



## Transcript- Episode 68

The Inclusive Schedule Trap: What Schools Keep Getting Wrong- And What To Do Instead

Today, we're going to be talking all about pitfalls to avoid when building your school's inclusive schedule. And this seems uninteresting to some of you.

Some of you are all about schedules. But I'll tell you what, we're about to give you some secret tips after doing this work for so many years with school systems. What we've learned is that the schedule is actually one of the more critical pieces that you need to get in order to create more inclusive schools and classrooms.

Yeah. So this one is not, as much as I love scope and sequence and spreadsheets, the schedule is not my favorite. I'll tell you two reasons why, Julie. Okay. One, in early childhood, we aren't as consumed as you all are in older grades.

Okay.

However, in a roundabout way we are, it sort of, like, perpetuates our victim mentality sometimes, like we're the ugly stepsister, like nobody remembers early childhoods in the building. Because when people create the schedule, they don't think about young learners or we're afterthought about when we get to go on the playground or have access to the media. So there is that, like we resent the schedule.

I don't mean to speak for all early childhood people, I'm just saying, but we're not as consumed by it. Secondly, Julie, often people call it the master schedule and you and I have been working so hard in our own personal work to dismantle our language that is either ableist or racist or sexist or has even just undertones of microaggressions. And so I always stumble when I go to talk about the schedule.

So I decided today, it's like Ohio State University. I can be annoyed by it, I don't, sorry, now I'm losing fans because I'm not a Buckeye fan, but we call it the schedule. And we're going to think about it inclusively, which means we have to think about early childhood and young children, too.

So that's my long rant to start off with this podcast. I only had two issues.

OK, OK. And I'll take it to from, you know, beyond, well, maybe not quite yet, but I'm going to take it from kindergarten to 12th grade to say that what happens traditionally is kids with disabilities are scheduled kind of last, meaning we will take in the main schedule, we'll figure out how to do, I'll use elementary as an example, art, FIAD, everybody gets put in first and then we add in students with disabilities at the end. And this scheduling process flips that on its head and it says, OK, first, we're going to start with students with disabilities and we're going to make sure that they are placed in the inclusive places that have natural

proportions and we don't have clusters of kids. And we do that very first and then we add from there and then we look at things like special areas and things like that.

And it's to say that students are the center of this work, as opposed to some of the other driving forces that we often see during a main scheduling process. So spoiler alert, when Julie says we think about students with disabilities first, we're not thinking about them as a collective, individual student, as a unit. We're not thinking of them as they're all the same.

OK, so that's the spoiler alert. But you're going to want some things to reference either during this podcast or immediately after. OK, so let me give you two things, folks, that you're going to want.

First, you want our free inclusive scheduling process. It's a 13 page document that will unpack step by step everything Julie and I might say super quickly, like natural proportions. And you're like, whoa, step back.

So at [inclusiveschooling.com/download68](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download68), you can get our free inclusive system scheduling process. This is grounded, as Julie said, in the work that's been done for decades and that is referenced in our book. So if you don't also have our book, you want to get [The Way to Inclusion: How Leaders Create Schools Where Every Student Belongs](#).

I will put links in the show notes, of course, to the download, which is download 68, and to the book, which is *Chapter 5, Reimagine the Schedule and Collaborative Staff Roles*. So I think that's important, Julie, because some people, this is going to be so radical or there's going to be so many nuances or they're going to be like, I'm not in elementary. I'm in a middle school.

Yes. Blah, blah, blah. So how do we do it? OK, yes, really, really brilliant, Kristie.

So what Kristie's referencing, the inclusive system scheduling process, the free download that's available for you all, I'm going to kind of just explain what's in it. So I'm going to give you a bigger overview. So first, there's a quick start checklist, which is what do you need to gather in order to do this work? And then there's another big area called guidance for use.

And so it's like we have to talk about the negotiables and the non-negotiables if we really want true inclusion to happen. And then it's phase by phase by phase, step by step by step. How do you do this work so that you can have the most inclusive classrooms by design? And then you put the staff in to support after you figured out how to make things as inclusive as possible.

So there are many pages, step by step, showing you exactly how to do that. And then we have 13 common scheduling pitfalls and how to avoid them. And I think it is like the heart of this episode, because we could get into all of the steps, but really, that is so I'll use tailored, it's so tailored to how many buildings do you have? How many students do you serve? How, where are your staff already located? All of those things. But we wanted to talk about this from our lived experiences, some things that we've seen people like miss a step, if you will.

Yes, Kristie. So, yes, we're going to focus a lot on these 13 common scheduling pitfalls and just know that additionally, we've got more support for you in this resource. That's why this process matters. And then how do you communicate this work? And it's 24 sentence starters for leaders.

So we've got so, so, so much for you in this resource that you're going to want to grab. Now, Kristie, let's just talk to folks about pitfalls. And I'm going to start with pitfall number one, because we've already mentioned it and it happens all the time.

And the pitfall is called clustering students with significant support needs.

Yeah. And what that looks like is people go, OK, we're going to become more inclusive.

So we're going to take the seven kids with autism that used to be in a self-contained classroom and we're going to put them in the same room and then add some General Ed peers and we're going to call it inclusion.

Right. And I wish we had a live audience right now, because all I'd have to do is say, what's the problem with doing that? And all of you would have a million reasons.

But essentially, it's like keeping kids self-contained. But instead, so avoid that pitfall. And the pitfall is clustering students with significant support needs together.

And you avoid it by using natural proportions so that students with higher support needs are evenly distributed across classrooms. My kids, when they were little, we were talking at dinner about inclusion. And they, Ella, was talking about what I was explaining with natural proportions.

We have very boring dinner conversations. And she said to me, oh, it's like a fruit salad. And I was like, what do you mean? Well, you wouldn't want a fruit salad with just like a ton of kiwi and then like all the kiwi together and then just a sprinkling of a few other things.

It's like you want the most diverse fruit salad and picture every classroom is a bowl of fruit salad. You want the most diverse fruit salad in every classroom. So you literally think about who are my students with the most significant support needs and how do I make sure they're in different classrooms so that that classroom can feel very inclusive and there's not support needs that are overwhelming the environment?

Yeah, and I'm going to say this is going to be like Julie, some people are going to stop listening because either like it's early childhood and it's like we've got all these three year olds with disabilities, but we don't have three year olds without disabilities.

So where are we going to have we only have one kind of fruit, if you will.

That's right. So it is true.

When we talk through these things, you're going to look at your own parameters and you're going to figure out how do I make things as inclusive as possible and how does your fruit vary and how do we make sure that we can look outside what exists and make our systems even more inclusive, which is A) It could be eighth grade too, right, Julie? A district could or like probably would happen at the transition between fifth and sixth or sixth and seventh. But they bus all the kids to one middle school or one junior high. All the kids with disabilities get bused to one building because that's where the specialists are.

So now you go, oh, we can't do natural proportions because we are so heavy on Kiwi because we bus them all here. So you're like, how do we change that? Well, you don't bus them there.

Right.

And then people are like up in arms with like, but we've always bused them to this building.

Yeah. So when Kristie is talking about this cluster problem and when she's talking about, oh, we've actually bused all the kids with autism to this one particular school and that's why there's a big group of them that needs to be dismantled.

Now, today, we're not talking about exactly how to do that today. I'd like you to think about the students that exist in your four walls and how to schedule them. And when you notice things like Kristie just mentioned, that goes on a parking lot to say, how are we going to start to move kids back to their neighborhood schools? How are we going to start to move kids back to the schools that they would attend if they did not have a disability? And in [our book](#), I think that's a really good place to start because we're talking about all of those things.

And so then on that note, Julie, let's keep going to another pitfall, because again, each of these is like peeling back an onion. So now we have onions in our fruit salad, but it's like you start and you're like, oh, but it's the transportation. Oh, it's because we've always, you know, whatever.

So as Julie said, you just get as far as you can and keep going and keep going.

Yeah.

And so pitfall number four is related, Julie.

So pitfall number four in the download, which is that [inclusiveschooling.com/download68](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download68) and discussed in many other of our podcast episodes, is over using adults as what we call a source of support. So instead of really ensuring that our general education practices or our daily activities are Tier One or our consultative supports, whatever we want to call our delivery of services, instead of like thinking about is that strong, is that up to par, we start thinking, oh, if I add more adults and then we got to the point where we put all the adults in the same place and that led to transportation of students there. So we peel it back and go, oh, how are we thinking about supports in the first place? And if you're thinking about making a very inclusive fruit salad and your Kiwis are

in different classrooms, it means that your educators will need to be in different classrooms.

And many of you right now are going, Julie and Kristie, have you lost your minds? Because I've done this role before myself as a Special Ed teacher where I've been in four or five classrooms in a day because I'm making sure that the fruit salad is really diverse. Well, there is something that you give up in order to do this. If you cluster everybody together, your Special Ed teacher gets to stay in that classroom all day long.

However, the downsides are more significant than we know. And so when you overuse adults as the primary source of support, we start to see clustering and all sorts of other things, and then, Kristie, I was just listening to our [Podcast Episode 18](#) from 100 years ago with Brianna, so she's a person with autism who's brilliant.

And she just put it in such a good way. She goes, what we need to do is find supports that are not adults. And Kristie, you and I have never said it.

We're always like paraprofessional-free adult supports, or support is a verb. But she just said we just need to find supports that are not adults. And I was like, so I don't know if you want to link another podcast to this podcast because now you're down a podcast rabbit hole.

But if you haven't listened to [Episode 18](#), I think your mind is about to be blown with some brilliance on so many levels. It's probably my all time favorite. And I wasn't even involved.

It is so good. It's so good. OK, so when we do this spreading out of students, we have to do it with thought in mind.

And so we use the phrase natural proportions a lot. And when I'm working with a specific district and we're sitting down and talking about natural proportions, what we mean is if 12 percent of your population are kids with disability labels, you're going to want roughly 12 percent of any classroom to be kids with disability labels.

OK, makes sense.

Now, the give and take of support that comes with that in the real world is such that you might have to double natural proportions. And so I just like to tell a clear workaround trick that is not, like, as inclusive as possible because we have to figure out how to make sure that kids are supported where they are, when they have significant support needs and when they do need adult support. So what we often say is you don't want to do any more than double natural proportions.

And that would mean then 24 percent of your classroom would be kids with disabilities. And notice I didn't say 50 percent.

Right.

So it's like that's the mathematical equation that we've found to be as inclusive as possible without spreading your adults so thin that they can't do the work.

Yeah, because if you'll, you know, when you get the download, friends, you'll see a lot of these are about how to maintain your staff, like, you know, retain maybe is the better word, retain your staff without prioritizing their comfort. We still have to prioritize their mental health, their caseloads, their workloads, their feelings of confidence and competence. So it's a dance between really thinking about what everybody needs.

Right. So when we talk about this inclusive system scheduling process, Julie and I guess another resource we'll put on the dashboard is that we have a self-assessment or a look-for because we really talk about that this schedule fits into a larger context and that this schedule is part of the structural changes.

But we can't forget that there are also conceptual, like, mindset things and instructional things that are happening at the same time. We can't just change physical kind of roles, and where people are, without also thinking about this is a right of our students, we're presuming competence, but we also want to make sure that the mental health of our staff is maintained. Right, Julie? I don't know how to really say that, but it's that dance between all the factors.

Well, I'm just so glad you said that because we're talking about scheduling almost as if it's in a vacuum. Yeah, what Kristie is saying is there's so many conceptual changes and instructional changes that need to be going on at the same time. But I'll tell you what administrators are the most nervous about when they're working with us is how do I schedule differently? Because the way that we've been scheduling is not inclusive at all.

And so I'm just going to give us a three phase overview, meaning what are the three parts to our scheduling process?

Oh, we probably should wrap that up with that. They're all the pitfalls, but Julie is going to kind of talk about the three phases and then Julie, maybe just say what the handout ends with.

OK, so phase one is schedule students first. And this is a big change for many places where you focus on students with disabilities and the most significant support needs first. Then the second phase is you schedule educators and related service providers. And the third phase is you schedule paraprofessionals last.

So the concept is, it's very conceptual, meaning we're going to prioritize making sure that students are in the right places and spaces that are inclusive. And then we move adults around to support them there, not the other way around where we move kids to adults. And then Kristie asked me to end our discussion today about scheduling by sharing with you what's at the very end of this resource.

And it's just reflections and review for school leaders. So it's kind of like a little rubric after you've given it your first shot. These questions to evaluate your final schedule.

For example, did we schedule students first using natural proportions? The second one is, are classrooms balanced academically, behaviorally and socially? The last one, I'm just going to skip to the last one, is does our final schedule reflect our commitment to inclusion and equity?

We hope you enjoy using this resource and reach out to us if you need more support in scheduling, because Kristie and I do a lot of support with individual leaders to make sure your schedules are as inclusive as possible. Thank you for tuning in.

And don't forget to subscribe and catch up on past episodes where we share valuable insights, straight talk, and practical steps to challenge outdated special education practices. You can find every episode with the show notes at [inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast) to build more inclusive schools together.

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## SHOW NOTES

### What This Episode Is About

School schedules are often treated like a logistical puzzle, but they are actually one of the most powerful (and overlooked) levers for inclusive education.

In this episode, Julie and Kristie break down the most common mistakes schools make when building schedules, and how those mistakes quietly reinforce segregation, adult dependence, and inequity.

This episode is for you...if you are:

- A principal or district leader building a master schedule
- Trying to improve Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) outcomes
- Struggling with staffing, co-teaching, or paraprofessional use
- Seeing clustering of students with disabilities
- Feeling stuck in “we’ve always done it this way”

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### Key Takeaways

- The schedule is not neutral — it either supports inclusion or prevents it.
- Most schools accidentally design schedules **around adults instead of students**.
- Clustering students with disabilities is one of the most common and harmful scheduling mistakes.
- Over-relying on adults (especially paraprofessionals) often masks deeper instructional or system issues.
- Inclusive scheduling requires a **clear sequence: students first, then educators, then paraprofessionals**.
- Natural proportions create balanced classrooms that support both students and staff.

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### Answering a Common Question

*How do you create an inclusive school schedule?*

By flipping the traditional process.

Instead of scheduling adults, programs, or rooms first, inclusive scheduling follows this order:

1. **Schedule students first** based on support needs and natural proportions
  2. **Schedule educators next** to align with those student needs
  3. **Schedule paraprofessionals last** to support — not drive — the system
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## **Episode Download / Handout**

*The Inclusive System Scheduling Process*

This step-by-step resource gives school leaders a **clear, structured process for building inclusive schedules from the ground up.**

Inside the download, you'll find:

- A quick-start checklist to gather the right data before scheduling
- A 3-phase scheduling process (students → educators → paraprofessionals)
- Step-by-step guidance for placing students using natural proportions
- Strategies for aligning staff roles with student needs
- Clear guidance for reducing fragmentation and improving collaboration
- 13 common scheduling pitfalls — and exactly how to avoid them
- Reflection questions to evaluate your final schedule

### **Why download it?**

Because most scheduling problems are not technical, they're structural. This tool helps you stop patching problems and start designing systems that naturally support inclusion, access, and belonging.

👉 Download at:

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## **The Biggest Scheduling Mistake Schools Make**

Most schools:

- Build the schedule around specials, staff availability, or programs
- Place students with disabilities last
- Cluster students with similar needs together
- Move students to where adults already are

This leads to:

- Segregated classrooms
  - Overloaded “high-need” rooms
  - Adult-dependent environments
  - Reduced access to peers and grade-level instruction
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### **What Are “Natural Proportions” (and Why Do They Matter?)**

Natural proportions mean that classrooms reflect the **overall percentage of students with disabilities in the school.**

For example:

- If 12% of your school has disability labels
- Then roughly 12% of each classroom should reflect that diversity

This prevents:

- Clustering
  - Overwhelming any one classroom
  - Creating hidden self-contained environments
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### **What to Watch For (Common Pitfalls)**

- Scheduling adults before students
  - Clustering students with significant needs
  - Overusing paraprofessionals as the primary support
  - Creating “para-heavy” or “high-need” classrooms
  - Assigning 1:1 support without a clear decision process
  - Using adult support to fix instructional gaps instead of improving Tier 1
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### **Additional Resources**

**[Inclusive Structural and Instructional Practices Self-Assessment](#)**: This comprehensive tool designed to help educators and school leaders reflect on their current inclusive practices across systems, structures, and classroom instruction. It guides individuals and teams to evaluate their beliefs, skills, and systemic supports while identifying strengths, priorities, and actionable next steps. The resource emphasizes key structural practices and high-impact instructional strategies — such as co-teaching, differentiation, natural supports, and inclusive behavior approaches — that foster belonging and meaningful participation for all students. By engaging in this reflective process, schools can move from intention to action and build more inclusive, equitable learning environments.

**[Inclusion Podcast Episode 18- My \(Un\)Special Education](#)**: In this episode of The Inclusion Podcast, Brianna Dickens shares powerful and personal insights about how behavior is often misunderstood in schools. Through both humor and lived experience, she challenges the idea that challenging behavior is a problem to fix, reframing it instead as meaningful communication and often a sign of intelligence. The conversation invites educators and families to look beyond surface-level behaviors and respond with curiosity, respect, and a presumption of competence. Listeners will leave with a deeper understanding of behavior and a renewed commitment to supporting all students in more inclusive, human-centered ways.

**[The Way to Inclusion](#)**: This book is a practical, research-based guide that supports school leaders in creating systems where every student truly belongs. The book walks readers through a clear, step-by-step process for inclusive change, including defining a shared vision, examining current practices, and redesigning structures and roles to better serve all learners. Grounded in real examples, tools, and actionable strategies, it helps teams move beyond intention to implementation with confidence. By focusing on leadership, collaboration, and equity, this resource empowers schools to build sustainable, inclusive environments where all students can thrive.

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If you're working hard to move inclusion forward, but students are still being pulled out, segregated, and supported in the same outdated ways, you're not alone. [The Way Wednesdays](#) is a 5-part, author-facilitated book study that helps you name what's really getting in the way, see your system clearly, and understand what inclusive practice actually looks like (not just what we say it is). You'll leave with clear next steps and a realistic path forward, so you can stop circling the same challenges and finally start making meaningful progress. [Join us here](#).

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