

# Inclusive Education: A Primer

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

What is inclusive education? It depends on who you ask. While doing presentations around the country, I've heard a variety of definitions of "inclusion." Parents have said, "My child is included in art, PE, and music." But this is actually "visitation." Some have said, "My child is fully included in regular classes with a full-time aide." When questioned further, the mom reports that her child and the aide sit in the back of the room and the child has little, if any, interaction with the other students or the classroom teacher. This is "integration." Other parents have said their children are included, but these children are actually in the regular classroom only for homeroom, and the rest of the day is spent in a special ed/resource room. And some educators have said their schools are inclusive since students with disabilities are in the same *building* as students without disabilities; these students never see the inside of a regular ed classroom, but they're said to be included. I'm not sure what to call *this!*

Inclusion could be compared to pregnancy: you either are or you're not! A belief common to many practitioners of inclusion is that there's no such thing as "partial" inclusion, just as there's no such thing as being "partially" pregnant.

Here's a definition subscribed to by many (and which is included in my *Disability is Natural* book):

Inclusion is children with disabilities being educated in the schools they would attend if they didn't have disabilities, in age-appropriate regular education classrooms, where services and supports are provided in those classrooms for both the students and their teachers, and where students with disabilities are fully participating members of their school communities in academic and extracurricular activities.

And while the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) doesn't use the word "inclusion," the *intent* is there, as evidenced by provisions which mandate that a child attend age-appropriate, general ed classes, in the school closest to his home, with the appropriate supports, assistive technology, and curriculum modifications.

To illustrate what inclusion "really looks like," I'll share some of my son's experiences at Columbine

Elementary in Woodland Park, Colorado. (This is not the same Columbine made famous by the school shootings. The columbine is the state flower of Colorado and many schools are named in its honor.) This article provides an overview from my perspective; the wisdom of Columbine's principal is detailed another article, "Inclusive Education: A Principal's Perspective."

My son, Benjamin—who uses a power wheelchair and other assistive technology devices and is now 19 and in college—attended Columbine from kindergarten through fifth grade. Native Texans, we moved to Colorado when Benjamin was four. We chose to leave Texas for a variety of reasons, but in deciding *where* to move, an inclusive school was one of our priorities.

When Benjamin was three (in Texas) and then four (in Colorado), he attended ordinary preschools. I never enrolled him in a special ed preschool, where he would be segregated—and that's another story!

Prior to actually making the move, I visited Columbine to meet the principal, Mike Galvin. I wanted reassurance that what I had heard about Columbine was really true. When I visited in June 1991, school was already out so I wasn't able to see classrooms full of students. But Mike took me on a tour and answered all my questions. I was delighted to learn there was *no special ed classroom*; all students with disabilities were included in regular classes! At the end of our meeting, I asked Mike how he had become a principal who supported inclusion: "Did you take a class or have some sort of epiphany or awakening?" He smiled and answered, "No, I just thought about what I would want if I had a child with a disability." And it really can be that simple.

So we moved. Four-year-old Benj had a good year at one of the neighborhood preschools. That summer, I asked Mike what I should do to get Benj "ready" for kindergarten. (I was still using the tired, old, medical-model thinking.) Flashing one of his trademark gentle smiles, Mike replied, "Just have fun with your kids this summer, Kathie. We take all kids wherever they are; you don't need to get Benjamin 'ready' for anything." So we began our journey of Benjamin being a "regular"—not a "special"—student. Our dream became reality.

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Columbine is an accessible school. The primary grades (K-2) are on the lower floor. The third, fourth, and fifth grades, along with the library, gym, and cafeteria are on the upper floor. Stairs connect the floors at each end of the school, as does a long hallway ramp which bisects the building.

Mike's belief in inclusion was pervasive. During Benjamin's years on the lower floor, Mike instructed each of Benj's teachers to always use the ramped hallway when taking their students upstairs. He didn't want Benj and a "chair pusher" going up the ramp alone, while everyone else in the class took the stairs. (At the time, Benj used a manual wheelchair which he could push for short distances, but he could not propel himself up the long, sloped hallway.)

Benjamin, like the other children with disabilities at Columbine, was in general ed, age-appropriate classrooms for the duration of his elementary school career. I don't recall the exact number of students with disabilities at the school—since they weren't isolated in a special room, you couldn't count heads—but students with physical disabilities, autism, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, and emotional disabilities were all included in regular classrooms; many were also in extra-curricular activities and all had real friends.

Benjamin and Dylan, a boy with Down syndrome, sang in the choir for several years. During one of those years, the choir won first place in a statewide competition. Columbine, along with the other winners, was invited to perform at the Colorado music teachers' annual conference. Mike and the music teacher, Brian Leatherman, were presented with the award. During his brief acceptance speech before the assembly of Colorado music teachers, Mike proudly announced that Columbine valued music, the arts, and diversity. The choir and Mike received a standing ovation.

Benjamin and the other students with disabilities were virtually indistinguishable from students without disabilities. They were thought of—and treated like—all the other students. *All* children were seen as "learners." Supports, accommodations, curriculum modifications,

and assistive technology devices were provided to meet their needs. The school provided Benjamin with a gently used manual wheelchair (as a backup to be kept at school in case his other chair broke down), a laptop computer to do his schoolwork on (he doesn't write with a pencil), a standing frame, a wheelchair accessible desk, large print materials, computer programs, and other goodies. *Never did I have to fight for these.*

Teachers' aides (classroom assistants), special ed teachers, and classroom teachers collaborated—and worked closely with parents and students—to ensure the needs of all students were met. A variety of instructional strategies were used; small group and hands-on activities were common. The classroom teacher, the special ed teacher, and/or the teacher's aide often became co-teachers, splitting the class in two, with each taking responsibility for half. Some teachers had multi-age classrooms. Others moved up with their classes: fourth grade teachers became fifth grade teachers the next year, providing stability for their students.

Under Mike's able leadership, teachers knew they were responsible for *all* the students in their classrooms. Thus, even though a teacher's aide was frequently in the classroom to assist Benjamin with certain activities, his classroom teacher—not the teacher's aide—was responsible for Benjamin and his learning.

Teacher responsibility for *all students* went beyond the borders of each teacher's classroom. While a teacher's aide usually helped Benj go to the restroom, whoever was closest and/or available was also expected to help. On at least one occasion, Principal Mike transferred Benj out of his chair and set him on the potty in the boys' bathroom!

In the "Inclusive Education: A Principal's Perspective" article on my website, you can learn more about the culture of inclusion at Columbine. The principal's wisdom, experiences, and common sense are valuable to parents and educators. You'll learn that inclusion is a process, not a product, and that it's *not* dependent on funding or on teachers or students being "ready." At Columbine, everyone was ready, and all children belonged and all children learned.

***Benjamin and Dylan, a boy with Down syndrome, sang in the choir for several years.***