



Inclusion and the Elementary Schools

What is inclusion?

Inclusion is an educational practice in which children with disabilities are educated in classrooms with children without disabilities. The purpose of inclusion is to make sure that students with special needs are integrated in the general education setting for as much of the day as possible, with the supports they need to be successful. Inclusion strategies can include co-teaching, consultative services, paraprofessional support, modifications to curriculum or testing, accommodations for specific disabilities, and other services an individual student needs in order to access the district curriculum in a general education classroom.

Inclusion is sound educational policy. It is also mandated by New Jersey Code which requires, in part, that "Students with disabilities shall be educated in the least restrictive environment;" and "To the maximum extent appropriate, a student with a disability is educated with children who are not disabled." (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-4.2)

What is "co-teaching?"

Co-teaching is one possible strategy to support students with disabilities in a general education setting. With co-teaching, two teachers are in the classroom for most of the day – a general education teacher who is an expert in the curriculum, and a special education teacher who is an expert in making modifications and accommodations to help students access the curriculum. Co-teaching is not the only, or even the most common, strategy for supporting students with disabilities. Co-teaching has been very successful for some children, but is not always the best choice for every student.

What is an IEP?

"IEP" is short for "Individualized Education Program." Each student classified as requiring special education services is guaranteed an IEP. The IEP identifies the specific supports that student needs to be able to access the curriculum. These supports vary considerably, depending on the needs of each individual student.

As defined in New Jersey Code: "'Individualized education program' (IEP) means a written plan which sets forth present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, measurable annual goals and short-term objectives or benchmarks and describes an integrated, sequential program of individually designed instructional activities and related services necessary to achieve the stated goals and objectives. This plan shall establish the rationale for the student's educational placement, serve as the basis for program implementation and comply with the mandates set forth in this chapter." (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-1.3)

Is SOMSD reducing inclusion classes in the elementary schools?

SOMSD is fully committed to the philosophy of inclusion and will continue to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, as defined in each child's IEP and determined by their specific needs. For some students, the least restrictive environment is a general education setting with some modifications and accommodations to test taking, etc. Other students need the support of a paraprofessional to help them focus and stay on task. Some students need a second teacher with specialized training, for some or all of their classes, in order for them to access the curriculum effectively. Other students require an alternative placement, if they cannot be educated appropriately in a general education classroom even with support. SOMSD currently uses all of these techniques, depending on each student's individual needs. SOMSD is committed to continuing to provide an inclusive educational setting to as many students as appropriate, and to providing excellent support to all students.

Is anything changing in the special education services provided to elementary students?

SOMSD is adding another service, specifically targeted to support struggling readers, to the array of services we offer to students in grades K-2. There are no changes planned for grades 3-5.

Case managers report that 90% of primary grade referrals to special education are due to reading issues. We have also identified that many of the reading interventions in place for struggling students who are not classified are currently not available to special education students.

We are working to provide effective interventions to all struggling readers in grades K-2, regardless of whether or not they have been formally classified as having a learning disability. Students whose primary issue is reading need reading support, but do not necessarily need the support of a special education teacher in math or other subjects. SOMSD will provide struggling readers with small group instruction using targeted reading interventions to help all students be on or close to grade level by grade 3. The long term vision is that, by providing struggling readers with intensive intervention in early grades, fewer students will require special education services for reading deficits in later grades.

K-2 students who have special needs other than, or in addition to, reading deficits will continue to receive the other services that they require, including co-teaching where indicated.

Is SOMSD reducing the number of classes using co-teaching strategies?

The number of classes which will use the co-teaching strategy for 2012-2013 is still being determined, as IEP teams work together to assess the needs of each individual student. This is true every year as the number of each type of class in each grade fluctuates according to the number of students overall, the number of students with IEPs, and the needs of those specific students. One year there might be enough students whose special needs require co-teaching strategies to warrant 2 classrooms in 4th grade at a particular school, the next year's cohort might require 1, or 3, or remain unchanged. These fluctuations happen every year.

There will be no reduction in the number of special education teachers in grades K-3 for 2012-2013, even if the number of students who require in-class support declines at those grades for next year. That is because we are committed to support struggling readers in these grades. Any special education teachers not needed as co-teachers all day will be assigned to provide intensive, targeted reading instruction to struggling readers during the time when they are not co-teaching.

What can I do if I have questions?

In response to parental concerns, a special meeting is scheduled for Monday, April 16, 2012, from 7:30pm-9:00pm in the District Meeting Room at 525 Academy Street in Maplewood. This meeting is an opportunity for parents/guardians to speak directly with special education staff and school leaders about inclusion in our elementary schools and get answers to their questions. SOMSD encourages parents/guardians to share questions by emailing inclusion@somsd.k12.nj.us. By sending your questions in advance, staff will be able to address the most common and pressing concerns at the beginning, and then will open the meeting to additional questions.

In addition, the Department of Special Services encourages parents/guardians to contact their case manager with questions specific to their own child. Parents/guardians are also welcome to contact Dr. Patricia Barker, Director of Special Services, at 973-762-5600 ext. 1841 or pbarker@somsd.k12.nj.us.