

**POLICY & ADVOCACY**

# Inclusive Principal Leadership – Part 1: What It Is & Why It Matters

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Parents, advocates, and educators often find themselves asking an incredibly important question: How can we improve outcomes for students with disabilities?

Students with disabilities [lag far behind their peers](#) in many areas. More than 90% score below “proficient” on NAEP (a standardized test), 18% drop out of school (which is three times the rate of other students), only 70% graduate from high school with a regular diploma, and even fewer go on to college. But that’s not the whole picture. We know they can achieve at high levels when they receive the right supports and accommodations.

Unfortunately, the educational experience of students with disabilities is not equitable. They are [twice as likely to be suspended](#) and expelled than students without disabilities. Further, there is a serious shortage of special education teachers in our nation’s schools and the general educators who instruct students with disabilities are often lacking the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to do so effectively.

As more and more students with disabilities spend most of their time in general education classrooms, how will we ensure that their schools are inclusive, responsive, and effective environments for them?

## **The Practice: Inclusive Principal Leadership**

Some schools are shifting to a practice called “inclusive principal leadership.” This idea might sound complicated, but there are a few key components to it.

You have likely heard about “inclusion,” which is the bedrock of our nation’s special education system. In a school that is inclusive, there is a culture and practice of valuing every student as a learner within general education classrooms, not separate programs or places. This means that students with disabilities have access to the same curriculum and educational opportunities as other students. It also means that educators share responsibility for each learner, providing the supports and resources students need when they need it.

Therefore, when principals demonstrate inclusive leadership, they foster this culture of inclusion in their schools. They build a structure of shared responsibility for all students where educators respond to the unique needs of each student. They set high expectations while providing appropriate supports and resources for all learners.

## **What it Looks like in Schools**

The term “inclusive principal leadership” describes a style or approach to leading. Principals who use it are likely to start by establishing a bold, clear, and inclusive vision for their school. They will often engage in collaborative planning with their teams and set up systems that encourage continuous collaboration among educators. They will conduct an audit of the school to determine which needs are not being met, and they will look closely at equity. Based on that, they will distribute staffing and resources to ensure the needs of all students are being addressed. In schools that use inclusive leadership, teams will work together and classroom practices will be transformed through professional development, team teaching, or differentiation. These efforts will be monitored and adjusted over time to ensure progress is being made.

## **The Value of Inclusive Principal Leadership**

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Inclusion works for students with disabilities as well as students without disabilities. If we want all students to succeed, we must focus on each student as a learner and address their particular needs and challenges. The team-based approach that inclusive principal leadership requires is essential to building a culture of inclusion and an environment where all students can thrive.

### Learn More

NCLD has been working with The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Collaborative for Inclusive Principal Leadership (NCIPL) to develop resources promoting inclusive principal leadership. Visit [the Collaborative's new website](#) to learn about how states can make the shift and support schools using this essential practice.

## Meet the NCLD Team

Carrying out the NCLD mission to improve outcomes for the 1 in 5 individuals with learning and attention issues.

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## Young Adult Initiatives

Help empower and advocate for young adults ages 18–26 with learning disabilities and attention issues.

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We need your help! Ask your member of Congress to support students with learning and attention issues.

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Thanks to support from generous partners like you, we are able to create programs and resources to support the 1 in 5 individuals with learning and attention issues nationwide.

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- Forward Together
- Assessing ESSA
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