

April 2018

# Improving Inclusionary Practices to Support All Learners

Teacher Leaders: Taking Action to Ensure All Means All



# Introduction

*The Tennessee Department of Education’s unifying vision is to prepare students for success in their chosen path in life. Every student, especially those who are furthest behind, must have the opportunity for and access to high-quality instruction, early and skills-based intervention, and appropriate non-academic supports.*

Our work in the All Means All priority area is grounded in creating a culture of inclusiveness that provides individualized support and opportunities for all students, with a specific focus on those who are furthest behind and historically underserved. By fostering a respectful, inclusive environment and mindset, teachers, leaders, and students recognize that all students have the opportunity to be successful.

While student performance has improved in past years in Tennessee, there continues to be substantial achievement gaps between students in historically underserved student groups and their comparison groups. In grades 3–8, nearly 35,000 of the 450,000 students—eight percent—tested below basic in both math and English language arts. All but 2,000 of these students fall into one of Tennessee’s four historically underserved student groups: students with disabilities, English learners, Black/Hispanic/Native American, and economically disadvantaged. Figure 1 on the next page shows the gap in achievement levels between

students with disabilities (SWD) and students without disabilities (non-SWDs). **We cannot improve outcomes overall without improving outcomes for our racially/ethnically diverse students and those of historically underserved populations.**

Students are more than simply part of a student group; each student is unique and must be supported to reach his or her potential. We believe that by continuing and expanding individualized support and opportunities for those furthest behind, we can continue to close these gaps. The most effective interventions are those coordinated across multiple programs to support the whole child and the environment in which he or she learns. The All Means All mindset opens up the dialogue to discuss where we are headed as a state and to determine how we are going to get there. By anchoring to a core set of beliefs (Figure 3, see page 4) that guide us through this process, we can better support all students.

FIGURE 1

**2016-17 STUDENT ASSESSMENT DATA: SWDS VS. NON-SWDS\***

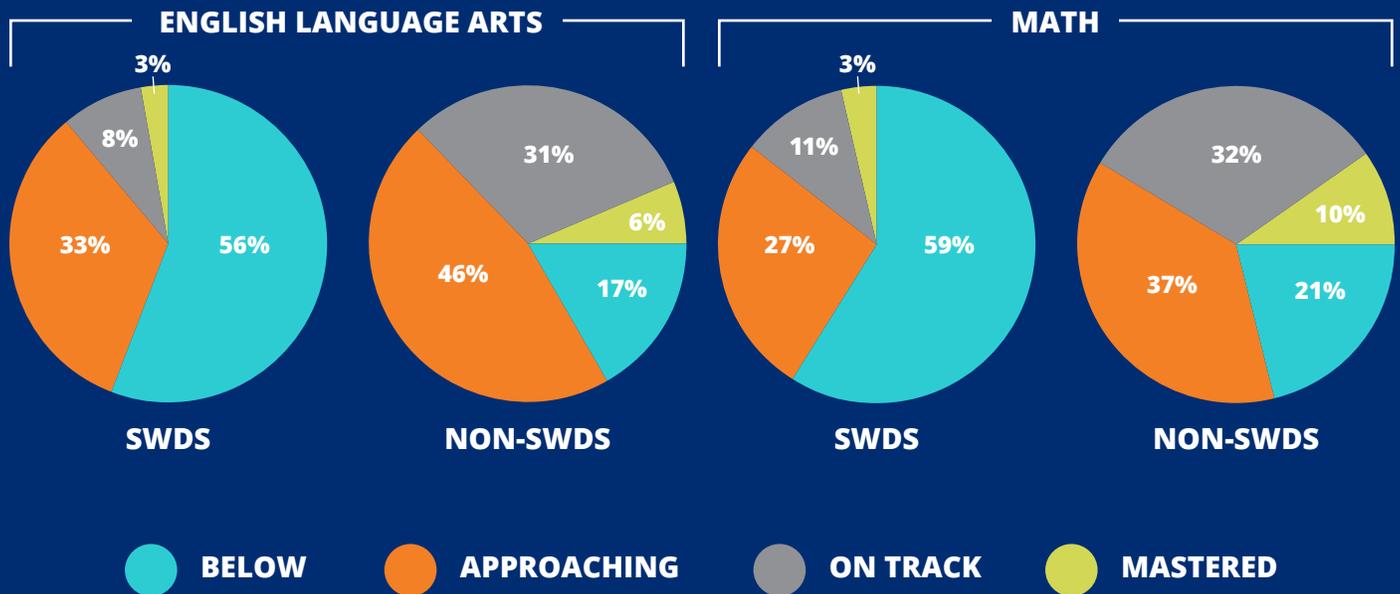


FIGURE 2

**LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT (LRE) LONGITUDINAL DATA FROM TENNESSEE'S ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT\***

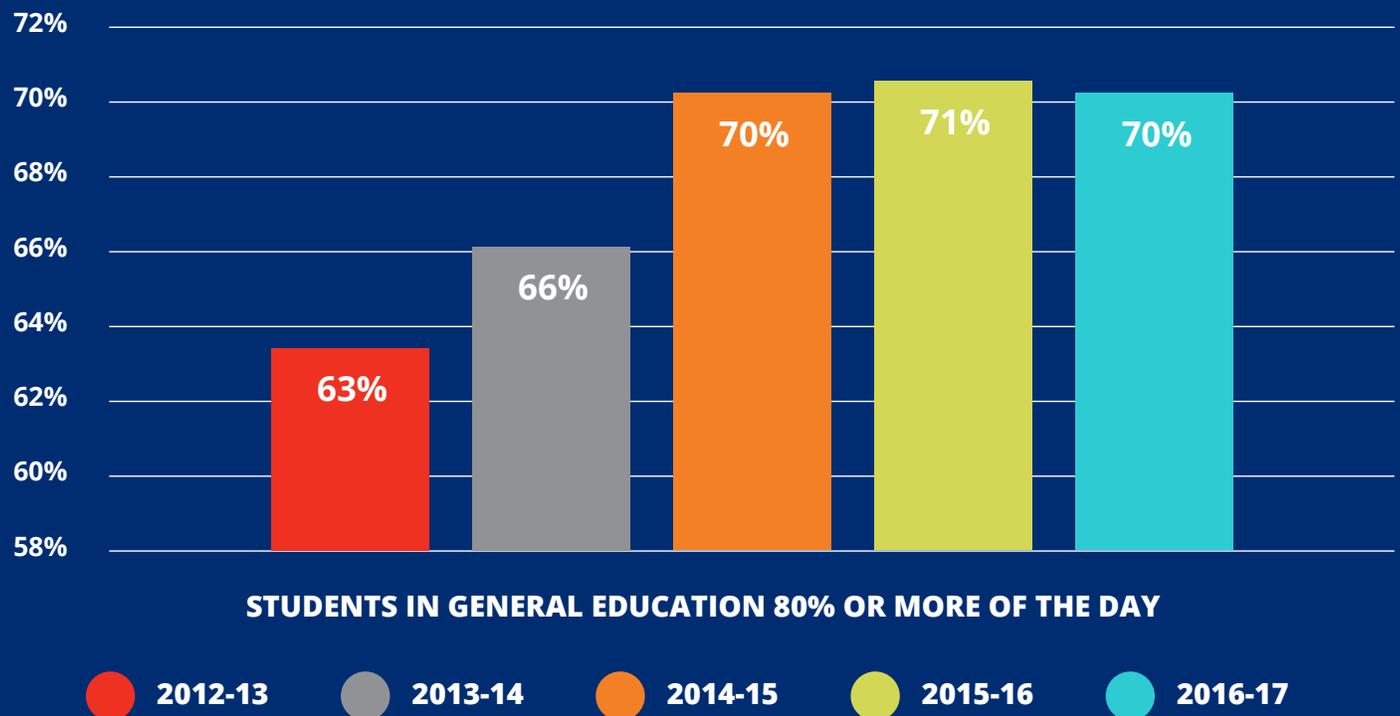
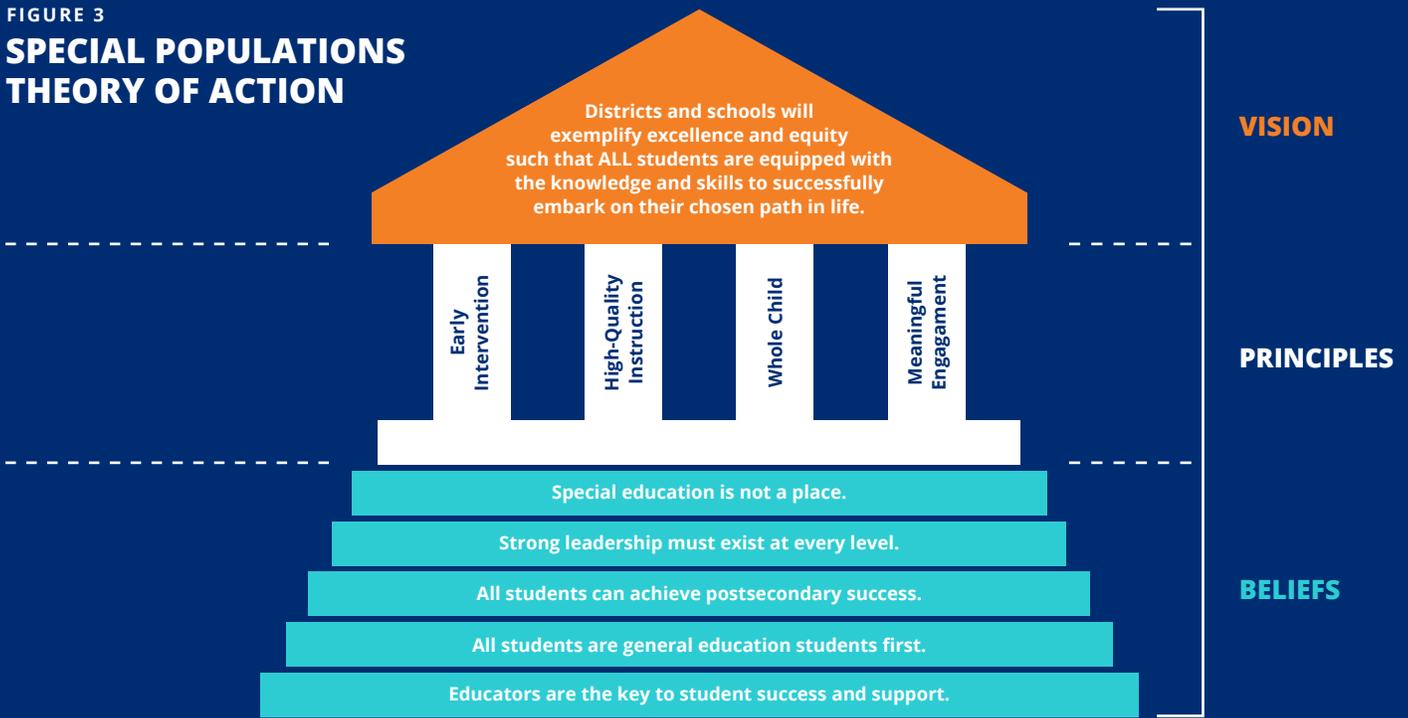


FIGURE 3

## SPECIAL POPULATIONS THEORY OF ACTION



## Tennessee Trends in Special Populations

In the summer of 2014, the department released an updated special education framework with a renewed focus on access to general education for all students. Since that time, Tennessee has been fortunate to see All Means All in action through the inclusive mindset that local school districts and great teachers embody across the state every day. Research shows that including SWDs in the general education classroom leads to higher performance for both students with and without disabilities. Figure 2 (see previous page) shows the percentage of students with disabilities whose least restrictive environment (LRE) is in the general education setting at least 80 percent or more of the day. The data display is a visual representation of the belief that all students are general education students first.

With the continued achievement gaps of historically underserved student groups (Figure 1) and the increased percentage of SWDs participating in general education classrooms in Tennessee (Figure 2), there is a need to examine effective practices for ensuring access to high-quality instruction for ALL students. Ultimately, we believe that every student can learn, grow, and have access to high-quality, evidence-based instruction that maximizes their potential in the least restrictive environment. This belief drives our work forward, and opportunities such as **multi-tiered systems**

**of support (MTSS)** provide an avenue for students with disabilities to increase access to core instruction.

It is the teachers and educators in Tennessee who give life to these practices and beliefs. Teacher leaders are uniquely positioned to collaborate with colleagues to shift mindsets, provide feedback, and improve instructional practices that increase outcomes for all students. On the following pages, you will read stories from teams of both general and special educators in Tennessee who describe four key actions that bring to life All Means All in their classrooms:



**Build relationships between the general education teacher and the special education teacher**



**Create a safe and healthy learning environment**



**Foster relationships among students**



**Cultivate and maintain growth mindsets**

# Teacher Leaders Taking Action: Teacher Introductions

Montvale Elementary School, Blount County



**Brandy Barton**  
Special Education Teacher

I have been a special education teacher for seven years and have experience working with children from birth through high school.

My special education career began at a residential treatment

facility for at-risk adolescents. My goal was to not only implement new strategies with students but provide additional supports for my fellow educators. These strategies and supports helped the students become more invested in their school work and helped the staff develop more meaningful relationships with students. This experience taught me the importance of building a relationship with my peers and how we can weave our own attitudes and beliefs together to make a stronger partnership.

My next special education experience was in Knox County in a Comprehensive Development Classroom (CDC). Students who are in this placement receive both direct and inclusive services. Traditionally, the inclusive services were provided by the instructional assistants in the special education classroom. However, in order to develop stronger partnerships with general educators, I felt it was imperative to become more integrated into the general education classroom.

Making this change was impactful because it allowed me to plan more efficiently as I could directly observe the lessons and modify the content and/or format to meet the needs of the students. It also allowed the general educator and me to develop a deeper relationship, and we could collaborate together more effectively. We learned one another's strengths and weaknesses and how to use them to provide effective instruction for all students in the classroom setting. Our relationship also became a model for the students, and they were able to experience how teamwork and collaboration can be impactful.

Throughout my teaching career, I have learned the true value of establishing collaborative partnerships with my fellow educators.



**Hailey Elrod**  
Kindergarten Teacher

I have known since the time I was in the second grade that I would be a teacher. However, what my classroom looks like on a day-to-day basis is far from my 7-year-old imaginings of that time. The vision I had for my future didn't exactly include

flexible seating, avoiding terms like "smart" and "good job," and students going in and out of my room throughout the day. Fortunately, the reality of being a teacher in a public school system in 2018 far surpasses the career dreams of my childhood. Let me tell you why.

I have had a passion for teaching, explaining, and helping others grow since I was a child. I also knew I had a passion for children even when I was still a child myself. So a path into education was a simple decision for me. Throughout my formal education at Lee University, I had myriad experiences with special education. Although I was not a special education major, I had special education classes and mandatory service hours spent in our on-campus center for children with disabilities. My general education professors also wove these students with special needs into our lessons regularly. I was very excited to begin teaching and hopeful to have students with disabilities learning and growing included in my general education classroom. This is the first year I have had the privilege of having students with disabilities in my class, and it has been a learning process and joy for both my students and me.

There are three very important components that make this classroom environment function so well: my relationship with the special education teacher, my students' relationships with one another and with me, and our very intentional growth mindset.

# Teacher Leaders Taking Action: Teacher Introductions

*Hardin Valley Academy, Knox County*



**Cory Minzyk**  
Special Education  
Mathematics Teacher

I graduated from Maryville College in 2001 with a B.A. in psychology and a concentration in child development. I originally started working with students in second and third grade. It was with this age

group that I learned about Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI), also referred to as “brain friendly” classrooms. Years later, I went on to work with middle school students in grades 7 and 8. After three years of working in the middle school setting, I attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and obtained a license in special education. This is my eighth year at Hardin Valley Academy (HVA) working as a special education case manager. I teach Algebra II to 11th graders. This Algebra II class is a yearlong, co-taught class that I currently teach with Mr. Michalski at HVA. This is our third year teaching together in the inclusion classroom.

I never thought I would end up being a high school teacher, and everything I have learned along the way has molded my teaching style and philosophy. Each year holds subtle differences from the preceding class, but most of the methods and concepts remain the same.



**Joe Michalski**  
High School  
Mathematics Teacher

I entered the teaching profession quite unexpectedly in 2009 as an adjunct professor teaching entry-level micro and macro economics at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Initially, I did not intend to

pursue teaching as a profession. I was nervous and rather unsure of myself. But after several weeks of teaching, I was shocked at how much I liked it, and, as they say, I was hooked. I found the challenge of igniting passion in students to be quite exhilarating, especially for a subject that many thought to be boring and/or difficult. Answering and posing questions and encouraging students to think outside the box were instantly rewarding. All of a sudden, this teaching assignment did not feel like a job. It still does not, and thus I was led to pursue a career in education.

I left Marist and headed to Knoxville for personal reasons, and stumbled into a temporary position teaching mathematics in high school. I am currently in my seventh year at Hardin Valley Academy (HVA) and have co-taught inclusion Algebra II classes for the past five years.

I have always strived to connect with and motivate students by having an open mind, maintaining a high level of energy, and displaying the love and passion that I have for mathematics. Hopefully, my administrators saw these traits in me, thinking that I might be a good fit for an inclusion classroom. I began teaching inclusion classes in my second year at HVA. It has become one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and I see the benefits for my students.



## ACTION 1:

# Build Relationships Between the General Education Teacher and the Special Education Teacher

Tennessee's Special Education Framework is based on the belief that Special Education is not a place; rather, it is the most intensive intervention along the continuum of service defined by individual need and services. All students are general education students first. Every student can learn and demonstrate growth, and must have access to high-quality, evidence-based instruction that maximizes their potential in the least restrictive environment. To do this well, these educators are **building relationships between each other as the general education teacher and the special education teacher, as well as with their students.**

### **B** Brandy Barton

This is my second year at Montvale Elementary, and I have been fortunate enough to find another educator who has the same collaborative spirit as I have. I have students with disabilities in my caseload in Ms. Elrod's classroom this school year. Fortunately, I have been able to provide the inclusive support for these students in her classroom. We are able to work with one another to find ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities and provide them with learning opportunities with their peers.

There are many reasons why our relationship is successful, and I feel most of them have to do with our combined belief that all students can learn and deserve access to the same curriculum and environment. These students truly belong in Ms. Elrod's classroom, and she has welcomed them just as she has welcomed all of her students. Ms. Elrod also focuses on learning how to develop a growth mindset during learning. This has truly benefited the students in

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— Brandy Barton, Special Education Teacher

learning how to identify how mistakes can help us grow and learn. I know our partnership has also become a model for these students, and we have seen them use effective collaboration and communication to help one another in different situations. I know it is not only the students with disabilities who are gaining a valuable experience from our inclusionary practices, but all students in the classroom are benefiting. The other students in the classroom are learning how to become positive peer models and how they can have a serious impact on another person's life.

### **H** Hailey Elrod

I am confident that I am not the only teacher who considers her classroom a second home. I spend just as much time there as I do in my actual home, if not more. Therefore, allowing another teacher to come into my classroom and interact with my students, take part in my lessons, and collaborate with me professionally would be very difficult if I did not have a personal relationship with this person. Thankfully, I have truly become great friends with Mrs. Barton and am thrilled to see her each day upon entering my classroom. Having her in my classroom has only positive effects on the environment of my class.

The easy rapport I share with my colleague not only leads to us working well in the classroom together, but it has also modeled positive relationships for my students. I greet Mrs. Barton and our classmates with disabilities with enthusiasm every day. My students see my reaction to them coming into our class and do the same. I have never explicitly asked my students to greet their classmates with disabilities differently or to be kind to them. They just copy what they see being done. My general population students are all excited to see their classmates coming in for their lessons every day and welcome them more heartily than they do anyone else. Setting clear expectations and being a good example have the greatest impact.

**C** **Cory Minzyk**

It is of the utmost importance that co-teachers respect each other professionally. Transparency between each other is crucial for classroom structure, management, and lesson planning. We have fun with our lessons, and because it's a yearlong class, we really get to know our students. I have been very fortunate to work with someone whom I refer to as a friend. Teaching with someone you can appreciate makes the job easier. It has been said that, "If you find a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life."

Although this statement may sound cliché, in my personal experience, it is mostly true. Certainly, everyone has an off day in their career here and there. But overall, I feel that my teaching tenure at HVA has been worthwhile and challenging and has contributed positively to my growth and development as an educator. My recent time at HVA has taught me that commonalities in teaching exist at every level: elementary, middle, and high. Finding the nuances and subtle differences allows me to reassess my skills and to implement them according to the situation at hand.

**J** **Joe Michalski**

I consider myself fortunate to teach with a good friend. For the past three years, I have co-taught with Mr. Minzyk. Because of our relationship, many of the potential difficulties of co-teaching are nonexistent. Through good fortune, I have discovered that having a positive co-teacher relationship is very meaningful to achieving the goals of an inclusion classroom. Mr. Minzyk and I display camaraderie and endeavor to show students that we enjoy and recognize them in all aspects of the school. We share stories about our personal passions with students, and they, in turn, want to share with us; we all get to know each other on a deeper level. We help each other utilize what we do best in order to benefit the students. We show respect for each other and model effective communication skills. We collaborate well and support one another. I realize that not all teachers may be fortunate enough to have such an incredible situation. However, establishing a positive energy between co-teachers is extremely important and cannot be overstated.

**MY RECENT TIME AT HVA HAS TAUGHT ME THAT COMMONALITIES IN TEACHING EXIST AT EVERY LEVEL: ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE, AND HIGH. FINDING THE NUANCES AND SUBTLE DIFFERENCES ALLOWS ME TO REASSESS MY SKILLS AND TO IMPLEMENT THEM ACCORDING TO THE SITUATION AT HAND.**

— Cory Minzyk, *Special Education Mathematics Teacher*



## ACTION 2:

# Create a Safe and Healthy Learning Environment

As Abraham Maslow's *Theory of Human Motivation*<sup>1</sup> suggests, a student's psychological, safety, and belongingness needs must be met before they can achieve self-actualization. In the following section, these teachers share how they are **creating a safe and healthy learning environment** that is welcoming to all students and grounded in the belief that every student can learn. School climate and connectedness is a key component of Tennessee's **MTSS model**.

### **C** Cory Minzyk

Each year brings about different students with different needs. As needs change, so do my strategies in reaching out to each student, but the mindset that everyone can learn Algebra is always being reinforced. I cannot help but to refer to the first part of the Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) model, absence of threat (see p. 10 for more). It is here we discuss that making mistakes are an important part of our classroom environment; in fact, mistakes are encouraged. When students are able to express their thought process as to how or why an error was made and can explain how to fix it, they enter metacognition, an important part of the learning process. When students are able to think through their own processes following a mistake, they are able to reflect and build on their own learning from those instances.

As a class, we always try to work out the more difficult problems together. Through this sense of teamwork and collaboration, a familial environment is created. Students learn to openly share ideas and to discuss differences in approaches to solving problems.

These daily practices create an atmosphere where learning from each others' mistakes and helping each other resolve these mistakes reduces anxiety. Once the apprehension of learning begins to disappear, students begin to open up to each other and the teacher(s), to ask for assistance, and to participate in open discussions. Throughout the school year, students begin to understand why we teach what we teach. We help them approach state and end-of-course tests with confidence. They see the real-life application and find better insight to their learning. This, in turn, gives way to problem solving in everyday life.

### **J** Joe Michalski

My approaches have not always produced desirable results. Fortunately, I have been given the autonomy and encouragement to attempt various techniques to support

the individual needs of my students. I do not have a magic formula for success. On any given day in a classroom, something may click; on another day or in a different class, it may not. In spite of the challenges, the rewards that I have reaped through my interactions with inclusion students are immeasurable. I quickly discovered that all students can learn, grow, and be successful in high school. Specific to inclusion teaching, I believe that all students belong in the general education classroom and have the ability to attain positive outcomes socially, emotionally, and physically. Furthermore, I am convinced that all students can participate and succeed in grade-level general education curriculum and demonstrate growth that will lead to success following graduation.

I have realized that practicing inclusion is different from the idea of inclusion itself. Merely integrating students with disabilities into the general education setting does not guarantee they will fare better. Similarly, the fact that special education students are part of the regular classroom does not mean that other students will incur less growth. Inclusionary practices such as genuine acceptance into the general education classroom, complete access for all students, and a support system that allows all students to maximize their abilities will foster growth for all students. A successful program must create a sense of community and belonging wherein each individual contributes to the betterment of themselves and everyone around them. All other facets of inclusionary teaching will fail to reach their potential without this overarching belief.

The goal is for each student to not only master the state's required course objectives, but also for teachers and students to grow together and form a community that is behaviorally, emotionally, and socially beneficial to all. For me, it begins each day with a genuine and warm welcome into the classroom. The hope is that students see that the teacher is working alongside them and rooting for their success from the very beginning. Next, it is imperative that I

<sup>1</sup> Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-96.

find something each student does well within the first week of school; this allows for a starting point and gives students confidence. It is important for students' first experiences in the classroom to be ones that make them feel good.

Feeling welcome and safe may encourage students to be adventurous enough to dive into the coursework and make that first mistake. Once that happens, it is up to me to enable them to embrace mistakes and see them as opportunities to dispel misconceptions and make new

connections about the way things work. Mistakes become an integral part of class time. We train ourselves to embrace mistakes and use them to our advantage as one of the most powerful learning tools. As the teacher, I occasionally plan mistakes purposefully into my lessons to model the attitude and thinking needed to both rebound from one's errors and correct them. I call this establishing an honest community of learning; we (students and teachers) agree that as human beings, we will make mistakes and that these mistakes often ignite our ability to learn.

## Elements of ITI Environment Modified for High School

### Cory Minzyk

Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) is a commonly used elementary classroom model based on eight elements of a "brain-friendly" learning experience. More detailed information on the ITI model can be found [here](#). Key components of an ITI environment can be utilized in the high school setting with a few adjustments. Whether working a job for financial stability and self-sufficiency, preparing for the ACT and/or postsecondary education, or going to a trade school, high school students must have a plan for transition into the "real world," and it is our job as educators to help refine the skills necessary for that transition. To support this, I incorporate the eight elements of ITI into my classroom as often as possible.

 **ABSENCE OF THREAT TO LEARNING:** Creating an environment where mistakes are encouraged helps facilitate an environment to eliminate anxiety. Many students have an imaginary audience and believe that making a mistake in class will cause peers to poke fun at them. Often, I will purposely make errors when working problems on the board and hope that a student will identify my mistakes. I model that I can and will make mistakes, and that is OK.

 **MEANINGFUL CONTENT:** With each lesson, we make our best effort to show how the material is used on a daily basis. Students need to see there is significance to the material in the real world and not just because "we have to teach it." This encourages a mindset for students that math is all around them and they are getting more from the material than fulfilling a requirement.

 **CHOICES:** Students see that any problem, for the most part, has more than one way to be solved in demonstration by more than one teacher. Not everybody learns the same way, and seeing problems being solved by different methods allows differentiated learning.

 **ADEQUATE TIME:** An accommodation offered for many students with disabilities, extra time on assignments and assessments is offered in my class to both general and special education students. Tests and quizzes can create anxiety, but with extra time to thoroughly complete assessments, students can work under less pressure.

 **ENRICHED ENVIRONMENT:** Using manipulatives and other hands-on activities helps develop the students' surrounding for successful learning. At times, we will use art to demonstrate math activities for learning. Even at the high school level, this is beneficial as it moves away from the daily lecture-style class discussions.

 **COLLABORATION:** Student collaboration or peer tutoring is a cornerstone of our yearlong Algebra II class. After a lesson, students are able to discuss in their own words what they have learned and work out issues they might have in the lesson. This may occur in small groups or one on one.

 **IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK:** Whether after a homework assignment or after a test, students need to know what areas need refinement through immediate feedback. Corrections are a great way for students to fix and learn from their mistakes.

 **MASTERY:** Mastery can be displayed in many forms. Explaining problems, fostering peer interaction, and utilizing teacher-made tests are a few ways learning is assessed. In our class, we create our own tests based on the lessons taught. We then move from open answer questions to more multiple-choice questions to mimic the standardized tests students will soon encounter.



### ACTION 3:

## Foster Relationships Among Students

As critical as it is to create partnerships among adults, it is equally important that all students understand the strengths and differences among their peers. By establishing inclusive practices and modeling appropriate interactions, these educators are **fostering relationships among their students.**

### **B** Brandy Barton

To build a culture that embraces inclusive practices, I believe it's important for students to see that belief from the adults they interact with daily. The relationship Ms. Elrod and I have developed has become a model for the students in our classroom. Our students have generalized the welcoming and endearing disposition Ms. Elrod has for all students and me. The result has been students serving as peer models in both academic and social settings. Within the classroom, I have seen students go out of their way each morning to be positive and endearing, beyond just a "Hello" or "Good morning." When I am providing inclusion support, peers volunteer to help the students with disabilities in any way.

I have also seen peers begin to develop social relationships with the students in my class. On the playground, some students are still learning appropriate social interactions with others. Students in Ms. Elrod's classroom have not only allowed these students to become involved in their social interactions and play at recess, but they are actively seeking out the students with disabilities and centering their play around their interests. For example, I have a student who loves to play tag, and students in Ms. Elrod's classroom will initiate and stay engaged in a game of tag with this student.

Sometimes, students in my class can become too rough with other students on the playground, and I help redirect them and model how they should be participating in the activity. However, since the students in Ms. Elrod's classroom have developed positive relationships with these students, they have begun to redirect and model the appropriate behavior intentionally and without teacher direction. I find it endearing these students do not just stop interacting or discontinue their play; they actively find ways to continue their interactions and turn these interactions into learning opportunities. These students have found a way to foster and maintain their positive and caring relationships with the students with disabilities.

### **H** Hailey Elrod

The students in class work hard to ensure all students, including those with disabilities, truly know they are part of our class family. I try to include these students in all that we do and show the rest of the class that they belong. Their names are on hooks and cubbies in my room; their names hang in the writing center; they have clips on my behavior chart and icons in my behavior management program; and their names get pulled out of the random name bucket. My students view our friends with disabilities as part of our class, and I credit this to them hearing and seeing their names all day long, even when they aren't in our room. I consider these students to be my students, even though they are not always in the room. I model these beliefs to the students who are with me all day, and I have never given them any reason to feel that these children are not their classmates. They all learn together in the classroom, eat together at lunch, and play together on the playground. They are simply living life together at school, just like they would in a general education classroom that does not include any students with disabilities. All of this stems from me as the teacher modeling inclusive, loving relationships with my students and colleagues. Modeling positive relationships leads to more positive relationships.

*"All of this stems from me as the teacher modeling inclusive, loving relationships with my students and colleagues. Modeling positive relationships leads to more positive relationships."*

— Hailey Elrod, Kindergarten Teacher



#### ACTION 4:

## Cultivate and Maintain a Growth Mindset

Learning is multifaceted and can be accomplished in a myriad of situations. Research by Carol Dweck and others shows that teaching people to have a “growth mindset,” which encourages a focus on effort rather than intelligence and talent, helps make them into high achievers in school and in life.<sup>2</sup> In this final section, these educators discuss how they develop students who are empowered and self-determined by **cultivating and maintaining a growth mindset.**

### **B** Brandy Barton

One reason Ms. Elrod and I work well with one another is because we have a shared belief that all students can learn and should be given access to the same content and curriculum. Ms. Elrod and I both focus on instilling a growth mindset in our students and I feel this is truly beneficial to both of our student populations. For students with disabilities, having a fixed mindset is detrimental for their learning and growth. Students with a fixed mindset feel their mistakes demonstrate their inability to learn and they can become completely unmotivated.

### **H** Hailey Elrod

This year, I have been implementing a growth mindset culture in my class. While there are several elements within growth mindset that most teachers naturally demonstrate, there are a few that need some serious intentionality. One

of the main focuses of the growth mindset movement is to praise student effort rather than intelligence. It caught me off guard the first time I read, “Don’t call your students smart.” But I really think there’s something to it. If students feel their value is tied to their intelligence, they will be less likely to try new things. When particular students constantly hear from adults (especially teachers) how smart they are, this surely boosts their confidence as intended. However, the very possible, unintended side effect is a student’s unwillingness to try or make mistakes. They may develop a fixed mindset, believing they are good at some things and not at others, and that’s just the way it will always be.

For general education students, that thought is devastating enough. They absolutely need to be allowed, even encouraged, to make mistakes. That just means they are challenging themselves and developing their skills. Even more startling is the effect a fixed mindset can have on students with intellectual disabilities. If some students feel their value is based on their intellect, and they have intellectual disabilities, where does that leave them? Furthermore, how am I training students to view their classmates with intellectual disabilities if all I praise is intellect?

With a growth mindset, however, we focus on our effort and how much we develop our skills and abilities. It’s not where we start out that matters, or even where we are right now. It’s where we are going and how we are going to get there. Having a classroom environment that is accepting of meaningful mistakes has made a huge impact on the way my students view their own learning and the learning process of their peers. They are so quick to encourage one another to try their best, never give up, and believe in themselves. They don’t think to make fun of or criticize one another for making a mistake. Instead, they laugh it off, tell each other that mistakes are a good thing, and guide one another to a more accurate path. As students with disabilities begin spending more and more time in the general education system, I hope they come across these students who not only have a growth mindset themselves, but help to instill it in one another.

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— Hailey Elrod, Kindergarten Teacher

<sup>2</sup>Dweck, C. (2015, January 1 Published). The Secret to Raising Smart Kids. Retrieved from [www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-secret-to-raising-smart-kids1](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-secret-to-raising-smart-kids1)

## **C** Cory Minzyk

I give strong reference to the ITI model and how, when implemented, it fosters a classroom structure that uplifts students to feel encouraged. This model and Mr. Michalski's beliefs about learning create a positive learning atmosphere for all members of the classroom, teachers included. We give praise for rigor and create opportunities from our mistakes. Mistakes then become our fuel for learning.

My ideals of education, in cooperation with Mr. Michalski's ideals, have had positive effects in fostering learning in our students. We collaborate daily to create lessons and activities that will benefit students' learning. What we bring to our planning sessions may differ, and that is good. It is our different approach in education that allows us to build ideas from each other. We try to construct our lessons by looking at the class as a whole. Some lessons work better than other lessons; something may work for one group of students but not for another group. We, like the students, use our errors to better our understanding of the material, whether we are teaching it or the students are learning it. It is this mindset that helps our classrooms evolve into what they have become.

## **J** Joe Michalski

Differentiated instruction is another key component to success in an inclusion classroom, and sets the stage for building growth mindsets. All of my inclusion classes at HVA have ranged from 25 to 35 students per class. This guarantees a diverse group of learners from unique backgrounds, family life, customs and abilities. In order to provide differentiated learning, the teacher must get to know their students well, adjust activities, make mid-course corrections, allow preferential seating, and explain concepts in a variety of ways.

As an example, consider a classroom with a blind student, a mildly autistic student, a student who has previously failed the course, a gifted student, an English Learner (EL) student, and several other students with different personalities and ability levels. Imagine working through a math problem in this room. The blind student needs to hear everything explained in detail at a slower pace to visualize what is taking place or be able to put the problem in braille as other students write. The slower pace will also help the EL student, but vocabulary words might need to be explained in different ways; facial expressions help me to determine the level of understanding. The autistic student may need to have every detail and step written out and explained thoroughly so that those exact steps are repeated again on a similar problem. The student who has previously failed will have to discover what has been done incorrectly and might require me to work out problems with mistakes. The gifted student may need to work on a similar problem later, but with added difficulty. It is likely that other

*“My goal is to empower my students to utilize their ability to question and build their own knowledge.”*

— Joe Michalski, High School Mathematics Teacher

students may have to hear the explanation in a variety of other ways and be supported individually at some point in class.

Differentiation definitely presents challenges, but it is critical to inclusion, and supports in the development of growth mindsets for our students. Recognizing and adjusting for each student's differences help students feel supported and confident, setting the foundation for cultivating a growth mindset.

As students gain confidence and their fears of being wrong diminish, I work to establish a Socratic type of community in which students share thoughts and opinions and ask questions. Positive feedback toward their questions helps to establish such a community of learning without formally stating it as a goal. I show interest and excitement for their questions. I sometimes pretend to ponder deeply, even if I know the obvious answer. I thank the student for asking a question that often someone else in the room wanted to ask. I make sure they see that all of their inquiries are important and taken seriously. Ultimately, the goal is to show students that the power lies within themselves. I believe the learner must first feel comfortable to inquire when they do not understand a concept. There can never be a penalty or moment of embarrassment for not understanding. My goal is to empower my students to utilize their ability to question and build their own knowledge.

Finally, and perhaps most important, is to never accept or allow the “I can't” or “it's too hard” attitude. We can find a solution and sometimes it starts with asking a question or expressing what is misunderstood. The analogy I use in the classroom is a hypothetical situation; if one's car breaks down on the side of the road, there are two options. One is to accept fate and do nothing but succumb to bad fortune. The second is to look for possibility and figure out the next move to get home. We must train ourselves and our students to choose the second option. Regardless of one's disability or gift, every student can learn and make progress when we look for possibility. This requires students to be courageous enough to speak out and voice their thoughts and concerns. The reality is that we will face obstacles in life and in education; our job is to empower our students to appreciate the challenge and identify solutions.

# Reflection

*Perhaps the greatest result of inclusive practices is the learning that takes place that is unrelated to the content in the course. When a diverse group of students comes together in a classroom environment where diversity is celebrated, students have an opportunity to learn valuable life skills that they will be able to use for the rest of their lives: acceptance, equality, belonging, second chances, family and friendship.*

All students benefit when teachers work to:



**Build relationships between the general education teacher and the special education teacher**



**Create a safe and healthy learning environment**



**Foster relationships among students**



**Cultivate and maintain growth mindsets**

These practices support teachers' ability to demonstrate high academic expectations and learn to meet the individual needs of each student with an appreciation for their differences. This translates to an increased ability for educators to differentiate their instruction, resulting in improved outcomes for all students. Students rise to meet rigorous expectations their teachers set for them. They make the effort to learn about their peers and work together to solve problems. Through these inclusive practices, students learn to appreciate each other as individuals with unique strengths, and have a respect for all people.

**Implementing these practices helps both teachers and students move beyond an inclusive classroom toward an inclusive mindset and ensures that classrooms, schools, districts, and the state are moving all students forward.**