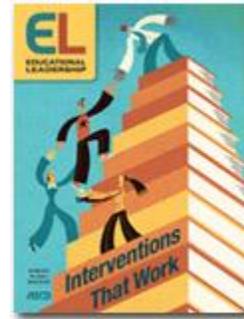


## Include, Belong, Learn

George Theoharis and Julie Causton-Theoharis

**Two schools serving many students with disabilities show it's possible to let everyone learn together.**

Kenny is a student at River View, a public K–8 school in central New York. Kenny spent his first few school years in a self-contained special education class because, according to an evaluation, he was "too disabled to be in the general education setting." In Kenny's 4th grade year, River View undertook a new schoolwide intervention. As part of that change, Kenny began learning in a general education classroom. Within a year, he no longer qualified for special education because he had made such significant academic progress.



At River View—and a similar school that serves K–6 grades called Summer Heights—more students are now achieving at grade level in math and at a proficient or advanced level in reading than was the case before these schools rolled out a schoolwide intervention. Achievement went up for both nondisabled students and students with mild and significant behavioral, academic, and intellectual disabilities. For example, in terms of literacy, the percent of River View 4th graders with identified disabilities scoring at or above grade level went from only 20 percent to 42 percent in just two years.

What was the intervention that made a difference for Kenny? Did these schools adopt a packaged program? Did they engage in test preparation or narrow their curriculum to raise achievement in math and reading at the expense of broader course offerings? Did the schools develop a new program for students with identified disabilities?

The answer to all these questions is *no*. The intervention both schools used is inclusive school reform: At River View and Summer Heights, all students—including the approximately 23 percent of the student body at both schools formally identified as disabled—now have full access to the general education curriculum. Special education teachers and general education teachers coplan and coteach lessons. As professors at a research university close to these schools, we helped them rethink school structures and bolster the instructional techniques that made this transformation possible.

## What Is Inclusive School Reform?

The theory behind inclusion is that the best way to provide quality education for students with disabilities—and all students—is to increase marginalized students' access to the general education classroom, where the best curriculum and social opportunity are often provided. Inclusive school reform also means providing each student an authentic sense of belonging in an inclusive classroom where difference is expected and valued.

Many schools across the country now approach intervention through the "three-tiered triangle" that's characteristic of Response to Intervention (RTI), a model for identifying and supporting students with learning challenges that many districts have adopted. The base of the triangle (Tier 1) represents good general curriculum and instruction, provided to all students. In the next tier up, students who still struggle receive some prescribed intervention; and in the upper tier, the few learners who don't respond successfully to the first two levels of instruction receive more focused intervention.

Rather than target a few students to receive special help outside the mainstream, however, schools like River View use inclusion as their guiding philosophy. As these schools improve the way they meet all students' needs within the general education setting, they are seeing positive results for kids like Kenny, who typically receive interventions in more restrictive settings. We see places like River View as schools of promise—three promises, in fact: a promise to include everyone, a promise to help staff and students feel that they belong, and a promise that everyone will learn.

## But We've *Tried* Inclusion...

We have heard many administrators, teachers, and staff say "we already do inclusion" or "we've tried that before," implying that such an overarching intervention is either already standard-issue or unrealistic. We are aware that inclusive services have been—and still are—implemented poorly in some schools across the United States and implemented well in others.

It's worth the work to get the inclusive approach right; decades of research has demonstrated that, when implemented properly, inclusive or integrated services can have positive social and academic results for students with disabilities, as well as English language learners (Peterson & Hittie, 2003; Zehr, 2006). A recent longitudinal study (Cosier, 2010) studied thousands of students across the United States and concluded that each hour a student with a disability spends in general education produces a significant gain in achievement. This effect held true across all disability categories, even when controlling for factors like race and socioeconomic status.

## Resource Restructuring

Adopting reforms to create schoolwide inclusion at River View and Summer Heights, and getting real commitment from staff and administration to move in this direction, took a year of planning. We began the process in 2007 by helping the schools' staff members learn about the philosophy and practice of inclusion. We formed a leadership team to spearhead a planning process that started with examining the existing data—an essential component of any inclusive reform intervention.

At each school, this team examined how the school was currently providing education to students of different ability levels and compared the school's standard method of operating with the inclusive philosophy. Both schools eventually created a new service model that all but eliminated separate special education environments.

At both River View and Summer Heights, more than half the school population receives free or reduced-price lunch. Twenty-four percent of River View's learners, and 21 percent of Summer Heights's students, receive special education services. At Summer Heights, examining the current landscape involved creating a visual representation showing all classrooms in which special education teachers and general education teachers worked, with arrows indicating which kinds of educators pulled students from which specific classrooms for services. This bird's-eye view of how and where all Summer Heights staff worked also showed how many multiage, self-contained spaces the school had for students with disabilities and how paraprofessionals were used. When the leadership team presented this visual representation at a planning meeting about school reform, all staff saw clearly how human resources were distributed.

It became clear that this service delivery plan concentrated the number of kids with intense needs into certain classrooms, some of them self-contained spaces that did not teach the standard curriculum. Many other classrooms at Summer Heights lacked both students with disabilities and additional adult support. This model excluded some students from the general education curriculum, standard modes of instruction, and social interaction with nondisabled peers for some or all of each day.

Together, staff members critically examined this bird's-eye view of their staff configuration with inclusion in mind. They looked for ways to redeploy staff that would create classrooms with a better balance of students with and without disabilities. Teams of teachers created proposals for how to rearrange staff, create new teaching teams, and rethink student placements. The leadership team looked over these drafts and created a final plan.

With the restructured staff and classroom configuration Summer Heights now uses, all learners are placed into general education classrooms. Special education teachers, in general, work with two general education classrooms and a teaching assistant to plan and provide differentiated instruction to a range of learners. The school staff begins planning and creating these collaborative staff teams in January so that many of the details and arrangements are in place before school starts the following fall. A few Summer Heights students also receive speech or physical therapy

outside the classroom; virtually none do so at River View. We guided River View through a similar process and arrived at a similar model that responded to the unique needs of their students and staffing. In this restructured design, there are no more resource rooms or self-contained spaces.

## New Roles Lead to More "Belonging"

The new teaching configuration carried out at Summer Heights fulfilled a second promise of inclusion: belonging. Students need to feel that they are full-time members of a general education classroom. In the traditional "pull-out" model Summer Heights previously relied on, students with the most academic difficulty were forced to undergo the most transitions and had the most segmented schedule. Under the inclusive model now in place, *all* students remain full-time members of one classroom community.

Teachers now have new roles and responsibilities. Special education teachers are expected to coteach with general educators; general teachers are no longer responsible only for general education students. Looking into several classrooms in Summer Heights and River View reveals how the changes in staff roles, teaching, and learning play out in an inclusive school.

In one classroom, 5th grade general and special education teachers are codesigning a writing unit about careers. They have grouped all students heterogeneously and are planning modifications and accommodations to allow all students to participate.

For instance, students can draw information for this project from pamphlets describing assorted careers that are available in the classroom, from video clips, or from speakers who presented to the class. Students can choose to work with a partner or alone. To compose a draft, they can write on traditional lined paper, on raised lined paper, or on chart paper on the wall (for students who need to stand up); they can use a computer program with word prediction software; they can use several graphic organizers to get started; and they can write with pens, markers, or "20/20 pens" (special marking pens with dark ink and very wide tips that help students with visual impairments see their own writing).

During the project, the special education teacher and general teacher explain these options and allow all students access to any of them. Once students begin writing, teachers circulate around the room answering questions and helping as needed.

In a middle school math class, the general and special education teacher have split the class into two halves. Each half is seated in a semicircle and the semicircles face in opposite directions to cut down on noise interference. Each teacher leads the same lesson in translating word problems involving math into algebraic equations, but each is instructing only half the class, allowing for a better student–teacher ratio.

Elsewhere, a team of general education teachers, special educators, and reading specialists who are responsible for educating the school's 1st graders have flexibly grouped these students for literacy instruction. Each adult plans a literacy circle activity for his or her group, individualizing the plan to meet the needs of these particular learners. For example, the special education teacher works with a group of nine students, only two of whom have identified disabilities. She differentiates instruction as students partner read using the "say something" strategy. Each partner reads a paragraph from a book, then pauses to allow both partners to say something about what they just heard. One student with a significant disability who struggles with decoding is responsible for reading only 30 underlined words during this partner read. The group then gathers as a whole, each student selects a role (such as summarizer, illustrator, or discussion director), and students discuss the book together.

Teachers at both schools receive extensive professional development about creating inclusive communities, achieving effective adult collaboration, coteaching, differentiating curriculum, and providing adaptations to the general education curriculum. This professional development is essential to making such sweeping changes.

At first, structural and collaborative changes like these were difficult. However, after the initial adjustment, many teachers at both River View and Summer Hill reported a heightened sense of belonging in their own schools and effectiveness in their profession. Reflecting on the changes, one teacher involved in this intervention said,

I no longer have the students with the most significant needs missing the most instruction... wasting so much time in transition, missing valuable core curriculum. Now these services are brought into the classroom seamlessly and everybody benefits... . Let's not forget the social stigma associated with pullout programs. These kids now finally belong somewhere... all day long.

## More Learning For Everyone

Since restructuring into a more inclusive learning environment, both River View and Summer Heights have seen gains—for all students, but especially for students with disabilities—on NCLB-mandated standardized tests and in-school assessments given throughout the year. As reflected in Figure 1, achievement gains for students identified as having disabilities have been dramatic in many grades, with no decrease or even plateauing of performance among the general student population.

Figure 1. Math Achievement of River View Students		
	Percent Scoring at or Above Grade Level	
Students' Current Grade Level	Before inclusive reform	Two years after reform
All 5th graders	55	66
5th graders with disabilities	18	43
All 6th graders	54	72
6th graders with disabilities	18	53
All 7th graders	56	78
7th graders with disabilities	29	70
All 8th graders	48	62
8th graders with disabilities	8	40

*Note.* These data follow the same student cohorts over three years. Data listed in the "Before inclusive reform" column reflect each student cohort's scores two years before its current grade level (for example, data from 3rd grade for students listed as currently in 5th grade). River View also made gains at each grade level from year to year (for example, comparing one 5th grade class to the next 5th grade class).

These schools are not alone in seeing robust gains after adopting inclusive reforms. In other schools, we see similar—and even greater—gains (Theoharis, 2007). Students with a disability are not the only ones whose achievement soars in such an environment. For example, three years into a similar intervention implemented by a Wisconsin elementary school, the percent of students eligible for special education who were classified as "at or above" grade level on the state's performance measure had shot from 18 to 60. Black students' performance on the same measure went from 33 percent to 78 percent "at or above," and 100 percent of English language learners achieved this level of performance, up from 17 percent (Theoharis, 2007).

Some teachers, administrators, and parents believe that an inclusive intervention will water down teaching and lower the achievement of all students. Yet at these schools and others across the United States, including students with special learning needs in general education classes resulted in a more effective education for all.

In the end, schools, districts, and the education system can decide to spend more time and money on methods that separate students and apply remedial interventions. But we believe that the more time schools devote to developing special programs that separate students and staff, the more they will come to rely on those same programs, thus sending more marginalized students out of general education classrooms. Summer Heights and River View show an alternate way: School can do the hard work of creating inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms. Pursuing this path would be a paradigm shift, one that requires educators make three significant promises—to include all students, help all belong, and allow everyone to learn together.

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*Authors' note:* All names are pseudonyms.

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