

Parent Participation Crucial to School Reform

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“Real change can only come as a result of the commitments of both the hearts and minds of the total school community – teachers, parents, students, administrators, and school boards.”

– Lisa Delpit

Why Participate in General Education Reform Today?

Education reform has become a pressing reality for all communities. Local, state, and federal education agencies have defined desired student outcomes, paid increased attention to the importance of rigorous content and performance standards for students, and discussed ways to hold schools accountable for students learning at higher levels. This focus on improved results has an impact on all students and all schools. One can see reform at work in local efforts that include site-based collaborations of parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as in statewide education reform initiatives.

Common Issues in School Reform

Because of the way general education has traditionally been structured, many people have difficulty understanding how students with disabilities can be included in school reform efforts. They have only experienced traditional techniques and teaching approaches such as lecture with follow-up exercises, curriculum taught primarily through textbooks, or grouping students in tracks based on ability. In addition, as a result of their own personal experiences in school, people frequently have many incorrect or limited perceptions. They may perceive that all students in a classroom must be at the same instructional level, or be able to work at the same rate, or have the same learning objectives in order to participate together in learning activities. These traditional models of instruction still exist, but they do not lend themselves well to addressing the needs of the majority of diverse learners found in classrooms today.





The issue of rights and protections adds further complexity to the question of how students with disabilities fit into school reform. Some people are fearful that if students with disabilities are included in reform, they could lose the special rights and safeguards to which they are entitled under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Furthermore, they are concerned about whether the general education system can meet anyone's needs, let alone the needs of students with disabilities.

Parents often experience resistance to their involvement in setting policy for schools. Some barriers are cultural and

require customized outreach efforts that take into account the diverse norms and experiences of families. Others, like scheduling meetings at inconvenient times, are organizational and can be addressed in a more general fashion. Families often feel that educational decisions are made by other people who understand the issues better or who have control of the funds necessary for reform. In addition, some families who would like to be involved need access to information to be effective participants. Sometimes, people who have a strong interest in the schools are not informed and are thereby left out of the discussions and the decision-making process.

New Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in School Reform Efforts

Given the current situation, where many schools are achieving less than satisfactory results for students who receive special education services as well as students in general education, it is vital that families and advocates for students who receive special education services take part in school restructuring discussions. All students — not just students traditionally included in general education — need a rich curriculum. However, special education traditionally has focused primarily on the processes of instruction rather than on student results or depth in curriculum. The 1997 Amendments to IDEA confirmed that students with disabilities must have access to the general curriculum as well as access to individualized instructional supports.

A second important issue is that students with disabilities are commonly denied access to typical incidental learning opportunities in school. Being part of social activities and rituals of the school community is important for students with disabilities if they are to participate fully in the culture or “informal curriculum” of the school. Students with disabilities need shared learning experiences with nondisabled students to develop social interaction skills and friendships — both critical dimensions of preparation for later life.

A final consideration is that students receiving special education services frequently need strong role models to assist with their language development

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Education Reform

is a project of the
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and problem-solving skills. Access to strong role models is also important for learning appropriate behavior.

Since school reform can provide new opportunities for students with disabilities to experience success in the context of general education, it is important for families to examine how teaching practices being implemented in general education reform can enhance the provision of

quality special education support services. By restructuring general education, schools can provide new learning opportunities to address these students' needs for rich curricula and normalized learning experiences with nondisabled peers while still providing meaningful, individually tailored learning opportunities as designated in each student's Individualized Education Program.

Tips for Participation in Reform Efforts

Family members, advocates, educators, and students and adults with disabilities bring many different levels of expertise, experience, and energy to restructuring schools to meet students' needs better. It is important for people who are committed to generating change in their schools to choose strategies that interest and work for them. The suggestions and ideas that follow are intended to serve as "triggers" to give people ideas that they can adapt.

- ***Become familiar with the groups in your school and district that are addressing school reform issues and join the one that interests you most.***

Consider standards committees, legislative groups, local school councils, accountability or curriculum development committees, or other groups that address key issues.

- ***Look at education reform broadly rather than with a narrow, specialized focus that might serve only one group of students.***

Ask how schools can be changed to realize better results for all students.

- ***Learn the issues.***

Broadening one's information base is important. Gain experience through reading, attending meetings or conferences, asking questions, and participating. Visit other schools.¹ Watch videos. School districts have staff development libraries where many current educational publications (e.g., *Educational Leadership*, *Education Week*) and videos are kept. Check the list provided at the end of this article for additional resources.



¹ For information on setting up and conducting site visits, see the *PEER Information Brief*, "Site Visits: Seeing Schools in Action."



- ***Ask students for feedback as new practices are implemented in their schools.***

Learn what teaching and learning strategies students are enthusiastic about and those that do not excite them.

- ***Locate and build allies in your school, school district, or state with people who have vision, who are informed about quality education, and who are open to exploring new ideas.***

Look for others who are connected to people with influence, and ask for names of people you should meet, places you should visit, and conferences or meetings you should attend. Network!

- ***Assist people to view students with disabilities as whole children who happen to have particular challenges.***

Re-educate people to the idea that the manner in which schools and society have typically educated students with disabilities is not the only or necessarily the best way to assist them. Instead, schools should build on a student's strengths and provide accommodations in areas of need, rather than focus on remediating the student's problems.

- ***Provide key decisionmakers with information and reading material on educational issues.***

When meeting with people, describe changes you have in mind in brief, accessible terms. Be as clear as possible in discussing school reform issues.

- ***Encourage ongoing training for a wide variety of participants – a key to successful school reform.***

Request that workshops include families, individuals with disabilities, and other community members so that everyone is able to explore the same ideas that teachers study for their own professional development. Continue to train new people who enter the process. Talk with university leaders in the community and state. Inform them about critical issues and changes. Solicit their views. This communication will enable them to join you in the reforms you are working to implement.

- ***Understand the process of change.***

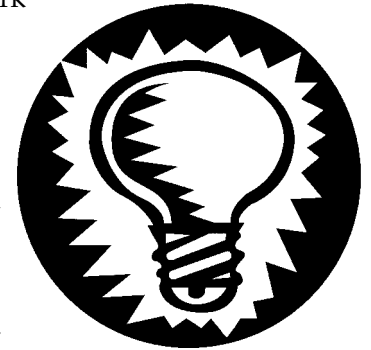
Use a variety of strategic approaches to achieve what you desire. Do not wait for the system to phase in a plan. Draw key people into supporting reform, since change happens most successfully when people feel as if they themselves are choosing those changes.

Effectiveness of Combined Efforts

Active involvement of diverse groups, including families, in school reform is essential to promote the development of effective schools in which all students can succeed. Having students (including those with disabilities) participate in these discussions is also highly beneficial. Their presence forces the adoption of genuine reform strategies that will lead to the kinds of changes needed to enable schools to meet the increasingly diverse needs of all learners.

Improved opportunities for all students arise when diverse learning styles, talents, and needs are addressed in the design and development of schools as learning communities. Research has shown that

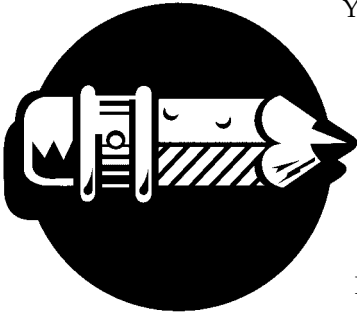
when best practice, instructional strategies, and technologies are designed and used to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general classrooms, all students benefit. Students should have the opportunity to grow up and learn with peers who bring diverse strengths, depth, and richness to the educational experience. Students with disabilities are respected and appreciated for their own unique contributions. As a result, schools improve, and the likelihood is significantly increased that individuals with disabilities in the future will themselves become a part of reform discussions as we work to achieve both excellence and equity in our nation's educational system.



Resources on School Reform and Inclusive Education

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