

What is inclusion in schools?



Inclusion is the result of the successful implementation of several practices aimed at promoting tolerance, accessibility, and integration of students into their learning environments. It necessitates coordination between students, caregivers, and classroom staff, as well as administrators and specialized support staff. It involves individualized approaches to accommodation and modification for specific students as well as broader shifts in school and district cultural and professional attitudes towards education and disability.

Inclusion is not something that a student experiences in one way, in one room, in one part of their school. It is a range of experiences demonstrating a student is not just physically and socially present in their schools, but their involvement in their schools is enriching to their peers and meaningful to themselves.

The Tennessee Department of Education (TN DOE) has *explicitly* identified the promotion of inclusion and inclusive practices as part of their guiding principles that predict postsecondary success. ([Special Education Framework Updated August 2018 \(tn.gov\)](#), p. 59-60)

The observation of challenging behaviors can signal the environment is not accessible and the student is unable to participate or even tolerate the expectations and environmental variables in the classroom.

Our goal is to inform education professionals regarding understanding and adopting the goals for inclusion. These goals may be for students, classroom staff, other school personnel, or administrators.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TOLERANCE, ACCESSIBILITY, AND INCLUSION?

The three terms defined below are often used synonymously; however, the distinction is important for educators to recognize to help their students be successful in various environments.

TERMS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Tolerance	The opportunity to be <i>present</i> ¹ but not offered the opportunity to physically or socially engage in a way that benefits the individual or the experience of others.	Jimmy is non-speaking and uses an Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) device to communicate. Jimmy comes to Ms. Smith's class every day for Circle Time. Today, Ms. Smith asks her class to tell each other something about their favorite animal. Jimmy is in the corner of the room playing with sensory toys while his paraprofessional stands over him. He is not given an opportunity to contribute to the conversation using his device.
Accessibility	The opportunity to physically or socially <i>participate</i> ² in a way that primarily benefits your own experience but doesn't change the experience of others. The individual is primarily taking something away from the experience.	Jimmy is non-speaking and uses an AAC device to communicate. Jimmy comes to Ms. Smith's class every day for Circle Time. Today, Ms. Smith asks her class to tell each other something about their favorite animal. Ms. Smith set out some paper and colored pencils for Jimmy before he arrived. Jimmy is at his desk sketching a picture of the blue whale and writing facts about it on the back while everyone else shares their favorite animal with the class.
Inclusion	The opportunity to physically and socially <i>contribute</i> ³ in a way that is valued and benefits others' experiences, ideally in alignment with the mission of the organization. This is meant to be a dynamic process – never fully achieved.	During Circle Time, Ms. Smith asks her class to tell each other something about their favorite animal. Jimmy is non-speaking and uses an AAC device to communicate. When it is his turn to share, Jimmy uses his AAC device to say, "I like the blue whale. It is the largest whale on the planet weighing 400,000 lbs." Everyone listened while Jimmy shared and Sally even said, "Woah! That's so cool!" Ms. Smith continually seeks to create more and more opportunities for Jimmy to contribute, including different contexts within the school.

¹ **Present:** The student is in the learning space but not engaged physically or socially in a way that benefits the individual or the experience of others.

² **Participate:** The student is engaged physically or socially in a way that benefits their own experience but doesn't change the experience of others. Through participation, the student can take away something from the experience.

³ **Contribute:** The student is engaged physically and socially in a way that benefits other people's experiences. Through contribution, the student can positively affect the school environment.

Below are some environment and student-specific skills that can help promote successful inclusion.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHECK

To promote an inclusive environment, there are modifications that can be made to the environment itself or by the people/staff in the environment.

Make sure individualized supports are in place so students benefit fully from involvement in inclusive experiences.

Build capacity among staff in your school to support students with disabilities in the breadth of available courses and programs.

Become familiar with the full range of offerings your school and community have to support transition-age youth.

Prioritize inclusive transition experiences over those that only include other students with similar disabilities.

STUDENT SKILL CHECK

Not all environments will always support every student; therefore it is important to build the student's capacity in the two following areas to advocate for themselves in how they choose to participate or contribute.

Self-advocacy skills

- learning how to speak up for yourself
- making your own decisions about your own life
- learning how to get information so that you can understand things that are of interest to you
- finding out who will support you in your journey
- knowing your rights and responsibilities
- problem solving
- listening and learning
- reaching out to others when you need help and friendship
- learning about self-determination

Self-determination

- a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior.
- belief of oneself as capable and effective
- an understanding of one's strengths and limitations