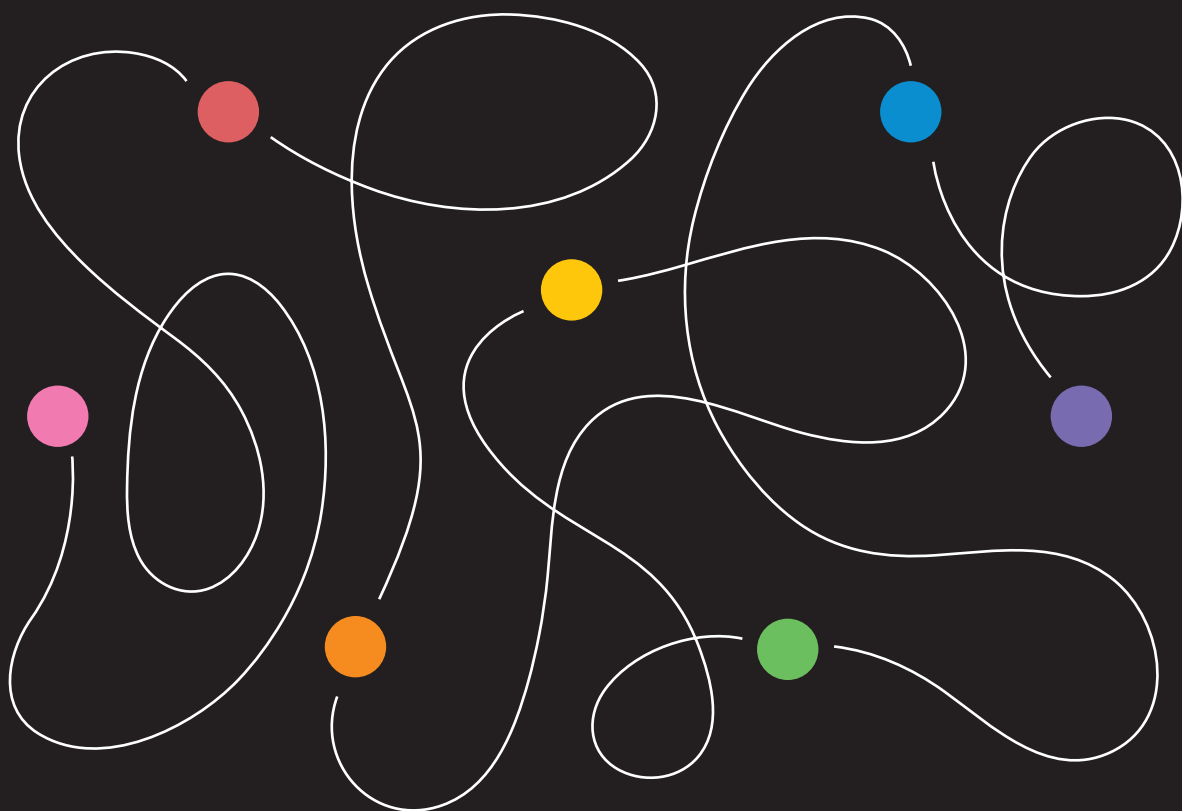


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kristie **PRETTI-FRONTCAK**
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the way to **inclusion**

How Leaders Create Schools
Where Every Student Belongs

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the way to inclusion

How Leaders Create Schools
Where Every Student Belongs

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Introduction

Welcome! We are thrilled you are here seeking a way to create an inclusive school system. You likely picked up this book because you are committed to ensuring more inclusive educational experiences for all your students. Hopefully, you have come seeking strategies and inspiration to expand the mindsets, heartsets, and skillsets of the incredible educators in your system. *The Way to Inclusion* is based on the knowledge that, through bold leadership and courageous perseverance, true inclusive change can and will occur in our schools.

Our aim as the authors of this book is to walk with you from where you are now to where you desire to go on your inclusivity journey. We wish to support you every step of the way and will use our collective knowledge, our extensive experience, and a set of milestone questions to guide you. We will also provide leadership tools, reflective questions, and action steps, and highlight the skills you need to develop the inclusive school system that you desire and that your students deserve.

Your Guides

We would like to begin by introducing ourselves and sharing the experiences and philosophies that underpin every aspect of the book. These are not the polished bios you may be used to, but unvarnished versions of our truths, since we are going to ask you to be deeply honest with us, too. We find that it is impossible to separate our personal experiences from the professional work of creating inclusive systems. We believe that the confluence of our values, beliefs, and experiences influences all the ideas and strategies we share.

Again, welcome! We are glad to be on this journey with you. Here's a little bit from each of us on who we are and what we bring to the journey.

Julie Causton

Hailing from the Land of 10,000 Lakes, I am the mother of two beautiful kids. I see possibilities everywhere. I have worked in elementary, middle, and high school as a special education teacher. Because I have always believed deeply in inclusive education, I have always taught in inclusive settings—even if I had to design those settings first. I attended the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where I learned from education superstars about the inequity inherent in traditional special education programs and became singularly focused on changing those systems.

In my first position as a special educator, when the principal handed me a key to my special education classroom, I boldly handed it back. “You can turn that room into something else,” I said, convinced that these students were going to be in general education classrooms. However, I quickly realized that I was in no position as a new educator to make any lasting schoolwide changes. I loved the work and the students, but I struggled to handle the backlash to the changes I sought.

I continued to teach as I went on to get my master’s and doctorate degrees in inclusive education. Then I spent 14 years at Syracuse University as a tenured professor, teaching future educators how to create inclusive schools and classrooms. I had several research projects in primary and secondary schools, where I studied the change process and focused on how to create more equitable and inclusive classrooms. I have also coauthored eight best-selling books on the topic of inclusion and more than 40 peer-reviewed articles.

Over the past 25 years, inclusive education has been my life. I strive to make our education system more inclusive and equitable for all. I started a company, Inclusive Schooling, to provide educators with transformative professional development. I deeply love supporting the education leaders and teachers who are courageous enough to improve our society through inclusion.

Kate MacLeod

I am a new mother, and despite months of sleep deprivation, I was quick to say “heck yes” to coauthoring a supportive guidebook for leaders committed to the work of inclusion. I have worked in the field of education for two decades. Providing all students meaningful access to education and a sense of belonging in schools has been at the forefront of my thinking, my teaching, my research, and my writing.

I got my start in education as a public high school special educator in New York City supporting students with the most complex needs—incredible students who deserved much more than what the current system was providing. I worked with colleagues and families to rethink segregated education for students with learning difficulties, striving to include them as much as possible alongside their general education peers and within their communities.

My high school students inspired me to enter academia to support inclusive change in our education system at large. I've served on the faculty of higher education institutions in New York City and rural Maine and have also worked as an educational consultant, helping administrators and teachers throughout the country engage in the invigorating work of inclusive reform.

Throughout my career, I have been on the emotional and intellectual roller-coaster of inclusive school change, whether that's meant navigating emotionally charged meetings with families on the benefits of inclusive education or problem solving with teachers and administrators through new place-based challenges. I have also learned to connect with mentors and allies to navigate challenges and celebrate successes. With this community of support, I feel more prepared to help leaders roll up their sleeves and commit to inclusive change.

I am so glad you've joined us here so we can help *you* create inclusive change in your own school system.

Kristie Pretti-Frontczak

I love the full continuum of learners, from the youngest and newest to the oldest and most experienced. I began my career in early education curious about how young children grow and develop and was excited to discover what was possible when kind, creative educators saw the strengths and gifts of all children—especially those with significant support needs. I was an early interventionist.

Despite my curiosity and the endless possibilities of my first few years in the profession, I soon found early childhood educators to be among the most devalued and isolated people in the school system. Too often, they receive the least funding, training, and respect while still being expected to do one of the hardest jobs there is: providing quality child-centered education during the most critical period of development. These educators are also expected to do this vital work for less pay, in partnership with a whole variety of agencies, and in collaboration with a range of beautifully diverse families. I have also found

that many early educators are the only voices within the system advocating for more inclusive services. Before long, I became passionate about helping to dismantle segregated early childhood programs and creating inclusive ones.

I still love everything about early childhood inclusion, but these days I focus on the other end of the continuum, helping adult learners to maintain their passion and ensure system-level changes that benefit children and their families. I first started focusing on adult learners during my 16 years as a tenured professor at Kent State University, where I taught future educators, directed grants, mentored hundreds of graduate students, and authored many articles, chapters, and books related to supporting young children in inclusive settings.

Since 2013, I have followed my true passion for designing and delivering transformative professional development as an entrepreneur. I currently partner with my coauthor Julie at Inclusive Schooling to create schools where all students flourish and educational systems, practices, and spaces are reimagined. I love teaching leaders how to raise their emotional intelligence to create kinder, more inclusive, and more creative schools for all.

To date, I have accumulated more than 50,000 hours helping educators and leaders work from a place of compassion, hope, and love everywhere from Cincinnati to Singapore. I spend just about every waking minute finding ways to support educational leaders as they engage in equity-based systems change and ensure inclusive education for our youngest citizens. I am thrilled to bring my experiences to this book as we aim to support you on this critical journey.

Jenna Mancini Rufo

I always knew I would be a special education teacher, thanks to the profound experience of growing up with a sibling with a disability. Living with my sister, Nina, who has multiple severe impairments, sparked my passion for special education. Nina attended a separate school and never had the opportunity to access grade-level curriculum and peers.

As a child, I certainly didn't have much experience with the idea of inclusion. Sure, I wished Nina could go to school with me, but I had no idea what that would look like. Even after getting a degree in elementary and special education, I still didn't get it. It was only when I was completing my master's in educational administration at Harvard University that I realized inclusive special education service delivery was far superior to anything I had previously seen.

Shortly after my master’s program, I accepted a role as an inclusion facilitator at a public middle school in Massachusetts coordinating services for general education students with significant disabilities. I was privileged to be part of a system that, 20 years ago, had already been implementing inclusion for a long time.

When I moved back to my home state of Pennsylvania, however, I was shocked. Most districts there still relied on segregated and self-contained special education programming. I felt like I had stepped back in time. I decided to pursue administrative positions, confident that I could share what I knew about inclusion to benefit students.

In North Penn, a large public school district, I served as a special education supervisor and director and as assistant superintendent. In these roles, I transitioned the district from a system of self-contained special education to a more inclusive model. It was not easy. Through blood, sweat, and tears—well, maybe not blood, but definitely sweat and tears—students with disabilities became part of the fabric of the district’s general education classrooms. I can say without a doubt that it was the most challenging aspect of my career in education, and with equal certainty that it was the most rewarding.

Today, I take my knowledge as a school leader around the country to help schools implement inclusion as the founder of empowerED School Solutions. I am excited to have this opportunity to share my insights with you alongside my amazing coauthors, Julie, Paul, Kate, and Kristie!

Paul Gordon

I love being an educator. Seeing the impact that educators have on students’ lives fills me with the energy, focus, and drive I need to do better for each student. My journey to cowriting this book was a long one that taught me about the abilities of our students and the power educators have to transform their lives.

I believe that inclusive schooling is one of the most complex system changes in education. Yet unlike my amazing coauthors, I don’t have an academic background in special education. What I bring to the table are my experiences as an educator.

I reflect on my time working at a middle school in Colorado with students like Vinny and JT, who were assigned to my reading class because they were reading two to five years below grade level but did not receive special education services. These brilliant young students had to attend my class while their

friends took elective courses like P.E., art, technology, or music. They hated walking into my room because they were segregated from their peers, which made them feel like they didn't belong.

I think about my colleagues when I was a principal in Colorado in the early 2000s and began to think differently about segregating students in “reading,” “resource,” or “self-contained” classrooms. Educators like Jenny, Teresa, Tina, Stacy, Lisa, Jess, and others asked the question, “Why do some kids get access to general education classes and diverse peers while others are hidden away in small classrooms where no one sees them?” We began to think about where our students would learn best and how we could support each student's learning. Was it perfect? Nope. But we did not allow the idea of perfection to get in the way of doing better for our students.

I think about my time as the chief academic officer for a large school district in Colorado, where we developed a multitiered system of support, took a new approach to instruction and assessment, and started knocking down the silos that divide our district. We thought about our work from a systems perspective rather than an individual school perspective.

I reflect on my time as superintendent in the western suburbs of Chicago, where some students with IEPs were sent to other school districts to receive their education. We moved students out of resource rooms and allowed them to access the general education setting. Was it incredibly challenging? Absolutely. Did we do better by our students? Absolutely. These opportunities in education are what led me to cowrite this book. I am proud to be a coauthor alongside my incredible fellow educators.

Preparing for Your Journey

You have decided to embark on an important and courageous journey to create a more inclusive school system. Such a journey requires planning and preparation. In *The Way to Inclusion*, we offer practical tools and concrete strategies that can be adopted immediately, including an Inclusive System Change Path, action planning templates, and timelines. We share examples and personal stories from our experiences and the experiences of other educational leaders to illustrate the successes and challenges of implementing inclusive educational change. In each chapter, we guide you through key ideas, structures, and practices that you will use to implement inclusive change. We point out obstacles you may encounter and offer supportive guidance to help you find your way.

What Is Inclusion?

But what exactly *is* inclusion? This term often means different things to different people. As your guides, we are here to help you and your staff clarify the answer to this question. You must have a clear and deep understanding of inclusion to lead real, sustainable systems change.

Our definition of inclusion disrupts the inequities found in traditional special education systems. It is a bold and courageous call to those committed to creating schools where students thrive together. This definition is at the heart of the inclusive change process used throughout this book.

We no longer accept that separate classrooms, separate schools, and separate lives are in the best interest of any student. Separating people by ability disadvantages everyone. Belonging is a human need. Our educational system, practices, and spaces need to be reimagined.

Every student is valued because of their strengths, gifts, and even challenges. As disability is simply diversity. Everyone benefits from meaningful participation and opportunities to learn grade-level content with diverse peers. We must trust that all students come to us as incredible, whole people who do not need to be fixed (Causton & Pretti-Frontczak, 2021a).

We define inclusion as multidimensional because it involves all aspects of the school system. Inclusion means students who have any type of educational label are educated together and teachers collaborate and co-teach to design lessons for all. It involves creating welcoming spaces where students' multiple identities are seen and celebrated, and continually and seamlessly providing students with access to additional support. Inclusive practices require partnering with families in new ways, understanding our own biases, and bravely examining where the system currently fails our students.

The Inclusive System Change Path

We've organized this book around the Inclusive System Change Path (Causton, MacLeod, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2022a), a framework grounded in the in-depth inclusive system reform process that we have used throughout the United

States for more than 25 years, findings from nearly 50 years of research on what makes inclusion work, and our own experiences creating inclusive schools. We turned this extensive knowledge into the Inclusive System Change Path, which contains milestones, clarifying questions, and leadership steps that will help to guide real change and inclusive growth in your school system (see Figure I.1).

Each chapter in this book aligns with a milestone question from the Inclusive System Change Path. The questions are meant to help you identify and understand your system's current strengths and needs, guiding your pursuit of meaningful inclusive change. Though the order of the milestone questions is sequential, we know that individual systems change is not linear. We have used this framework in many different systems—large, small, rural, urban, and suburban—and understand that each system's unique context will create many opportunities for shortcuts and necessary redirects, circle-backs, and loops. The icon below, preceding Figure I.1, provides a visual of this path, complete with milestones and loops.

This journey can take anywhere from three to five years to complete. Great leaders will keep the urgency of the work at the center while going at a pace their system can tolerate, all the while supporting their colleagues with clarity, compassion, and purpose. Leading systems change will be among the most challenging but also rewarding and impactful work you are likely to complete in your educational career. We are here to support you all along the way.

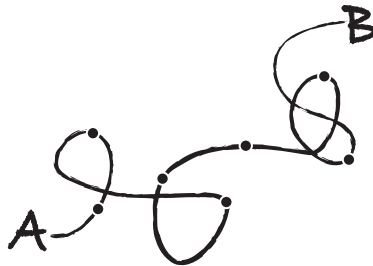


Figure I.1 Inclusive System Change Path

Milestone 1: Do we understand why inclusive education is the way forward?
<p>Leadership Questions</p> <p>Q 1.1 Is the leadership team clear on what inclusion means?</p> <p>Q 1.2 Do we understand the equity lens?</p> <p>Q 1.3 How will the leadership team explore their own “why”?</p> <p>Q 1.4 Does the leadership team know how to communicate why inclusion is the way forward?</p> <p>Leadership Steps</p> <p>S 1.1 Develop a shared understanding of inclusive education.</p> <p>S 1.2 Explore the equity lens together.</p> <p>S 1.3 Read and discuss the reasons why people engage in this work.</p> <p>S 1.4 As a team, explore your personal “whys.”</p> <p>S 1.5 Support leaders who continue to have questions about inclusion.</p>
Milestone 2: Have we seen our system through an equity lens?
<p>Leadership Questions</p> <p>Q 2.1 Which students are not educated within their home school or home school district?</p> <p>Q 2.2 Which students do not have access to general education classrooms, content, and peers for most of the day?</p> <p>Q 2.3 Which students are over- or underrepresented in special education, in more restrictive placements, or in terms of disciplinary action?</p> <p>Q 2.4 Which students are still in separate programs or classrooms for students with specific disabilities?</p> <p>Q 2.5 Do educators and related service providers work in collaborative teams?</p> <p>Q 2.6 Do any special educators or related service providers work in separate rooms, spaces, or programs?</p> <p>Leadership Steps</p> <p>S 2.1 Collect system data using the Equity Review Data Collection Guide.</p> <p>S 2.2 Visually represent system equity data using graphs or charts.</p> <p>S 2.3 Create building-level service-delivery maps.</p> <p>S 2.4 Share the system data with the leadership team and analyze it through an equity lens.</p> <p>S 2.5 Name and take action to remedy inequities in the current system.</p>
Milestone 3: Do we have a clear public vision for inclusion and understanding of the needed system-level changes?
<p>Leadership Questions</p> <p>Q 3.1 Does the leadership team have a vision for inclusion?</p> <p>Q 3.2 Does the leadership team have a clear rationale for the shift toward inclusion?</p> <p>Q 3.3 Has the leadership team included diverse members in the visioning process?</p> <p>Q 3.4 Is the vision shared publicly?</p> <p>Q 3.5 Is there a process in place to revisit and revise the vision yearly?</p> <p>Leadership Steps</p> <p>S 3.1 Craft or revise a vision statement.</p> <p>S 3.2 Develop a clear rationale using key findings from your system equity review.</p> <p>S 3.3 Get feedback on the vision from diverse members of the school system.</p> <p>S 3.4 Share the finalized vision and rationale widely.</p> <p>S 3.5 Review the vision and rationale yearly, revising as needed.</p>
Milestone 4: How can we realign existing service-delivery structures to create an inclusive system?
<p>Leadership Questions</p> <p>Q 4.1 Where are our service-delivery structures out of alignment with our inclusive vision?</p> <p>Q 4.2 How do we better align service-delivery structures to our inclusive vision?</p> <p>Q 4.3 How do we use the IEP as a vehicle for effective inclusive change?</p>

(continued)

Figure I.1 Inclusive System Change Path—(continued)

<p>Milestone 4: How can we realign existing service-delivery structures to create an inclusive system?—(continued)</p> <p>Leadership Steps S 4.1 Review service-delivery maps before and after inclusive redesign. S 4.2 Use system data to align service-delivery structures with your inclusive vision. S 4.3 Align IEPs with new inclusive structures.</p>
<p>Milestone 5: How can we reimagine schedules and collaborative staff roles?</p> <p>Leadership Questions Q 5.1 How can the leadership team strategically and flexibly schedule existing staff? Q 5.2 How will the leadership team explore and communicate the reimaged collaborative roles and responsibilities for new inclusive service delivery? Q 5.3 How will the leadership team ensure and support collaborative instructional planning time?</p> <p>Leadership Steps S 5.1 Learn about collaborative roles and inclusive service delivery. S 5.2 Identify ways to strategically and flexibly schedule staff to serve all students inclusively. S 5.3 Carve out time in the schedule for staff to collaboratively plan and provide ongoing support.</p>
<p>Milestone 6: Do our educators use powerful inclusive classroom practices?</p> <p>Leadership Questions Q 6.1 Does the leadership team understand the most powerful inclusive classroom practices? Q 6.2 Does the leadership team have a highly effective professional development plan to address collaboration and co-teaching, differentiation, adaptations, and natural and behavioral supports? Q 6.3 Does the leadership team provide staff with effective learning opportunities to support implementation of powerful inclusive classroom practices? Q 6.4 Does the leadership team provide staff with feedback on powerful inclusive classroom practices to ensure accountability and meaningful support?</p> <p>Leadership Steps S 6.1 Explore highly effective inclusive classroom practices and identify growth opportunities. S 6.2 Develop a systematic plan for all-staff professional development about powerful inclusive classroom practices. S 6.3 Create learning that gives staff opportunities to learn with one another and from student advocates and inclusion experts. S 6.4 Communicate expectations to staff and provide feedback on those expectations.</p>
<p>Milestone 7: How can we provide ongoing support for this new inclusive system?</p> <p>Leadership Questions Q 7.1 Does the leadership team understand systems change? Q 7.2 Does the leadership team understand how to support everyone through change? Q 7.3 Does the leadership team have a systematic way to analyze educators’ successes and needs? Q 7.4 Does the leadership team have a way to sustain the momentum of change? Q 7.5 Does the leadership team document progress and celebrate often?</p> <p>Leadership Steps S 7.1 Explore systems change. S 7.2 Learn more about how to support everyone through change. S 7.3 Design a systematic way to analyze educators’ successes and needs. S 7.4 Determine ways to sustain the momentum of change. S 7.5 Create genuine systems of celebration.</p>

Source: Causton, J., MacLeod, K., & Pretti-Frontczak, K. (2022a). *The Inclusive System Change Path*. New York: Inclusive Schooling, LLC. Copyright 2022 by Inclusive Schooling. Reprinted with permission.

What Else Is in the Book?

Each chapter in this book aligns with a broad milestone question, a series of clarifying questions, and leadership steps. At the beginning of each chapter, we ask you to consider the broad milestone question. We then walk you through each of the leadership steps—the main part of each chapter—and conclude by asking you to review and discuss the questions and steps with your leadership team. Finally, we ask you to determine your system’s specific next steps and write them in your Action Plan. We have provided you with a template that you can use for this purpose (available in Appendix A, p. 113, and at www.inclusiveschooling.com/the-way-to-inclusion or www.ascd.org/the-way-to-inclusion-resources).

The path to inclusion is both strenuous and inspiring. We recommend that you work your way through this book chapter by chapter, with your trusted leadership team by your side. Together you will make courageous decisions about the specific actions and timelines that will move your system toward greater inclusive experiences for all students. Write each action step out explicitly, including how that step will be measured, the person responsible for carrying out the action assigned, and a specific timeline for completion.

Your Action Plan will depend on your team, your leadership style, and your preferences. One efficient strategy is to set a monthly meeting to determine actions for your team. At the next meeting, the team reviews the progress and sets new action steps. The team repeats this iterative process each month until the action steps are complete, always understanding that the journey never truly ends—there will always be new challenges to address and new ways to improve equity. Another approach is to use the Action Plan to set a year’s worth of goals and return to the document each quarter, again using an iterative process to complete your action steps.

Get your customizable Action Plan as well as other resources we include in this book at www.inclusiveschooling.com/the-way-to-inclusion or www.ascd.org/the-way-to-inclusion-resources.

Additional Visuals to Support Your Journey

The following three images will appear throughout the book to remind you that you are not alone and help guide you forward:



Seasoned Traveler—This image of a traveler on a path is designed to connect you to someone who has taken this journey ahead of you and can provide clear answers about how they made it through a particular challenge. Wherever this image appears, we share specific examples of how other leaders have navigated an obstacle or developed an innovative approach to inclusive change. The traveler image is a reminder that someone has come before you; it is here to support you, advise you, and let you know that you can make it through your own inclusive journey.



The Loop—This image is designed to remind you that your path will not always be linear. Throughout your journey, you may need to circle back to different sections of the book for support, or ahead for more information about a concept. Either way, use the loop to help you gain clarity and understanding.



Your Action Plan—This image prompts you to stop and add steps to your Action Plan. We have included it at the end of each chapter because we want you to translate the concepts from each chapter into actionable items that will support your system’s inclusive journey. We provide specific leadership questions and steps to help you determine where your system and leadership team need to focus. Together, you and your team will use our leadership questions and steps to determine the best actions for your unique system.

You are now ready to lead the way to inclusion.

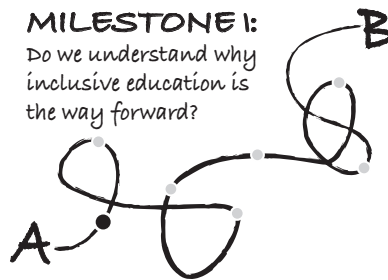
Your First Action Plan



- Decide on your leadership team—the people you want to bring to the table to do this work with you. Remember, you can always add additional members to the team as you move forward.
- Schedule a meeting to sit together and work through the beginning of this book.
- Read the definition of *inclusion* on page 7. Talk about where you are headed.
- Read about the Inclusive System Change Path on page 7 and discuss the journey ahead.
- Get your Action Plan. Use our digital template or create your own plan that clearly outlines each action item, who is responsible for the action, how you will measure success, and a deadline for completion.

1

Understand Why Inclusive Education Is the Way Forward



Congratulations on starting your journey! Our first milestone question is, “Do we understand why inclusive education is the way forward?” Here we set the stage for understanding why leaders like you commit to inclusive education. We explore the concept of an equity lens and share how you can clearly comprehend and communicate a rationale for inclusion to the entire school or system. In this chapter, you also can explore your “personal why” and learn ways to support your leadership team so you can all be headed in the same direction together. At the end of the chapter, we ask you to review and discuss the leadership questions and steps and determine areas that may need more attention. For reader ease, we have numbered sections of the chapter with the

corresponding milestone leadership steps. Finally, we ask you to visit your Action Plan to put your steps in place.

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Gain clarity on what inclusion means. Before you begin to explore your own reasons for moving to a more inclusive system, you may want to loop back and read our definition of inclusion on page 7. Some leaders use our definition as their goal, while others use it as a conversation-starter with their leadership team.

.....

1.1: Develop a Shared Understanding of Inclusive Education

School system leaders will often disagree on the importance of inclusion. We have seen inclusive system change stall because of this. All administrators on your team must be a part of the meaning-making around inclusion—from central office staff to building leaders. To build a shared understanding, start by gathering your leadership team and thinking deeply about the change you want to see in your system. As you do so, envision how becoming more inclusive can impact the entire system. Ask team members to independently answer the following questions:

- What does inclusion mean to me? Be as detailed as possible.
- What changes in current practices will inclusion have for our school system and everyone in it?
- Think ahead one year, or even five years. What does a more inclusive system look and feel like?

Once everyone has completed their reflections, spend time discussing the similarities and differences in team members' responses. Using this time to create a shared understanding will bring clarity to the words we use, our hopes for our students, and the work that lies ahead. We encourage the team to take time with this process. Trust and honesty will be key.



Our Meaning-Making Experience

By a school superintendent

As a district and school leadership team, we began our meaning-making process by each completing an anonymous survey. This was to ensure that each of our leaders felt safe sharing their thoughts and ideas without fear of judgment. The survey asked each team member to define *inclusion* in their own words and to describe in detail what they thought inclusion would look like for students and staff when fully implemented. It also asked precisely where the wide range of diverse learners would be educated.

We started by reading aloud each definition and ideal vision for inclusion, stopping to celebrate the honesty our team put forth. This initial review revealed that we had very little shared meaning of the term *inclusion* and almost no agreement on what the ideal future state of inclusion would look like in our district. However, we celebrated even this—the fact that we *didn't* have a clear or shared understanding of inclusion or what it would look like.

Why? Because the meaning-making process worked. It was clear that our team needed more time to think, read, process, and discuss inclusion. Then, over the next six weeks, we took time for more deliberate meaning-making, during which we created a shared understanding of inclusion and our vision for what it would look like for students and staff.

1.2: Explore the Equity Lens Together

Separate special education programs, schools, and classrooms have existed for decades. For the most part, educators and parents have embraced the myth that these separate settings are beneficial despite research and lived experiences indicating otherwise. Thus, one of the greatest challenges to creating inclusive school systems is shifting mindsets away from long-held beliefs that students with disabilities benefit from separate settings to receive individualized instruction.

Leaders must address this underlying systemic message about disability grounded in an outdated and exclusionary medical model by shifting the lens through which they view disabilities. A lens provides us a way to look at something, and across many school systems today, we are using a very outdated lens to view students with disabilities—one that has been distorting our vision

for some time. We suggest replacing the current lens with an equity lens to improve our vision of how we “see” or understand disability, as seen in Figure 1.1 (Causton & Pretti-Frontczak, 2021b). By changing our lens, we can create a new mindset that will eventually impact how we teach and support our learners with and without labels.

Figure 1.1 Medical Versus Equity Lens

Medical Lens	Equity Lens
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability is seen as residing within the individual. • Focus is on individual pathology or impairment. • Aim is to fix or remediate. • Disability labels are seen as deficits. • Labels, rather than systems, are seen as the problem. • Systemic inequities are ignored. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability is seen as a socially constructed identity. • Focus is on societal barriers that disable people. • Aim is to provide “just right” supports. • Disability is seen as a natural difference. • Systems, rather than the disabilities themselves, are seen as the problem. • Systemic inequities are identified and addressed.

Source: From *The Transition from Medical to Equity Lens* by J. Causton & K. Pretti-Frontczak, 2021, *Inclusive Schooling*. Copyright 2021 by Inclusive Schooling. Reprinted with permission.

The Medical Lens

Today, too many schools continue to view disability through a medical lens that views it as a problem that needs to be fixed. You can hear echoes of the medical lens in our everyday special education terminology: words like *deficit*, *pathology*, *remediate*, and *therapy*, which all stem from a medical perspective. Places like resource rooms and separate classrooms for students with specific labels (autism, behavior disorder, visual impairment) were born out of these beliefs. The medical lens sees a student’s disability as the problem that a specialist in a separate room is required to fix.

The Equity Lens

The equity lens provides us with a new understanding of the way systems we have created are disabling students. This lens helps us to see that disability is a form of difference or diversity, and that our job is not to fix it in a separate environment, but to help students access, participate in, and make progress in the general education setting. The equity lens allows us to see that it is systemic inequities, not our students, that need to be fixed.

Services over Placements or Programs

Special education should be considered a service rather than a separate placement or program. Rather than being seen as the purview of special education staff in special schools, self-contained programs, or resource rooms, special education should be viewed in a broader context, within a greater collaborative system of support that works to benefit students with and without IEPs.



Understanding Fear of Change

By a school superintendent

When we started our inclusion journey, our first obstacle was supporting educators and families to better understand why all students would benefit from being fully included in the general education setting. I soon realized that the same staff who were nervous about inclusion had taught parents that these separate rooms and spaces were better. In other words, the traditional view that self-contained classrooms were places where children could receive the highly individualized supports and services they “needed” to be successful was being perpetuated. No amount of research we presented convinced families that their child would flourish in general education. The greatest obstacle we faced was the momentum of over 150 years of segregating students who do not fit into the “typical” student profile. When I took a step back and looked at it from this perspective, it was easy to understand the fear of this change.

1.3: Read and Discuss the Reasons Why People Engage in This Work

We have found that every educator comes to the work of making schools more inclusive for different reasons. Some of the most common reasons are outlined here; understanding them will help you to lead others:

1. **The Research.** Many believe that the research is the most compelling reason to do this work, and rightly so. For decades, research has provided unequivocal evidence that students with and without disabilities do better academically, socially, and behaviorally when educated in inclusive settings (Hehir et al., 2016).

- 2. The Law.** Some educators see the law around the least restrictive environment (LRE) and the legal preference for inclusion as reasons to engage in this important work. In the United States, federal law ensures that, “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities . . . are educated with children who are not disabled” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. 1412[a][5]).
- 3. Personal Connections.** Others come to this work because of a personal connection. Perhaps life has created the opportunity for them to advocate long and hard for a child or sibling to be included in general education, or maybe they are moved by the personal story of someone who suffered trauma from being segregated in school. We have heard from many educators who have dedicated their careers to inclusive education because of a powerful personal experience with someone who has a disability.
- 4. Caregiver Advocacy.** Still others come to this work because they are pressured to do so by key stakeholders (e.g., family members). At its best, such pressure results in families, advocates, and schools collaborating to support more inclusive efforts. Many school leaders take on the work of inclusion because of due process hearings, mediation, or simply the wishes of caregivers and other advocates.
- 5. Social Justice.** Some people see the work from a perspective of ethics and justice. It is well documented that the education profession has made it defensible to segregate large portions of our students based on academic, behavioral, or other membership criteria. Thus, many educators, working to ensure our school systems are equitable, connect to the idea of righting the historical wrong of segregating by disability.
- 6. Belonging.** Humans have a basic need to belong, and some view inclusion as a way to create a culture of belonging in a school system. When students feel like they truly belong, they have permission to be their authentic selves, cultivate friendships, build relationships, and experience academic challenges. Structures can either provide all students with access to general education or exclude some students from others. In schools with a culture of belonging, classroom instruction offers multiple ways for students to learn and succeed, building relationships with students is a priority for staff, students’ multiple identities are reflected in the curriculum, and families are welcomed and their expertise and ideas are celebrated.

The Research and Inclusive Education

Here, we provide a streamlined summation of the most useful research findings and the most powerful U.S. court cases and legislation related to inclusion. Our hope is that this information will support you in building a strong case to bring others up to speed in terms of the reasons, rationale, and benefits of inclusive education.

Academic Benefits. Studies show that the more time a student with a disability spends in general education, the better that student performs on reading and math assessments (Choi et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2004; Cosier et al., 2013; Dessemontet et al., 2011; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010).

The largest longitudinal study of its kind, the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS, 1993; NLTS2, 2004; NLTS2012, 2012), has followed tens of thousands of students with disabilities for decades. Each phase of reporting from this study provides evidence that engagement in general education settings is a critical predictor of academic achievement for students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2021). Specifically, the more general education classes a student is enrolled in, the closer to grade level they are in their reading and math abilities (Wagner et al., 2006).

Schools that are committed to providing systemwide inclusive supports have demonstrated greater student growth on state reading and math assessments than students attending comparable, less-inclusive schools (Choi et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2020).

Social and Behavioral Benefits. When students with disabilities are included in general education, they have fewer disciplinary referrals and miss fewer days of school (Test et al., 2009). They are also more likely to join extracurricular group activities at school and in the community and to regularly see friends outside school (Newman et al., 2010).

The research also shows that students with complex support needs demonstrate increased communication (Foreman et al., 2004) and interpersonal skills (Woodman et al., 2016) and establish a larger network of friendships when they are included in general education classes (Copeland & Cosbey, 2009; Jackson et al., 2008). Additionally, students without disabilities develop a deeper level of acceptance for diversity when they are educated alongside their peers with disabilities (Fisher et al., 2003; Krajewski & Hyde, 2000; Shogren et al., 2015).

Post-Secondary Benefits. Inclusive education is a critical predictor of successful post-secondary experiences for students with disabilities. Students included in general education settings are more likely to graduate high school,

access post-secondary education and employment, and live independently (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009).

Faculty and Staff Benefits. When a school system commits to inclusive education, faculty and staff also benefit. Studies have shown that leaders who provide staff with consistent support systems see an increase in responsive instruction, more sustainable implementation of inclusive practices, and a greater likelihood that educators will feel prepared to collaborate and address the diverse needs of students (Bouillet, 2013; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Skiba & Losen, 2016).

Educational research has provided clear and consistent evidence for nearly 50 years that inclusion leads to improved outcomes in all areas—academic, social, behavioral, and post-secondary—for students with and without disabilities and regardless of disability label, gender, race, or socioeconomic status.

This robust evidence base for inclusive education alone is compelling enough for most leaders to make an immediate change in service delivery. When paired with the historical path and current legal preference for inclusive education, such a change is practically unavoidable.

The Law and Inclusive Education

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), or IDEA, ensures that, “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities... are educated with children who are not disabled” (Section 1412[a][5]). However, current practices are not reflective of this ideal. Only 65 percent of 6- to 21-year-old students with disabilities spend 80 percent or more of their day in general education classrooms. For students with more complex support needs (e.g., students with autism, intellectual disability, or multiple disabilities), that number drops dramatically to anywhere between 14 percent and 40 percent of students who are included 80 percent or more of their day (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Federal courts in the United States have repeatedly established that inclusive settings are preferable to segregated placements and that special education services are portable. We have provided a summary of important inclusion-related court cases and the impact each has had on the U.S. education system in Figure 1.2. You’ll notice that a relatively early court case (1983) determined that “the court should determine whether the services... could be feasibly provided in a non-segregated setting (i.e., regular class). If they can, the placement in the segregated school would be inappropriate under the act (IDEA)” (Roncker v.

Figure 1.2 Important Inclusion-Related Court Cases

Court Case	Outcome
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)	The Supreme Court found that racially segregated public schools are inherently unequal. Many in the disability advocacy community apply this concept to segregated schools and settings for students with disabilities. When we think of separate restaurants, drinking fountains, and schools for white and Black people, we can all agree that this type of separation is appalling. Yet in many school systems, we are still comfortable separating students with disabilities from their peers without disabilities.
Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)	PARC plaintiffs argued that children with intellectual disability (then called “mental retardation”) could benefit from educational programs and training. The court ruled that Pennsylvania was responsible for providing free public education to all children; that no child, regardless of their disability, could be turned down; and that the quality of the education provided to children with disabilities needed to match that of their nondisabled peers.
Roncker v. Walter (1983)	This case challenged the placement of students in separate schools and programs. The court ruled in favor of inclusive placements over self-contained settings and established the principle of portability. If a district claims a self-contained placement is superior to an inclusive one, the court should determine if the services offered in the self-contained setting can be feasibly provided in the general education classroom. If they can, then the self-contained setting would be inappropriate under IDEA.
Daniel v. State Board of Education (1989)	The court determined that students with disabilities have a right to be included in both academic and extracurricular programs of general education. The court established a two-part test: first, educators must examine whether the student can be included in general education with the appropriate supplementary aids and services; if not, they must then examine whether the student is included in general education to the maximum extent appropriate.
Oberti v. Board of Education of Clementon School District (1992)	The court ruled that a school did not offer the appropriate supports and services to provide a student with access to inclusive settings. This case established that the burden of proof for compliance with IDEA fell on the school district and state, not the family. The judge stated, “inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a select few.”
Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H. (1994)	The court identified four factors that must be taken into consideration when determining a student’s least restrictive environment: (1) the educational benefits of inclusive settings versus segregated settings; (2) nonacademic benefits of interactions between students with and without disabilities; (3) the effect the student with a disability may have on the teacher and classmates; and (4) the cost of services required for the student to access the inclusive setting.
Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)	In this case, the court clarified the standard of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) under IDEA. It ruled that the correct standard of FAPE is whether a school district has created an IEP in which the student (1) has challenging and ambitious goals and (2) can make progress according to their own individual needs.
L. H. v. Hamilton County Department of Education (2018)	In this case, the court ruled that the self-contained placement a school provided was more restrictive than necessary and therefore in violation of IDEA. The court also explained that school staff cannot choose to exclude a student from general education simply because they are “unwilling or unable to properly engage in the process of mainstreaming [the student] . . . rather than isolating and removing him when the situation became challenging.”

Walter, 1983, at 1063). It's important to remember that supports and services are easily brought into a general education classroom.

Figure 1.2 also includes newer cases that require students to have access to, be involved in, and make progress in the general education curriculum (Endrew F. v. Douglas, 2017; IDEA, 2004, Section 300.320 [a]). This means that students with disabilities do not have to leave the general education classroom to receive rich individualized special education services and supports. Instead, special education supports and services are brought to the learner in the general education settings—benefiting not only the individual, but all learners and all staff.

Inclusive education has been proven to be so much better for students, educators, and communities. Yet despite the overwhelming evidence, the decades of research, the legal precedents, and the tireless efforts of caregivers and advocates, most leaders still find themselves asking, “How can I change the mindset and culture of our school? How can I get others to buy in and believe in inclusion the way I do?”

1.4: As a Team, Explore Your Personal “Whys”

You came to the work of inclusion for a reason, and you are likely already very committed to and passionate about creating inclusive schools. Clarifying even more the reasons you want to create more inclusive schools will serve you well in leading your system through this change process. You will return to your own “why” and the why of others repeatedly in the journey toward inclusion for all.

If you and your colleagues deeply understand why you are taking this journey, you will feel bolstered to continue through the challenges that may come and be prepared to bring everyone along to your desired outcome. Understanding and committing to the why of this work will ignite your resolve to take the journey and bring you comfort when the trail gets narrow and hard to navigate.

Take a moment here to reflect on your own why as it relates to inclusion and the journey you are embarking upon. Why is the work of equity and inclusive education important to you personally? Why is inclusion a priority now?

Communicate Your Why with Your Team

Gather your trusted leadership team to share your thoughts and ideas with one another. Having an open and honest sharing conversation will help you to

develop common reasons why you are working toward inclusion and discuss similarities and differences in your personal rationale. In some districts, everyone writes individual answers on a shared document so that you can easily see your different rationales, hopes and dreams, and priorities for this work. This conversation will solidify the importance and urgency of the work and create even more shared collective purpose for your team.



Rationale at the Ready

By a special education director

When I assumed the role of special education director for a school district with roughly 13,000 students, most students with disabilities were receiving services in self-contained special education classrooms. I knew, based on both research and my experience working in other school systems, that this method was ineffective and needed to be redesigned. Our district’s Inclusion Task Force asked the question, “How do we bring services to students rather than bringing students to services?” We engaged in many conversations about how to wrap services around students.

Even with a strong leadership team in place, clear rationale for the change, and a detailed plan of action, questions still arose. Here are some examples:


- Why are we making this change?
- What’s wrong with what we’ve been doing all these years?
- What about the students who “can’t handle” general education?
- Can’t we do this as a pilot?
- How will we get training?
- What if this doesn’t work?

As a leader, I needed to be ready to answer these questions and many more. I also found that for some staff, words were not enough. They needed to see and experience success for themselves firsthand. Others needed time to discuss concerns and revisit what this would mean for them. What it came down to was revisiting our rationale repeatedly. We had to show, share, discuss, and, at times, debate why we were moving toward an inclusive system. We had to have our why at the ready each day.

1.5: Support Leaders Who Continue to Have Questions About Inclusion

Creating shared meaning about your why with your leadership team is a good starting point, but remember, every member of your leadership team will feel different levels of excitement, understanding, readiness, and urgency. Some may arrive at an understanding of their why organically and on their own; others may be led to it by you or may feel pushed, rushed, or resistant. To support everyone, you will need to spend time with them to understand their concerns and fears, hopes and dreams, and strengths.

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 **Loop Ahead:** We will discuss more about supporting people through change in Chapter 7. If getting everyone on your leadership team on the same path to inclusion is a significant obstacle for you, jump ahead to Chapter 7 to get more strategies and ideas.

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A Little Bit Softer Now

We have seen leaders try to convince others of their inclusive why by simply offering up more facts, figures, and information. It makes logical sense—to us. When someone is resistant or hesitant, we tend to turn up the dial by giving them more data, more reasons, more arguments, and even more training to help them “come around.” But believe it or not, this approach can lead to more pushback, more resistance, and more inertia (Berger, 2020).

Understanding what triggers those individuals or makes them feel unsafe allows us to address their resistance with more compassion and understanding. Our goal is to give people a sense of agency and safety and to reduce barriers and remove challenges in their way.

Ask questions that start with *why*, *how*, and *what*, because these types of questions offer hope and possibility and highlight room for growth. By contrast, *who*, *where*, *which*, and *yes/no* questions can be limiting.

You can use the following questions to guide your conversations:

- What fears or worries do you have about moving in an inclusive direction?
- How can I help you overcome the challenges you face?

- What resources will you need to achieve your goals?

This chapter was designed to help you clarify and communicate your rationale and personal why around inclusive education. You had the opportunity to explore an equity lens as well as how to develop shared meaning and purpose about inclusion with your leadership team. We provided common examples of the whys of other leaders as well as a detailed overview of inclusion-related research and legal decisions in the United States. Now that you’ve completed this chapter, we invite you to gather your leadership team and reflect on the Milestone 1 leadership questions and steps together.

Milestone 1: Do we understand why inclusive education is the way forward?
<p>Leadership Questions</p> <p>Q 1.1 Is the leadership team clear on what inclusion means?</p> <p>Q 1.2 Do we understand the equity lens?</p> <p>Q 1.3 How will the leadership team explore their own “why”?</p> <p>Q 1.4 Does the leadership team know how to communicate why inclusion is the way forward?</p> <p>Leadership Steps</p> <p>S 1.1 Develop a shared understanding of inclusive education.</p> <p>S 1.2 Explore the equity lens together.</p> <p>S 1.3 Read and discuss the reasons why people engage in this work.</p> <p>S 1.4 As a team, explore your personal “whys.”</p> <p>S 1.5 Support leaders who continue to have questions about inclusion.</p>

Consider your team’s discussion around these questions and steps: Where is there clarity and where might your team need to focus additional time and energy? Then, turn to your Action Plan and add any necessary steps.

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Your Action Plan

Go to your Action Plan. If you haven’t created yours yet, you can use the template in Appendix A (p. 113) or access one at www.inclusive-schooling.com/the-way-to-inclusion or www.ascd.org/the-way-to-inclusion-resources. With your leadership team, add any necessary action steps for your system.

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About the Authors



Dr. Julie Causton is a best-selling author, inspiring speaker, and inclusive education advocate. The founder and CEO of Inclusive Schooling, she is a former tenured professor in the Inclusive and Special Education Program in the Department of Teaching and Leadership at Syracuse University, where she headed the Inclusive Elementary Education Program.

Julie has spent the last 25 years studying best practices for inclusive education. A former elementary, middle, and high school special education teacher herself, she knows firsthand how inclusion leads to better outcomes for students. With Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, she has conducted magical presentations focusing on engaging ways to educate all students within the context of general education that have inspired and uplifted administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and families throughout the United States and helped them learn the most cutting-edge inclusive practices. Julie is the author of a dozen books about inclusive education, and she has published articles in over 30 educational research and practitioner journals. She currently resides in upstate New York.



Dr. Kate MacLeod is an innovative inclusive educator, researcher, and author. She began her career as a high school special education teacher in New York City and now works as faculty in the college of education at the University of Maine Farmington and as an education consultant with Inclusive Schooling. She has spent 15 years studying inclusive practices and supporting school leaders and educators to feel prepared and inspired

to include all learners. She lives in Maine with her husband and son.



Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak is a highly sought-after speaker, accomplished author, and educators' educator. With nearly three decades of educational experience, including 16 years as faculty at Kent State University, Kristie cultivates real change within educational systems. She instills an impressive sense of joy, humor, and fun in creating inclusive educational practices and empowering teachers and leaders to spread wellness both within and beyond the classroom walls. At Inclusive Schooling, along with Dr. Julie Causton, Kristie designs and delivers transformative professional development that addresses and supports the wholeness of the adult professional and helps leaders create school cultures that ensure all children experience a sense of belonging. She has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals and is an author of over 10 books and monographs. Since 2013, she has followed her true passion, which is supporting adult learners. As a result, she has accumulated over 50,000 hours of helping educators and leaders work from a place of compassion, hope, and love in locations from Cincinnati to Singapore. She currently resides in northeastern Ohio.



Dr. Jenna Mancini Rufo is an experienced public-school leader turned inclusive education consultant. She is the founder and owner of empowerED School Solutions, a consulting firm specializing in equity and inclusion. Having served as an assistant superintendent, director of special education, state policy specialist, special education teacher, and inclusion facilitator, Jenna has practical experience in leading systems change for inclusion. She has shared her knowledge at numerous events, including *The Atlantic's* Education Summit and the National Principals' Conference. She has been published in *School Administrator* and recently launched a blog and video series. Jenna was inspired to enter the field of education by her sister, Nina, who has multiple disabilities. She views education as her calling and is passionate about providing quality programs for *all* students.



Dr. Paul Gordon is an educator who has dedicated his life to public education. Paul spent much of his career working for the Adams 12 Five Star School District outside Denver, Colorado, where he served as a classroom teacher, a middle school principal, the director of professional development, and the chief academic officer. During the last 10 years, Paul has served as the superintendent of three school districts. Early in Paul's career, he worked with students with significant reading challenges, which forged his path toward creating inclusive environments for each student. The districts Paul has worked with have engaged in honest conversations about inclusive practices and the incredible opportunities and challenges that districts and schools must understand as they embrace this important work for students. He has worked with educators in Colorado, Illinois, and Washington who have influenced his beliefs about students, instruction, systems, and families. As a working practitioner, Paul profoundly understands the complexity of what it means to create inclusive environments for students and the impact it has on the overall system. He continues to learn from students, teachers, directors, parents, and countless others working in our inclusive classrooms daily about the challenges and the incredible opportunities that inclusion offers each student.

Related ASCD Resources: Inclusive Education

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses).

Brain-Friendly Strategies for the Inclusion Classroom by Judy Willis (#107040E4)

Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs: How to Move Beyond Disability Labels in the Classroom by Toby J. Karten (#117023)

Creating an Inclusive School, 2nd Edition by Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand (Eds.) (#105019E4)

Decoding Autism and Leading the Way to Successful Inclusion by Barbara Boroson (#118008)

From Behaving to Belonging: The Inclusive Art of Supporting Students Who Challenge Us by Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod (#121011)

From Goals to Growth: Intervention and Support in Every Classroom by Lee Ann Jung (#118032)

Inclusion Do's, Don'ts, and Do Betters (Quick Reference Guide) by Toby J. Karten (#QRG116082)

Leading an Inclusive School: Access and Success for ALL Students by Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand (#116022)

A Teacher's Guide to Special Education by David F. Bateman and Jenifer L. Cline (#116019)

Teaching in Tandem: Effective Co-Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom by Gloria Lodato Wilson and Joan Blednick (#110029)

Trauma-Informed Teaching and IEPs: Strategies for Building Student Resilience by Melissa Sadin (#122026)

Your Students, My Students, Our Students: Rethinking Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms by Lee Ann Jung, Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Julie Kroener (#119019)

For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to **www.ascd.org**. You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at **www.ascd.org/el**.

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