to "the DJ"—never to me. This makes Teresa feel fully seen as the professional in the room. By contrast,

> **"I love it when people come up to me directly to tell me they love my music, my dance moves, or my dress. I feel very welcomed and celebrated."**

when clients bypass her and speak only to me, it diminishes her sense of inclusion. We are learning to advocate for her to be addressed directly from the start.

- "Really good clients who are kind, understanding, and hire me make me feel confident."
- "It's hard for me to understand a client's request sometimes, and I need help from my dad to understand. But I don't like to be left out—even if I don't understand the first time, I still need to be included in the discussions first."

This is rightful presence in adulthood: being seen as a professional, not as someone's child, and having her work valued on its own merit.

Reflections: Why Rightful Presence Matters

Teresa has grown into a confident, kind, determined young woman. Her inclusion from the beginning was a key part of that. She was never hidden away. She grew up learning from her peers, contributing to her classrooms, and seeing herself as part of the world around her.

True inclusion—and giving every child the right to be present—requires systems to do better. Schools must presume competence, employers must value neurodiversity, and the public must learn that belonging is a right, not a favor. Rightful presence is not charity—it is justice. It benefits everyone.

Teresa says it best:

- "Don't give up trying—nobody is perfect. Just include me."
- "Be yourself. Students should advocate for themselves, and parents should advocate for them."
- "What I want people to know about me is that I can do things. My dreams for the future are to keep DJ-ing."

I am deeply proud of who Teresa is becoming. Rightful presence allowed her to be seen—not just as a person with a disability, but as a full participant in the world. And once someone has been truly seen, they can never go back to being invisible. ▯

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Orange County Department of Education Joins National Effort

There is a growing belief among parents and educators in the value of a single system of education for all children. A single system would make the general education classroom the default setting for all students, because special education students are general education students first.

Anaheim Elementary School District, part of the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE), has partnered with the National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence at the University of Kansas' SWIFT Education Center. OCDE is a natural partner for this work. For more than a decade, the department has been the home of Scale-up Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) Statewide (SUMS), an initiative funded by the California Department of Education and designed to support school districts across the state in developing a district-based organizational MTSS framework gives all students the academic, behavioral, and social and emotional services and supports they need to succeed in school, with increasingly intensive interventions as needed. SWIFT was a founding partner in the SUMS initiative.

Through its SUMS efforts, the OCDE is demonstrating a consistent and creative commitment to ensuring equity and inclusion for all students. Rightful presence is the logical and natural next step.

SWIFT's leaders are fully aware of the audacity of their work. "We are trying to imagine something that doesn't exist yet," says Program Director Allyson Satter, "which is challenging—and exciting."

Addressing Beliefs and Fears

Kamica Barnes agrees. She is the assistant director of special education for OCDE and is working with SWIFT to make rightful presence a guiding principle in Orange County. One of the biggest challenges she has faced involves helping teachers "believe that all kids belong together."

In most schools where students with disabilities are taught in restrictive settings, she says, "teachers really believe with their hearts that students with disabilities should be educated apart from their general education peers." To change this belief, Barnes is giving teachers the research and data that show the benefits of "educating all kids together." This helps, she says, but what really changes people's attitudes is seeing for themselves the progress that students with disabilities make when they learn alongside their general education peers.

Six Key Levers to Foster Rightful Presence, SWIFT Center

Barnes recalls working with one group of teachers who didn't believe even in the benefits of inclusive settings, let alone rightful presence. But then they all observed "one little girl who wasn't accepted" in a program because of her below-average language skills. Barnes and her staff included this child in their general education program, "and her language just blossomed; her communication skills blossomed." The uncertain teachers "couldn't believe it" at first, says Barnes. And then they did.

"I think the more stories that we have to share with other teachers, the more helpful it'll be."

Kim Govea is also working with SWIFT. An educator in the Anaheim Elementary School District, she, too, has spent many years "trying to change the mindset of our educators" about creating one system of education. She was used to hearing teachers say that children with disabilities "don't belong in my classroom." At the beginning of every school year, when teachers saw the name of a student with an IEP on their roster, they'd say to her, "'Oh, no! Wait. You need to call special ed right now.'" Or if a child was showing signs of delay during the school year, a standard response was, "'Oh, wait! We need to get them tested right away.'"

"On the whole, teachers were scared," says Govea, because no one had taught them how to support various learning levels in a single classroom. Govea was determined to provide what was missing. Her first step involved asking questions: "Why does that child need to go to a separate classroom? If a child has a speech delay, is the delay impacting anything in the classroom? If a child has Down syndrome, can we just provide the right support? If a child needs behavior support, why not integrate behavioral supports throughout every classroom and provide in-class coaching?"

"I say to the staff all the time," says Govea, "'Every single child deserves a spot in your classroom.'"

Parents of children with disabilities also have fears that need to be thoughtfully addressed, says Barnes. Parents, she says, often believe "that their kids need to be separate." She challenges that belief through "open and honest conversations."

In her experience, when students with disabilities or other differences are separated from general education, they are often seen as "other" and not belonging. "The fact is," she says, "the more we segregate kids, the more we will have bullying." The converse, she says, is also true: when children of all kinds have been around each other all of their lives, from preschool on up, they "see each other as friends. They help each other out. 'That's just my friend who uses a wheelchair. That's my friend who is blind.'" Barnes has seen students as young as preschool age advocate for their classmates with disabilities.

Going Beyond Inclusion

"We have a research base behind inclusion. That is a good thing," says Satter. Rightful presence, however, goes beyond the physical classroom and programmatic protocols of inclusion. "Rightful presence is a lens for looking at how students experience true belonging." Students don't have "to change themselves to earn the right to be included" in a classroom; it is not "the responsibility of the student to somehow assimilate" into the school environment. Rather it is the responsibility of the system, she says, to make sure that all students are seen as having the right to be included. "There are all kinds of things that we can look at to help us think about ways in which we design a system," Satter says. One of these things is collaboration.

Collaborating

"You can't just take students with really, really significant support needs" and place them in a general education classroom, Satter says. "It's really important to get educators collaborating around what it would take. We know it cannot fall on the shoulders of one person." Much of SWIFT's work involves "supporting this collaborative planning process for the general educators, special educators, and related service providers," she says. The grant also helps schools plan how to bring in "other experts as needed to really collaborate on how [to] meet learner variability across the class. And then how do we really intensify supports for individual students or groups of students as needed? We're looking at this as educators, as collaborative teams," and not as individual teachers who are left alone to do the impossible.

Two years ago, some general education preschool teachers at Anaheim raised concerns through

their union when students with IEPs were added to classroom rosters. Last year, according to Govea, those concerns were addressed through collaboration and shared problem-solving, and no formal issues were brought forward—an outcome she describes as significant progress. One cause? "The training teachers have received about how to support students of all ability levels in the same classroom. But it's also the collaboration," she says. "Everything we do, no matter what program you teach" involves full collaboration between special education and general education. "Everybody's invited to the same training" and included in the same professional learning communities. "We're all together talking about students and data."

Teachers have emerged not just with more skills, says Govea, but with greater satisfaction in their work. They are better teachers.

Govea is a realist. 'It's still a battle," she says. Some staff members still treat students with disabilities like they don't belong. So the work continues.

Angie Caster, SWIFT's director of alignment, implementation and measurement, acknowledges that this level of collaboration "requires a lot from a system," involving class schedules, professional learning, knowledge of standards and instruction, and more. These changes don't happen overnight.

Changing Systems

At SWIFT, Satter describes her approach to working with schools and school districts as intentionally slow and thoughtful. She has found that educators and administrators, including those who are committed to restrictive settings, have good intentions. But she has seen many operate more from "ingrained, automatic beliefs and biases" that reflect the existing system than from their commitment to doing what's best for each child. "They need to catch and interrogate their own beliefs," she says. This deep questioning is an important part of SWIFT's work.

Again, Barnes agrees. "We've built these systems" at OCDE, she says, that require children "to be on the same learning level" in order to be in the same classroom. With Caster's help, she is encouraging educators to take "a step back to re-examine the entire system." Both Barnes and Govea agree that without a system that was designed for and committed to rightful presence, those important conversations, the necessary training, and the targeted professional development would not happen. Satter also encourages schools and districts to consider, in any decision, the consequences for "our learners who are most significantly impacted," whether that decision involves hiring, professional development, classroom practices, curriculum adoption, class rosters. . . the list is long.

"It is about examining our beliefs within our system," says Satter, "examining our practices within our system, examining our policies within

our system, and looking at those things through this lens" of rightful presence. "And that may look different in California than it does in Wisconsin or even within different districts within California."

While the conversations about changing systems may start out theoretical and abstract, they soon get very practical, especially since the often limited finances of education, particularly special education, are regularly seen as a barrier to improvement. The other practicality has to do with staff shortages. These both ironically dovetail in an endorsement of rightful presence.

"We can show people that more adults in the [class]room is actually not as helpful as people think it is," says Barnes. "Adults tend to be a little bit overly helpful, and they don't let kids be independent." SWIFT and some California schools are discovering that when they decrease the number of restrictive classrooms, which typically have very low student-teacher ratios, the staff member who becomes available can then provide the support that students with disabilities need in general education settings.

Barnes works primarily with early childhood educators. In her experience, when children are excluded from general education settings in their first school experiences, "you're starting their trajectory of exclusion" for the rest of their schooling—and even their lives. But if you educate all children together from the beginning, she says, then another trajectory takes hold—one of belonging. "If we can start to shift toward this idea of rightful presence," says Barnes, "and people start really believing this, I think it's going to have a huge, positive impact" on the futures of all children.

Co-creating

In OCDE's partnership with SWIFT, everyone with a stake in the game is invited to take part in the conversation. When strategizing about rethinking systems, Caster and her colleagues include family members as well as school administrators, educators, service providers, and school staff. "You especially want to be hearing from families," she says. You want to ask them, "What about the current system is not working? What experiences are the students having in a more restrictive environment that are better? How do we capture those experiences? How do we translate that to less restrictive environments? [T]hat family voice really informs what do we need to be doing within this current system differently."

Satter insists that "that word 'co-creation' is such a pivotal part of what we mean by rightful presence," as the word requires that "the voices from all levels of the system—state, county, district, school, department, teacher, student," be included in order to examine who's not being supported by the current system. Satter talks about the importance of "elevating the voices of those groups and individuals" so that their experiences can help to create systems that offer success to all students.

Foundations of Rightful Presence

SWIFT envisions rightful presence as grounded in three areas:

True Belonging: To truly belong is to take a deep sense of comfort, safety, and peace, and connect it to an experience or place. Students, families, and educators feel most peaceful in a state of non-judgment and emotional connection.

Inherent Value: Inherent value means a person's value does not need to be proven to exist; it is assumed to exist, even if undefined or unconventional. It is the responsibility of educators and institutions to look until that value is seen. Rightful presence honors people's humanity, intersectional identities, and culture.

Shared Power: Rightful presence is characterized by a fundamental shift in power. Students, families, and communities who most frequently experience systemic inequities become integral in the shaping and design of educational systems, policies, and practices. Rightful presence promotes the co-creation of school experiences that benefit students, educators, staff, families, and communities.

Rightful presence lives in schools when previously excluded students, families, and communities experience a sense of belonging, while also holding the power to contribute to educational policy and practice decisions.

Working Organically

"I think sometimes people want 'the guide,'" says Satter, "something that tells them 'first you do this, then you do this, and then you do this. And then we have rightful presence.'" That's not what this is, she says. "The work toward rightful presence involves looking at all of your practices and your policies in your system through this lens of 'what would it take to change those so that all students experience true belonging.'" The work is "iterative," she says, "It is as dynamic as the growth and development of a child." And the efforts and the results are different in every place that works toward the principle.

When asked if rightful presence isn't an unrealistic educational construct—great as an idea but impossible in practice—Barnes says, "This is not ivory tower. This is not pie in the sky. This is a basic human right for all children." ▯

Resources

- Implementation Guide, Additional Resources, and Other Grants. ***https://swiftschools.org/towardrightfulpresence/***

Youth Leaders Gather in Sacramento

Isabel and Paola are chatting like old friends even though they've only just met. Nearby, an animated conversation is being conducted in American Sign Language. Wheelchairs are skillfully maneuvering between tables. It's almost time for the Keynote Luncheon to begin at the Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), an annual gathering of high school students with disabilities at California State University, Sacramento.

The actual words rightful presence may not be spoken at YLF, but everything about this annual week-long forum is focused on the students "learning to claim their rightful place in school and in the community, to feel empowered, to be seen and heard. That is the core of YLF," says Matt Baker, YLF project manager at the California Department of Rehabilitation.

When the hubbub at the luncheon subsides, the students will hear Rebecca Cokley, the disability rights program officer at the Ford Foundation and a person with dwarfism, urge them to advocate for their rights, to be "loud and active. Don't wait for permission to lead."

And they will hear from Otto Lana, a 2020 YLF alumnus, who tells them not to fear change but "to view it as an opportunity." Lana is nonverbal, but his visual presentation connects with his audience. "It is important to present confidence," he says. "Be brave enough to shine." A student will later say of Lana, "He's not speaking, but he's touching people with his heart."

A Multitude of Opportunities

Over the course of the week, the students will hear from presenters, many of them disability community leaders and YLF alumni, who serve as adult role models with disabilities. Students can question them about challenges and opportunities they will face when they return to school, enter college, or join the workforce.

They will visit a resource fair where they can learn about the multitude of opportunities and services available to them—from help with employment to adaptive sports facilities to a savings plans for people with disabilities.

They will convene as a group to hear panel discussions about life after high school, independent living, career development, and self- and community advocacy. And they will gather in small groups, each identified by a designated color, to share what they are learning. They will tour the CSUS campus and the State Capitol. And they will have fun: a movie, a dance, a talent/variety show.

At a panel on Moving Beyond High School, the students will be exhorted to advocate for themselves when they get to college. "Use your voice," a presenter says. "Apply for services; talk about the special accommodations you might need like early registration, extended time on tests, the ability to have a notetaker or record classes." And, they are advised, "Stay friends with those you meet at YLF."

At this and other panels, the presenters are adults with disabilities who have moved through the stages of anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation that many of the delegates may be experiencing currently—"I struggled with finding my voice," "It was hard to make friends in high school."— These adults can offer a roadmap.

Answering the Call to Action

The orange team gathers in a small room to debrief. There are two people in wheelchairs; one student is blind, another hard of hearing; others are dyslexic or on the autism spectrum. They have decided to call themselves the Orangutans. They have heard the call to action. One says she is going to run for a seat on the county youth commission; two say they have written articles for their school or local newspapers.

Their leader is Raul Munoz, 35, a medical social worker who has Asperger's Syndrome. He shares his own story. "A self-discovery journey" is what he calls it. "I like routine. I tend to be overwhelmed when too much is going on so I needed to identify strategies to help me cope." In his 20s, he says, "I wanted to learn more about autism. I discovered a support group and was able to learn how others cope

with a similar disability." He went on to earn a master's degree at the University of Southern California and, like many of the staff and presenters, he has chosen a career in a helping profession. Munoz now works at a hospital in Los Angeles where some of his patients have physical or developmental disabilities.

Munoz also is part of the Independent Living panel where he stressed the importance of have allies. "I wanted to live on my own," he says, "but I got pushback from my parents." He got help from a college counselor "who convinced my parents to let me go." The other panelists advised students who wish to live independently to "do your research and have a plan."

A Successful Model

More than 180 students applied for the 60 slots at YLF. They were selected on the basis of their leadership potential, academic success, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and the ability to interact with other students. In YLF's early years, Baker says, most participants had physical disabilities; today students with all types of disabilities are eligible.

The first YLF was held in 1992 and the forum has been held every year since then, including virtually during the pandemic. Over the years, the California YLF model has spread to 30 other states and Puerto Rico.

The staff are all volunteers, and most are people with disabilities. Munoz is making his second appearance at YLF. The forum, he says, "is not just empowering for students, but also for the volunteers who have disabilities themselves. It's a good opportunity to be a mentor for the younger generation." What he wants to impart to the students, he says, is for them "to believe in themselves and to know that they don't have to go through this alone. They can find communities or create them."

Rachel Stewart, a former YLF project manager and current staff member, says she wants the delegates "to know that there is a huge disability community out there waiting to support them and mentor them. I want them to be proud of their disability and to recognize the strengths they have because of their disability, not in spite of it." Stewart, 35, who has been in a wheelchair since the age of five, earned a doctorate in education and now coordinates the Workability III program at the Los Rios Community College District. "I want them to find a sense of belonging and to know that disability is a natural part of the human experience."

Changing the System

The topic of the last panel of the week is System Change and Community Advocacy. At one point the moderator asked, "What gives you hope now during uncertain times?" The panelists' answer was the advocacy they see now from the disabled community, "voicing our needs, bugging our representatives."

Steven Auclair, a YLF alumnus who now works at a university, tells the students, "The way you see the world is different; that's a valuable asset; find other people like you and write your stories. If your programs are being cut, write your school board, your library board. Your stories are important."

In these uncertain times, Baker says, fear of educational changes at the federal level acts as a motivator. "It's more important than ever to be active so that the students who come behind them have the same opportunities," he says. "I hope they will make their voices heard at student council meetings, at the PTA and the school board." "It's more important than ever to be active so that the students who come behind them have the same opportunities," he says. "I hope they will make their voices heard at student council meetings, at the PTA and the school board."

Lessons Learned

When the orange group gathered for the final time at week's end, Munoz says, "they were sharing how much they had learned, the friendships they had made."

Baker received many favorable comments from participants after the forum. Several spoke of YLF as "a second family." Other comments included, "I am more brave than I ever thought I could be"; "I experienced a sense of belonging and pride in my identity," and "I realized how powerful it is to connect with others who have similar goals and stories."

Two of the Orangutans looked back on the experience after they had a few weeks to reflect on the experience.

Drew Divinagracia, 18, from Lodi, says he used to be shy in high school. "I heard about YLF, heard that there were other people with my disability (autism spectrum). YLF changed me immensely. I learned so much about my disability. I've become more of a person; I learned how to stand up for myself and ask for accommodations." He is now taking online classes at Delta Community College and hopes to become an engineer. YLF, he says, was a "fun, memorable experience." And he's staying in touch with some of the Orangutans in a group chat.

For Isabel Lara, 18, from West Covina, "the best part of YLF was being able to be part of the community and to know that you don't have be feel ashamed of having a disability." Isabel is dyslexic. "It's a disability you can't see," she says, "and my friends didn't understand it. In high school I didn't know anyone with my disability." A teacher encouraged her to go to college, and she is now a freshman at San Antonio Community College studying marine biology. "After YLF I'm much more open," she says. "I was able to tell my teachers that I had a disability, and I've started joining clubs at college."

Drew and Isabel, the Orangutans, and the other members of the 2025 YFL cohort may not have heard the words rightful presence at the forum, but they left having internalized its true meaning. ▯

Rightful Presence from the Beginning

Patterns and impressions in early childhood build a child's sense of belonging, safety, self-worth, and capability. Educators across California are working to create classrooms that honor the rightful presence of students with disabilities from the very beginning.

Conditions for Learning

Marci Zeppegno shared a story during her keynote at the recent California Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Professional Learning Institute in Anaheim. Zeppegno works at the Humboldt County Office of Education as a program manager for Prevention and Intervention Services in the county's schools. Early in her career, she was in a first-grade classroom where the teacher was overwhelmed. In frustration, the teacher indicated a particular student and said angrily, "He doesn't belong here." The student was receiving special education services and had just been reunited with his mother after being in foster care. Behavior is communication, and it was clear, Zeppegno said, that the student—and the teacher—needed additional support.

This early experience, Zeppegno says, led to her deep educational commitment to fostering belonging in schools.

She used the story to urge educators to consider internal and external messages—their own and their students'. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with this kid?" ask, "What happened to this child, and how can we help?" This kind of trauma-informed approach communicates a sense of belonging for students with and without disabilities that is essential in classrooms. "Belonging is more than a feeling," Zeppegno says. "It's truly a condition for learning."

Zeppegno is focused on "creating environments where students feel not only that they're included, but everyone's an important, valued member of the school community." The questions to ask, she says, are "How do we ensure every student feels seen, valued, and heard?" and "How can we support each other and grow together?" With minds set toward rightful presence, educators can make sure every student has a place in the classroom.

Janel Plack is program specialist at the Sonoma County Special Education

Marci Zeppegno

Local Plan Area (SELPA) and Charter SELPA. Grounded in rightful presence, she says that educators must also be thoughtful in how they share information with parents. She has heard stories of families who have been given the impression that because their child has a disability, they will never belong.

She has observed many parents who did not accept such messages, worked hard to give their child every opportunity, and have seen their children "grow into wonderful musicians, athletes, educators, or other talented and employable adults." Rather than lowering expectations, educators must assume competence and provide students with opportunities—along with a place in general education.

Plack says that rightful presence starts before the student even enters a classroom. Districts can be proactive in helping parents to understand that their children are not stuck at home after their child has been diagnosed with a disability. She urges school administrators and educators to "work with families and the community to understand that children with disabilities are welcome at school, at the library, in music programs, at the park, and in all places where other children are welcomed."

Collaborating and co-training within clear frameworks can strengthen efforts to create a sense of belonging in early childhood classrooms. Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE) is doing this by rooting its efforts in MTSS, with emphasis on transformative social-emotional learning, mental health, behavior, and inclusive academic practices through Universal Design for Learning (UDL). "All the work that we're doing under school climate and within the MTSS framework," Zeppegno says, "is to create environments that are predictable, positive, equitable, and safe" for all students.

Always a Family

Restorative Practices—separating the deed from the doer in cases of misbehavior—is also important in reducing exclusion for students who may not always fit behavioral norms. Zeppegno says that training in Restorative Practices helps educators reinforce to students that "you made a poor choice, but we value you as a person. What do we need to do to make things right?" In the early childhood setting, these practices interrupt patterns that might otherwise lead to a child being excluded from the classroom.

Jolie Critchfield, director of child development at Marysville Joint Unified School District, stresses the importance of establishing each student as part

of the school family. "In a family," she says, "you may mess up, you may do something wrong, but you're still part of that family."

"If you're having a breakdown, kicking, screaming…we love you, you're gonna be okay, and we'll try again."

The Marysville Child Development Preschool Program uses the Conscious Discipline methodology centered on building safety, connection, and problem-solving skills in the classroom. The approach is designed to help students transition into an optimal state for learning by teaching self-regulation strategies such as deep breathing and "brain breaks." "All of it is to get kids in that frontal lobe brain in order to be able to problem-solve, learn, and be composed," says Critchfield.

Critchfield emphasizes that the methodology fundamentally requires adult behavior to change first. Adults must model collaboration, respect, and self-regulation, recognizing their own emotional state before they can effectively support a child in distress.

Critchfield also raises concerns about "soft suspensions"—the practice of repeatedly asking parents to pick up a child due to a difficult day or labeling a child as "not a good fit." These exclusionary actions, regardless of intent, stigmatize the child and interrupt their learning opportunities with peers. The California Department of Education emphasizes positive practices that replace exclusion with support.[1]

Adults who were suspended or expelled from school as youth have lower educational success and greater criminal justice involvement than their nonsuspended peers, which makes it all the more important to avoid setting patterns of exclusion for kids, even in the earliest educational settings.

Proximity

When general education and special education students interact with each other, with teachers cross-trained, collaborating, and sharing values of equity and inclusion, rightful presence can find a firm hold in the schools.

Plack says that at the preschool level, rightful presence begins in the community preschool programs with same-aged peers. If a child needs to be placed in a specialized class, that child should at least have the opportunity to be on the same campus and interact with others. Proximity can help, Plack says, "but it's not just proximity. It's welcoming into each other's circles. The interactions have to be meaningful, and not just on the playground."

Critchfield acknowledges the challenges. "Our system is set up for being separate," she says. There

Friends helping friends in Marysville

are separate credentials for special education, so general educators may not feel they have the skills to help students with disabilities, and yet, she says, these students have a rightful presence in their classroom. Realizing the incongruity between these ideas was an "aha!" moment for her, and one she is working to reconcile.

Critchfield agrees with Plack that physical proximity makes it much easier to introduce and embrace the principle of rightful presence. Her district was determined to put general education and special education classrooms right next door to each other—even if they had to clear out classrooms to make that happen. While this is not inclusion, bringing students closer together is an important step. General education and special education teachers now have weekly release time to meet during the school day. They follow a scripted set of questions to share information about students and plan together.

The work is not new, says Plack, and many educators are equipped to handle it without even realizing it. "They are already providing accommodations in class to many children in many different ways," she says. "Now they just need to broaden their focus to serve students with disabilities."

What It Looks Like

Critchfield says that in all 23 preschool programs in Marysville, "our kids are greeted at the door, with eye contact," and given a choice of greeting options from a hug to a fist bump to a wave. During this time, teachers assess whether that student on that day is "in that emotional brain state that might need some extra time." They focus on making a connection and being that safe person for the student, each and every day.

She credits the entire school staff with doing whatever it takes for students with disabilities, asking "Okay, what do you need me to do?"

Zeppegno says "making data-based decisions creates more equitable outcomes." At HCOE they use evidence-based interventions, assessing and adjusting consistently to achieve the best outcomes for students.

Marysville has been part of a project through the Napa County Office of Education that funds coaches to support embedded learning strategies in early childhood classrooms. Under this pilot program, general education and special education teachers choose one student with an IEP. They look at an end-of-the-year IEP goal and break it down into very small two-week chunks. The teachers then work together to create opportunities within the typical school day for the student to practice that small

[1] More information and recommendations from the California Department of Education at https://tinyurl.com/CDEdisplineresources

goal. They collect data on whether the student was able to meet the smaller goal during five-to-seven opportunities provided daily for two weeks.

After two weeks, the teachers come back together to determine whether the student is ready for the next small goal. This concentration on achievable goals allows them to celebrate small victories with the student, reinforcing a positive message. "Even though we thought that it was just naturally happening in the environment," Critchfield says that "being strategic and focused opened our eyes to how we might look at a student who is struggling with sharing or peer interactions, break that down to a simple two-week goal, and then celebrate" every achievement.

Through the program, teachers got extra coaching hours and stipends. Although funding for the project has been cut by the Trump administration,[2] they will use what they learned to serve students in the future. "It's an amazing strategy that we should be doing for all students who might be struggling with foundational skills," says Critchfield.

Headway

Plack says, "though it takes work, creating rightful presence in the classroom can be done —and we are making headway." She urges educators to "be that one person who does something to make a change ... There will be a ripple effect." With the backing of administrators and a collaborative team of general educators and special educators, many barriers in the early childhood setting can be overcome—building confidence and rightful presence from the start.

She says that adults have needs and kids do, too. "Our kids—disability or not—need the same thing. Sometimes it's a fidget. Sometimes they need to stand up. It doesn't mean you don't belong here." ▯

2 Read an article on these funding cuts at https://tinyurl.com/PressDemocratFedCutsNapaSpeD

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally called The Education for All Handicapped Children Act. It was signed by President Gerald Ford in 1975 and renamed IDEA in 1990. This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of this groundbreaking law.

IDEA's key provisions are:

Access to public education: The law requires that all children, regardless of disability, have access to public education, effectively ending the exclusion of students with disabilities from public schools.

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs): The law requires the development of IEPs tailored to each student's needs, outlining specific goals, objectives, instructional strategies, and accommodations.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): Students with disabilities are to be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, fostering inclusion and social interaction.

Due Process Rights: Parents have the right to participate in all aspects of assessment, identification, and placement decisions, including the right to challenge decisions through mediation or administrative hearings.

Interagency Collaboration: The law promotes coordination of resources among school districts and other agencies, such as the Department of Health Services, to provide comprehensive support for students with disabilities.

Teacher Training: The passage of PL 94-142 spurred colleges and universities to train teachers and specialists to work effectively with students with a range of disabilities.

Increased Inclusion: While challenges remain, there's evidence that inclusion in general education classrooms benefits both students with and without disabilities. California is actively working to improve its inclusion rates.

Accountability and Quality Assurance: The law established requirements for monitoring and evaluating special education programs to ensure compliance and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Seneca's Unconditional Education

The non-profit organization Seneca Family of Agencies supports students with and without disabilities through its Unconditional Education model. Part of this is helping educators to see behavior within the context of a child's life—and then to design interventions accordingly.

Robin Detterman, Seneca's Chief Program Officer of Educational Services, says that the program's goal is to "build holistic and healing communities so that students can be successful and thrive." The program's consideration of the context of a child's behavior is especially important for students with disabilities, since studies show that they are often more susceptible to disciplinary interventions than their peers[1].

Based in the Bay Area, Seneca has been offering services for more than 40 years, with a focus on students with extensive academic, behavioral, or social-emotional support needs. They work with 100 schools and districts across California and Washington State to implement elements of Unconditional Education.

Detterman says that under Seneca's model, any student can receive intervention services—they don't need to be referred to special education—and all staff are trained to provide healing-centered interventions and work alongside mental health professionals to create a seamless continuum of care.

Detterman says that "the prevailing national context is around discipline and consequences and assigning blame. We really work to change that narrative" by looking at oppressive systems and seeing students in terms of "all the things that have happened to them in their lives and what they're really trying to tell us with their behavior." Interventions are chosen based on the individual student and the context of the behavior.

Seneca's program is grounded on the belief that kids don't fail—systems fail kids, and systems must be adjusted to fit young people's needs. One of these adjustments involves ensuring predictability: the rules are clear, and students are held accountable to the rules. The model also uses restorative justice practices to shift the power

dynamic and make consequences more meaningful.

Under this model, Detterman says, teachers work to understand their own behaviors. Seneca helps teachers recognize their triggers and "escalation curves" and to prepare for what it actually feels like to be in the classroom. "We do some work with staff around wellness," she says, "knowing that there's a contagion factor between high levels of cortisol in teachers," and student behavior. In effect, if teachers are anxious and stressed, students may react to those emotions.

This holistic approach requires support and buy-in from leadership. "If we want teachers to be able to build predictability, and consistency, and a healing-centered classroom for their students," says Detterman, they have to know what to expect when they themselves need extra support. One of the big pieces of the work is to build alignment between teachers and administrators.

Detterman mentions Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) as foundational to rightful presence. An early step in PBIS implementation involves building a schoolwide matrix to guide educators on what student behaviors they will address in the classroom and what behaviors they will refer to an administrator. Sometimes, Detterman says, a behavior could be managed in the classroom, but more than one thing may be going on, and a teacher may need additional support. The goal is always to avoid exclusionary practices.

Detterman acknowledges that "we are working in an under-resourced system," and sustainability for programs such as these can be challenging.

In Contra Costa County, they work with West Contra Costa Unified and a foundation partner to provide training. Several of Seneca's other partners are using California Community Schools Partnerships grants to fund the model's central coordinator role, direct services related to the model, or both.

Leticia Galyean, Seneca's Chief Executive Officer, says the practices that are part of Unconditional Education have a cascading effect. "It's not just about the youth who is receiving direct services; it's about the impact to their peers, the classroom, and the whole culture."

Learn more: You can find Seneca Family of Agencies' book on Unconditional Education at https://senecafoa.org/services/unconditional-education-partnerships/ ▯

1 The US Department of Education's data snapshot is at https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-student-disabilities-snapshot.pdf

Rightful Presence in Rural Schools

Los Alamos is a town with one main street in an unincorporated part of Santa Barbara County. It has one school, Olga Reed, whose 170 students range from transitional kindergarten to eighth grade. Sixteen percent are students with disabilities.

"In an isolated rural town like Los Alamos, the school is the community center for families, and the kids depend on school for their social connections," says Joe Dana, assistant superintendent of educational services at the Orcutt Union School District, which includes Olga Reed. "We don't have the multiplicity of programs and services that an urban school has, but there is a deep connection among the kids. Many go to preschool, and they are on the same campus for 10 or 11 years. They understand that everybody has barriers, challenges and deficits, and they accept each other."

For many students with disabilities, a small, rural school like Olga Reed is the right fit. First and foremost, they are known and seen as part of the school community. They are more likely to be included in general education classrooms and to receive individualized instruction. The continuity of learning with the same classmates year after year contributes to a sense of stability, security, and belonging.

But rural schools in California face challenges as well. "Every school has challenges, but they have a greater impact in rural areas, says Rindy DeVoll, executive director of the California Rural Ed Network, an organization that seeks to amplify the voices of rural educators. "Policymakers assume we're like cities; we are not." From mountains to canyons to deserts, Internet access can be spotty or nonexistent (although resources were available to expand broadband during the pandemic). A small school may not be able to provide all the services required by a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), and rural districts may find it difficult to attract and retain staff.

Despite those difficulties, educators and parents at schools in Santa Barbara, Alpine, and Nevada Counties say that their small, rural schools are places where every student belongs, where rightful presence is a given.

Connectivity in Alpine

According to the California School Boards Association, 37 percent of all school districts in the state are defined as rural, meaning they have fewer than 600 students and they are more than 25 miles from a major city. Every county has rural schools with the exception of San Francisco and Orange Counties. Even Los Angeles County has rural schools.

But perhaps no county is as rural as Alpine.

Nestled in the mountains south of Lake Tahoe, the Alpine County Unified School District has a total of 65 students; 19 have disabilities. As with many rural districts, Alpine has issues with connectivity. "We recently brought fiber optics to the main campus in Markleeville," says Bill Roderick, director of student services. The district now offers speech services online, "and we're bringing occupational therapy online, too," he says. "Models show that it works in rural areas. If they can make it work in rural Alaska, we can make it work here."

But off campus, he acknowledges, "access can be a challenge for families. Streaming wi-fi or a majestic setting—it's a tradeoff."

Roderick also might consider another tradeoff: streaming wi-fi or a sense of belonging. Fifty-six of the Alpine students are on the main campus. "We make sure that everyone from the superintendent to the bus driver knows every student's name," he says.

The other nine students, three with IEPs, attend a one-room K-8 school in Bear Valley, where the physical education class in winter is skiing. Staff is one teacher and two para-professionals. "It's an amazing experience for the students who go to that school," says Roderick. "They are family. They take care of each other, and everyone watches out for the kids."

Amber Watts is the parent of two students in Bear Valley, a daughter in third grade and a son in fifth grade with an IEP. Her son is single-sided deaf. His IEP calls for three services a month. "We drive an hour and a half for two of the sessions, and the third is on Zoom." In Bear Valley, she says, "The kids are with the same class every year; they all know each other. Being in this town," Watts says, has given her

son "the freedom to own his disability. It doesn't make him different; it makes him special."

No Wrong Effort

Sierra Academy of Experiential Learning (SAEL), is a public charter high school (grades 9–12) in Nevada City with 180 students. The 35 students with IEPs are "fully included" in all classes and in the fieldwork that is a major component of experiential learning, says Judy Tomasetti, special education coordinator. The fieldwork, she says, "helps create bonds" among the students.

And then there is Crew, which is somewhat akin to a homeroom in a more traditional high school. Fifteen entering freshmen start out as a cohort, "and they stay together for four years," says Tomasetti. They meet for 30 minutes four times a week "and form close-knit friendships within their grade level."

"All students take the same classes and are held to the same standard," says Richard Young, the school's executive director. All students have computers and build their own website, which, Young says, "is an archive of their work that helps drive their student-led conferences." These conferences are held twice a year, and students with IEPs might use them to demonstrate progress toward reaching their goals. "Every kid produces a different product," Young says. "There is no wrong effort."

Tomasetti says there is "a lot of economic diversity in the area. The historic town of Nevada City attracted people who work at home," she says, "but other families are very rural." For some of those rural families, connectivity can be an issue, so the school schedules "office hours," a "free academic time" during the school day when students can do their homework or meet with teachers.

Becki Robins' daughter is a senior at SAEL. Robins says she has seen the change in her daughter, who was diagnosed with Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), since she entered SAEL as a ninth-grader.

Although her daughter chose to attend the school, "she started out not being motivated," Robins says. "At her previous school they didn't like her behavior; they saw it as an annoyance rather than as part of her disability." At a smaller school like SAEL, she says, "teachers take an interest in individual students. They saw that she was struggling. They are always in tune with her needs; they support her and help her to work with her disability."

Services at School

Back at Olga Reed, Principal Cher Manich says, "For a small school, we have a pretty robust special ed department with resource and speech services, a half-time psychologist, and hearing and visual exams scheduled by the district nurse. And when a student's IEP requires services beyond the school's capacity, we provide transportation." Resource time is scheduled in the classroom when everyone is getting support so students with disabilities are not singled out or separated from their peers.

"Our teachers understand the community and the students, and they play to student strengths," Manich says. And the students themselves? "You don't see any separation when they are out on the playground," she says. With or without disabilities, "they treat each other like brother and sister." ▯

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