

Special needs, “mainstream” classroom

Inclusive education isn't easy, but it benefits kids with—and without—disabilities

By Kathy Flores

Valerie is passionate about music, loves parties, and enjoys hanging out with friends. She's a doting big sister and an avid Giants fan.

She's also severely disabled. A disease called Rhet Syndrome robs her body of all voluntary movement except for minimal use of one hand. She eats with feeding tubes and communicates with a voice output device.

With the help of adaptive technology, Valerie is performing on grade level in regular classes in a San Francisco public school. Her mom, Audrey de-Chadenedes, fought hard to get her into regular classes. “I wanted Valerie to be part of the community at school and feel comfortable in the world,” she says. “When I was growing up, I never saw disabled kids, and that wasn't right. The world is full of all kinds of people, and they all have value. Kids should learn that.”

“INCLUSIVE EDUCATION”

Federal law says students with disabilities should be included with other kids as much as possible, but many children with disabilities have been separated in special education classes. Prompted by a group of parents, the San Francisco Unified School District has been pursuing an ambitious inclusion initiative since 1993—so far nearly half of the district's schools are participating.

Other districts are also moving toward greater inclusion. The Los Angeles Unified School District has been working on inclusive education to implement a 1996 court order stemming from a parent lawsuit.

For some children, like Valerie, inclusion means spending all day in “mainstream” classrooms. Others study core subjects in special education classes and join mainstream art, music, or physical education classes. “There is no one model of inclusive education,” says Deborah McKnight, San Francisco's interim executive director of special education. Special education, she says, “is a service, not a place. It is about meeting the needs of students, whatever those needs may be.”

THE BENEFITS: FOR KIDS WITH DISABILITIES

Here are three examples:

Cruz, who is autistic, is in a regular first-grade class with the assistance of a paraprofessional aide. His teacher's special picture cues, the reading of stories about social situations, and participation in class meetings all help him learn appropriate behavior. He is happy in school and making friends.

Tony, who is developmentally delayed and has severe behavior problems, was mainstreamed in a drama class. With the teacher modeling acceptance, the other children helped Tony follow directions and participate. His behavior improved, he made friends, and according to his grateful

mother, had the best school year of his life.

Patrick, who is deaf, attended an elementary school where he received some of his instruction in classes for deaf students, the rest in mainstream classes with the aid of an interpreter. He learned to relate to and make friends with both hearing and deaf people.

“Inclusion also results in greater academic gains,” says Lois Jones, executive director of Parents Helping Parents of San Francisco, “and, just as importantly, language gains for children with disabilities.”

THE BENEFITS: FOR OTHER KIDS

■ **Greater understanding:** Aruna Subramanian, inclusion specialist at San Francisco's Cesar Chavez School, says, “Parents learn the benefits by watching their children interacting. Parents of nondisabled children see that their kids' learning is enhanced by the presence of the disabled kids.”

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*Deborah McKnight,
San Francisco
special education director*

Kim Lind has a student with Down Syndrome in her fourth-grade class at West Portal School in San Francisco. His aide is there only part of the day, so the other kids help him when he needs help. “Sometimes I think that the other kids in the class get even more out of it than he does,” she says. “They learn how to treat other people who aren't just like them.”

■ **Better teaching:** “You have to learn to be a better teacher to teach different kinds of kids,” Subramanian adds. “It makes learning better for all kids.” Including students with disabilities can prompt teachers to use more creative methods, such as cooperative learning and differential instruction (teaching to children's different learning styles), which benefit all their students.

WHAT MAKES IT WORK?

■ **Commitment of school leadership.** “If the principal isn't cooperative, you're out of luck,” says J.C. Flores, mother of two autistic children in Los Angeles. Inclusion works in schools like West Portal, where everyone, not just special education teachers, is expected to share responsibility for educating children with disabilities.

■ **Specially trained staff.** In each San Francisco school with an inclusion program, an inclusion specialist is on staff to work with classroom teachers. In addition, many children with disabili-



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ties need a specially trained aide with them in the classroom.

■ **Adapting the curriculum.** Tiffany Kendall, inclusion specialist at West Portal, helps classroom teachers make modifications for students with special needs: A student with fine motor problems uses a marker and whiteboard instead of paper and pencil. A student with severe reading problems has a peer tutor read to him and listens to books on CDs. A student with cerebral palsy uses an adaptive keyboard. A teacher rings a bell to cue students with Attention Deficit Disorder to prepare for a transition.

At Cesar Chavez School, says Subramanian, a developmentally delayed student in fourth grade “wanted to work in the same math book on the same page as the other kids, but he didn't know how to do multiplication. So we let him add the numbers instead.”

■ **Training and time for collaboration.** Most classroom teachers need training and ongoing support to effectively teach such a wide range of learners. They also need time to meet regularly with inclusion specialists. “If there isn't sufficient training of teachers and paraprofessionals, it doesn't work for kids,” says Pat Mejia, program director for Support for Families of Children with Disabilities.

■ **Teaching children acceptance.** Schools teach inclusive attitudes mostly by example. In addition, a San Francisco organization called Kids Project does school presentations to educate kids about disabilities. “It helps kids to appreciate each other's similarities and differences,” says Emily Bittner, program director. “They begin to understand that disabilities are a social, not medical, condition.”

BIG CHALLENGES, BIG REWARDS

Inclusive education is, in general, more expensive, says McKnight. It means hiring specially trained paraprofessionals to work with the students and providing training to classroom teachers. Some federal funds are available, but not enough to cover the cost—one reason why inclusion doesn't hap-

pen more. In addition, there's rarely enough time in a typical school week for the planning and collaboration necessary to make inclusion work well.

And mainstream classrooms don't work for all students with disabilities. Billy, who has development delays, was fully included in a third-grade classroom with a teacher who lacked training in special needs. Billy was aware that he could not do what his peers were doing and became increasingly frustrated. His behavior got worse. Eventually he was transferred into a special class. With teaching at his own level and an intensive social skills curriculum, he showed great improvement and appeared much happier.

The challenges of inclusion are substantial, but the payoffs come in small day-to-day moments. Tiffany Kendall recalls, for example, the time a fifth-grade student with Down Syndrome, sharing a learning experience with two non-disabled peers, put his arms around their shoulders and said, grinning, “Friends! I love friends!”

“That,” says Kendall, “makes it all worthwhile.”

Resources

- California Department of Education Special Education Division, 916-445-4613, www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/sed
- Information on the educational rights of students with disabilities, 800-926-0648
- San Francisco Unified School District Special Education office, 415-355-6904