Assigning all special education students to a general education roster on the first day of school results in a ripple effect that is good for all students. They learn tolerance, to help one another, and that everyone gets what they need.

Walk into any classroom at Roosevelt Elementary School in Burbank and you will see a sign that says, “Fair does not mean equal.” Below those words are two images, each shows three different sized children trying to see a baseball game over a fence.

In the first picture, each child has a crate to stand on. But the tall child does not need it, and the shortest still cannot see over the fence. In the second picture, the tallest boy does not have a box and can still see over the fence, and the smallest child has two boxes. Now, all three of the children can see over the fence, and it required no extra boxes. This image illustrates an important idea for an inclusive classroom – everyone gets what they need and people need different things.

Roosevelt Elementary School has 650 students and 80 of those students are on an Individualized Education Plan, meaning they have special education support services ranging from speech therapy to specialized academic instruction.

All students in special education spend part of their day in a general education classroom. They are assigned to a general education teacher, and they line up with their typical peers starting on the first day of school. They take part in the opening class activities, are listed on the general education teacher’s roster, and many receive a majority of their instruction in the general education classroom.

For a school with three special day classes, this was a big change. A special day class is an antiquated term for a special education classroom for students who need support services for more than half of their day. These students are usually two years below grade level or more.

Several years ago, students in a special day class were all on a special education teacher’s roster; they lined up with only their special

By Jennifer Meglemre
education peers on the first day of school, and they started to go into general education classes only after about a month of school, after they had “settled into” their special education class.

Though it may seem like a subtle difference, assigning all special education students to a general education roster on the first day of school caused a ripple effect throughout the school. The change was small but symbolic and signaled a shift in thinking.

General education teachers would be in charge of the education of all of their students. Administration made a commitment to the teachers that special education teachers and paraprofessionals would provide support during academic subjects. A second adult in the classroom would also benefit students who were struggling but not identified as learning disabled.

A benefit to all

Inclusion is used in elementary schools throughout the country as a way to meet the federal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Originally enacted by Congress in 1975 to protect the rights of children with disabilities, two of the main tenets are that all students have access to a free and appropriate education (known as FAPE), and they are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

The least restrictive environment means that whenever possible, a child with disabilities should be educated with their typical peers in a general education classroom.

School is about more than just academics. Social lessons are learned on the playground and in the cafeteria. Most schools have art, music, computer and library time built into their day. Students with disabilities have the right to learn these topics along with their typical peers.

There are many times during the school day that activities are not cognitively demanding for children, such as when the teacher reads a story aloud to the class or the class practices reciting multiplication tables. Students with a reading disability can listen to a story as well as their typical peers. Even students with a significant cognitive impairment can take part in calendar activities and other repetitive, routine-based learning experiences in the classroom if given enough time and practice.

Having students with all kinds of disabilities in the general education classroom can be good for all students. They learn tolerance, they learn to help one another, and they can learn that everyone gets what they need; fair does not mean equal.

Second grade general education teacher Pam Nichols said, “When the general education teacher creates a safe learning environment, all students benefit, especially the special education kids. They can learn from each other and bring down barriers and fears about failing. It’s a win-win.”

Students celebrate the victories of their classmates who achieve something that is hard for them and encourage one another along the way. Most importantly, the general education teachers stop underestimating what the special education students can do and challenge themselves to help all students reach their full potential.

Teachers who grapple with the challenges of differentiating their lessons for students with disabilities find themselves becoming more effective teachers to all of their students.

Pitfalls to avoid

In an attempt to provide access to the general education curriculum for all students, many schools have taken a broad approach to inclusion. Students with all kinds of disabilities are mainstreamed into the general education classroom for the entirety of their day.

Advocates for full inclusion argue, rightfully, that students with disabilities need access to high-quality instruction from teachers who are specialists in their grade level or subject matter. Special educators have expertise in helping students learn to read and may be better able to remediate academic delays than a general education teacher, but they will never have the depth of knowledge on a subject, by nature of their training and experience.

For example, at the elementary level, a special education teacher works with students in multiple grade levels in a variety of subjects and topics, often at the same time. General education teachers can focus on one lesson, one subject at a time, and one grade level at a time. They have the support of curriculum and professional development to guide their pacing and lesson planning.

For special educators, there is little Common Core aligned curriculum to follow, and the pacing is different for each child. In a group of five students from one grade level, each student might be in a different place and have different gaps in his or her knowledge.

For many students with mild disabilities, accommodations such as a slower pace, time for re-teaching, additional time to complete assignments, shortened assignments, and a small group setting are enough to help them to be successful with the grade level standards. For students who are more than two years behind, the curriculum itself must be modified to allow students access to the grade level standards. These special education classes are often taught whole group to students in different grade levels with lowered expectations.

Well-meaning administrators look at this problem of lowered expectations and standards and believe the best option is to have the special education students attend only the general education class, with support in the classroom.

Often referred to as a “push-in” model of service, the logic behind it makes sense to many, especially parents who want their child with typical peers as much as possible. If the general education teacher is the content area specialist, the special education student will benefit from being in his or her class. When
the child needs help accessing the curriculum, a special educator is there to help. In theory, this sounds like a perfect solution.

The problem comes when the direct instruction, readability of the textbook, and pacing of the class are way above the functioning level of the special education student. Even with an additional special educator in the general education classroom, it can be difficult to meet the many different needs of the special education students in the room.

The more severe the disability, the more support a student needs. At its worst, full inclusion can result in a student sitting in a general education classroom, working on a completely separate curriculum, disengaged from the rest of the class. Inclusion is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

A measured approach

Two years ago at Roosevelt Elementary School, seven students from the special education preschool were sent to kindergarten to be in a special day class. The special education teacher, Theresa Heldt, partnered with a general education teacher, Rachelle Lynn, who was willing to have the whole group in her class.

Heldt provided support to students in the general education classroom during all subjects and only pulled them out for small group phonics and reading instruction. Those students will be starting second grade next year, and every one of them requires less than 45 minutes of specialized academic support a day.

“As a teacher, I want to see growth, independence and success in all of my students, but the most dramatic changes I see are in the lives of my special education students,” Lynn reports. “To these children, school is challenging in every domain: socially, emotionally, cognitively and at times, physically. These children are not only worried about the schoolwork, but about making friends. They want someone to ask them to build a tower out of blocks, to draw at the Art Center, to sit next to them at snack time, to invite them on play dates and to birthday parties; truly life-changing moments.

“These friendships motivate them and in many ways teach them how to be just a child and not one with a disability. Having special needs children included in all aspects of kindergarten, allows them to learn alongside their peers where they belong. Their peers also change in significant ways. They become more patient and compassionate with others. They learn from very early on, to be inclusive. I could not imagine any other way to teach these special children.”

When special education teachers are freed up from spending the entire day with one class of students, they can provide more support in the general education classroom. The younger the student, the smaller the gap is between the skills of the general education student and the special education student.

In kindergarten and first grade at Roosevelt, all special education students spend the majority of their day in general education classrooms. The special education teacher and assistant provide support to their students in the general education classroom after the direct instruction is given. Students who need remediation and re-teaching come to the Learning Lab for an hour or so daily to practice their skills.

As they enter second and third grade, the gap between their skills and the skills of their typical peers has lessened, not grown, as it does when students are pulled out of class for a majority of their day for specialized, modified curriculum.

There are students with severe disabilities who will never close the gap completely. However, they can spend some of their day with their typical peers, participating in library time, holiday programs, class parties, art projects, and all of the other activities that happen during the school day that are not so cognitively demanding. When included in a general education class from the first day of school, teachers and students expect the special education students to participate in these activities.

Before embarking on more inclusion in your school, teachers need training in different levels of disabilities, techniques for accommodating and modifying curriculum, and strategies for dealing with more challenging behaviors. To make changes that will help promote a positive, inclusive environment, include the following in your program:

• Utilize special educators in planning and
delivering training during faculty meetings and professional development workshops.

• Cluster special education students in the general education class and send a special education paraprofessional into the classroom to provide support.

• Devote some time to exploring programs, such as Universal Design for Learning, that show how to build one lesson that takes into account many learning differences.

• Provide special education teachers time to work with general education teachers on accommodating lessons and assessments.

• Discuss expectations for behaviors and positive reinforcement systems that work best for students with attention issues and impulsivity.

• Train teachers in the biological impact of learning disabilities and other impairments to help them see that some behaviors are outside of the child’s control.

• Place special education classrooms and service areas in the main sections of the school, not on the outskirts of the campus.

• Place all special education students on a general education classroom roster starting on the first day of school. This will ensure they are not forgotten when it comes to a field trip or special event, and the general education teachers will begin to take ownership of their education.

• Communicate changes with parents and inform them about what to expect when making the transition to a more inclusive model.

### Resources


For more information about Universal Design for Learning, please go to www.udlcenter.org.

Jennifer Meglemre is principal of Roosevelt Elementary School in Burbank USD.

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Digital signatures work for special education

In special education, a signature is required for every notice of an IEP meeting scheduled, for every assessment plan written for triennials, exits and initial evaluations, for changing or adding services, for every amendment from the slightest correction to major changes. The number of documents reaches into the hundreds every year. Sending, tracking, and hounding teachers and parents to return the signed form takes an enormous amount of time and effort.

Banks, real estate companies, healthcare providers and insurance companies are all beginning to follow the developing trend of using digital signatures for transactions, signing contracts and obtaining consent. I began to research the idea and discovered that the law actually promotes the use of digital and electronic signatures.

The United States Office of Special Education wrote a letter dated March 21, 2014, stating that electronic signatures could be used by special education departments, provided necessary steps to safeguard the integrity of the process are taken. OSEP also stated that e-signatures do not violate FERPA.

California Code of Regulations, Title 2, Chapter 10 on “Digital Signatures” and California Government Code Section 16.5 provide criteria to ensure validity and authenticity of electronic signatures, providing they are unique to the person using it and under their sole control; capable of verification; linked to data in such a manner that if the data is changed, the digital signature is invalidated; and conform to regulations adopted by the secretary of state.

Our district developed an optional digital signature program, and within three months, we had consent to participate from 95 percent of our families. In fact, most families were thrilled with the idea and felt great relief to have all those documents more accessible on their computers and stored in their electronic home filing system.

Two California cases have addressed the enforceability of electronic signatures, Ruiz v. Moss Bros. Auto Group on burden of proof and Newton v. Am Debt Services on authenticity and verification.

Docusign, the software company used in our district, actually warrants the authenticity and verification of signatures obtained through its program and will send a witness to court, if necessary.

Receiving a signature now happens in minutes rather than days and weeks.

We have been using the program for more than a year without incidence. Our special ed staff and our parents have enjoyed the ease and efficiency of using a digital signature program.
