

elementary school



Making the Case for Inclusion

Schools that incorporate special education benefit all students, but finding them takes effort

BY LAURA CASTAÑEDA

Elena Polansky was living in Chicago with her family and looking for a school that could serve the needs of her eldest daughter, Sophia, who uses a wheelchair and is nonverbal.

Her search led her to the CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger Community School, which she believed offered the vital educational and supplemental services her special-needs daughter required.

After Sophia was admitted to the school, Polansky and her three children moved more than 1,700 miles west to be nearer to the Woodland Hills, Calif., school. CHIME stands for Community Honoring Inclusive Model Education.

"At CHIME, if you asked her friends to tell you about Sophia,

no one would say, 'She's in a wheelchair.' They would say, 'She's a big flirt, she has long brown hair, she's really funny and she causes lots of trouble,'" says Polansky, adding that her daughter is now a thriving high school senior — and a cheerleader.

Since 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has required that special-needs students spend as much time as possible with peers who do not receive special education. And research shows that inclusive schools like CHIME are better academically, socially and emotionally for all students.

However, finding schools that practice true inclusion can be challenging. Too many still pull special-needs students out of general education classrooms

THINKSTOCK



Katie Robinson, a science teacher at CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger Community School, instructs seventh-graders on lab safety.

and offer watered-down versions of the curriculum, says Frances Stetson, president of the Houston-based educational consulting firm Stetson & Associates Inc.

"Separate is not equal," says Stetson, adding that inclusion is one of the most complex yet growing civil-rights issues facing education today.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities estimates that 1 in 5 children in the U.S. have brain-based learning and attention issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia, among others. And those numbers rise if students with physical, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities are included.

To be sure, teaching all children in one setting can be challenging. But CHIME gets high marks on inclusion, which means integrating students with special needs into the general-education environment at least 80 percent of the time. At CHIME, for example, it's 100 percent, says executive director Erin Studer.

"There are no pullout or special day classes," she notes. "All services and supports are brought to students and integrated into the general-education environment. Everyone learns with age-level peers all together, all day long."

Inclusion has many benefits, says Barbara Trader, executive director of TASH, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group working to advance inclusive practices.

"For more than 30 years, research has shown that all students — with and without disabilities — do better when taught in the same classrooms with

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— ELENA POLANSKY, mother of a special-needs student

same-age peers," she says. "This kind of school culture improves teacher responsiveness to a wide array of unique learning needs and helps students develop into socially conscious, empathetic adults."

Shane Martin, dean of the Loyola Marymount University School of Education in Los Angeles, agrees.

"We are preparing this generation of young people to be active citizens and contributors to our »



FIND HELP ONLINE

In addition to your local and state school districts' websites, check the following sites to learn about education rights for students with autism, ADHD, learning differences and physical, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities:

The Arc
thearc.org

CHADD
chadd.org

Inclusive Schools Network
inclusivechools.org

National Autism Association
autismsafety.org

National Disability Rights Network
ndrn.org

SWIFT
swiftschools.org

TASH
tash.org

U.S. Department of Education Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
www2.ed.gov/policy/special/leg/edpicks.jhtml?src=rbxxx

Understood
understood.org

Wrightslaw
wrightslaw.com



CHIME Institute teacher
Megan Holmes helps a fifth-grade student at Schwarzenegger Community School.

society,” he says. “They’re going to encounter a whole range of people with gifts, abilities and disabilities. It’s helpful and positive if they are introduced to them all through school.”

Real inclusion involves all children, not just those with disabilities. It brings together general and special education in new ways to address each and every student, says Amy McCart, director of technical assistance for the SWIFT Center at the University of Kansas, which helps K-8 schools implement inclusive academic instruction.

“At SWIFT, general and special educators work in concert, supporting one another for the benefit of all students. We can no longer rely on segmented or separate buildings or classrooms,” she says.

Finding an inclusive school can be challenging, however, especially because of the range of

districts across the U.S. Some schools, like CHIME, admit students via lottery only. Others require students to live within a geographical location.

EDUCATE, INVESTIGATE AND ADVOCATE

The Internet is an invaluable tool to learn about your rights and find appropriate resources.

Start with the U.S. Department of Education, and move on to general websites from groups such as Understood.org, a free online resource for parents of children with learning and attention issues and the Inclusive Schools Network, which promotes inclusive educational practices (inclusiveschools.org). You can also check with your local school district. Next, go to sites that are specific to your child’s needs, such as the National Autism Association.

Once you identify a



1 in 5
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school, visit the campus or schedule a phone call with an administrator or head of special education.

TASH’s Trader recommends asking the following: Does the school state a commitment to inclusion in its mission? Do general and special education teachers collaborate and co-teach? Do you see evidence of students with disabilities as full members of the school? What kinds of support are available to teachers?

Parents should also find out how a school discusses “difference” with children, says Bob Cunningham, an adviser for Understood.org.

“What kinds of things (does the school) actually do to help a child feel included?” he asks.

Getting into the right school is just the first step. You must advocate for your child and learn to work as a team with educators.

Christine Stephan of Harrisonburg, Va., was homeschooling her 13-year-old son, Oliver, who has autism and is nonverbal. When Oliver decided he wanted to go to a traditional school, she met with the superintendent.

“He saw my perspective, understood inclusion and suggested a way forward,” she says. “It’s not yet an inclusive environment, but they are working at it.”

It takes time and energy to find the right school, but the payoff can be profound.

Johanna Korpinen looked extensively for a school for her 9-year-old daughter, Emilia, who is autistic and nonverbal. Then she found CHIME.

Thanks to a speech therapist and an iPad with voice recognition, Korpinen says her daughter started “talking” in kindergarten.

“All of a sudden, I heard a girl’s voice on the iPad. ‘My name is Emilia.’ I burst into tears. It was the first time I heard my child’s voice,” she says. ●