



Transcript- Episode 64

A Para is Not an Environment: Clearing Up the LRE Confusion

Oh my goodness.

Hi, everyone. Welcome to the Inclusion Podcast. This one is a hot topic.

And some of you will go, this is not a hot topic for us. Great. Don't listen to it, honestly.

It's only for people who have heard this issue. Some places don't confuse this. And so it's confusing to listen to this.

So what's this? Okay. We hear all the time that families say, my school system said that my kid can't be included because they're supported by a paraprofessional in the inclusive classroom. And that means it's a more restrictive placement than a segregated classroom.

All right, Julie, you're going to have to say it one more time because there was like double negatives in there or something.

I know. I'll say it one more time.

So we hear that parents will say, my district said, okay, that they can't be in an inclusive classroom because they have to be supported by a paraprofessional. And the inclusive classroom is more restrictive than a self-contained classroom because of the paraprofessional.

Okay.

So I'm the kid. My IEP team has decided that I need human support.

Yes.

Part of my supplementary supports and services on my IEP.

Yeah.

But if I get that in the general classroom, we're thereby making the general classroom more restrictive than if I were in a restrictive environment.

So let's imagine that you're listening to this and you're like, never heard of this. I swear to you, just don't listen to them. It's fine.

Go find another podcast that will work for you better. If you've been told this, we need to help you clear it up. I want to clear this up for every administrator that has said it in the world.

These are different things. These things, meaning paraprofessionals, are a [supplemental aid support and service](#). So they fall under this whole list of supplemental aid supports and services.

How restrictive an environment is, is how much access the kid has to general education content, curriculum, and peers, meaning the more inclusive the environment, the least restrictive the environment is.

Okay. So let's maybe the word inclusive is access to general, meaning it becomes less restrictive.

It becomes more inclusive. The greater access I as a student have to the general education content, curriculum, and peers. That's the only part of the formula that is about restrictiveness is what Kristie just said.

How many minutes am I next to kids without disabilities in the general education content with access to the curriculum?

Okay. And so when people think about, but wait, I have to give them special education services. Let's also remind people that the definition of special education services is to ensure access, participation, and progress in the general education curriculum, content, and peers.

You might want the transcript for this episode in the show notes because these are a lot of phrases, but they're all saying the same thing, that restriction, or when Julie and I are promoting inclusive education, we're always saying we're upping, ensuring the right of every student to access general education content, curriculum, and peers, curricular and extracurricular, participate in that and make progress towards it. I'll say side note, you bifurcated it. You said there's these two issues.

One, you're entitled to [supplementary aid supports and services](#), which can include human supports and services like paraprofessional, and then restriction. Let's go down really quick the rabbit hole of humans aren't support, that [support is a verb](#). We'll link to all those other episodes in the show notes, but we should probably clarify that out of the gate, just like we clarified restriction, that support is a verb, and then keep going.

So a lot of times people will say this kid can be included, but they need support, and they think support equals a human being. Nope. Support equals about one million things we can do to give kids access.

For example, you might reduce the reading level of a bit of a text that a student is expected to read by themselves. You might highlight the directions so a student can see what the relevant stimuli is here. You might provide a to-do list so the kid knows exactly what's expected of them during this time.

You might use peer support, like all those things are support, and so when we say support, we don't mean a human, we mean all the possible things. Some kids will require adult support, but what we want you to hear and understand is paraprofessional support has no relationship to the decision about restrictiveness of environment.

Okay.

When we're looking at [least restrictive environment](#), the only thing we're looking at is where's the place where they can get the most access to general education content curriculum and peers. Later, we discuss what supports are necessary to give that student the most access to general education content curriculum peers, but that's not a factor in the LRE decision, and anytime kids are pulled out of general education, it is more restrictive. When the law says less restrictive is what we're looking for or more inclusive is what we're looking for.

Okay. And, Julie, why, before we move on to like what should teams be asking and what kind of shifts they should do and all of that good stuff, when you said, you know, if this hasn't been an issue for you, move on to another episode, why do people get so confused? I mean, I know you've alluded to it, but can you kind of just say it again? Like, why do some people end up in this spot where they're actually putting the kid in an actually a more restrictive environment thinking that they're not? Like, why are we doing the opposite?

Well, I think this answers the question, but let me know if it doesn't. It's being used as an excuse by teams to put kids in more restrictive environments, and it's being called the opposite.

And so parents who may or may not know any better are like, oh, got it. My kid is going to be in a resource room. My kid is going to be in a self-contained classroom.

My kid is going to be in a Special Ed classroom because that's the least restrictive environment for them. Because if they're in a General Ed classroom with a para, that's very restrictive. No, no, no, no.

That para conversation needs to be separate from. It doesn't have anything to do with the environment. The goal is to put kids in the most inclusive environments possible, and this is being used to exclude kids with the wrong reasoning behind it.

And do you think, I think what you're alluding to is this, like, getting settings mixed up with what is special education versus how we deliver less intrusive supports?

Yeah. So just like in general, we start in general education. It's the default. It's the foundation. And then we add supports to make it work. Settings and supports are very different.

We never remove a student because they need support. We just bring the support to them. And so people have confused the fact that sometimes

paraprofessionals can be considered, if they're not trained well, the support itself can feel restrictive to the student.

And what we have to do instead is to train the paraprofessional, teach the paraprofessional to utilize the least restrictive techniques when they're providing supports.

Yeah. So even a kid who needs a lot of different types of supports, which could include humans, you know, one, supports and services are almost universally portable.

Yes. Which means they could be brought to the student. So even if supports and services are currently delivered at a particular building in my district, and it's hard for the district to bring those to where I am as a student, that's a different issue.

That's just a logistical challenge the district has, but it doesn't make the Gen Ed classroom more restricted because you're bringing in lots of supports and services, even if they're human.

That's right. Delivering those.

That's right. We and I don't have access, participation, and the ability to make progress with general education content, curriculum, and peers that make something restrictive or not. So what do we, what do we do? What do we ask at an IEP team meeting? What does a parent say as they advocate for inclusive education? Where do we [shift our mindset](#)? What's, what's going on here?

Yeah. So a really simple thing to say is separate those things in your mind, the difference between supports and placement. The placement decision is how do we give this student the most access to general education content curriculum and peers? And Kristie and I would argue it's most of the time the general education classroom.

Then the second aspect is what kinds of supports will allow this kid to be as independent as possible? And sometimes that takes maybe a paraprofessional and that paraprofessional should be trained in independence or interdependence as opposed to Velcroing themselves to a student and make, and following them around all day.

We can help paras become less intrusive or more intrusive, but they're not about restriction. They're about intrusive supports or not. And we can teach that to help kids be more independent.

So essentially we've got to really, and I'm, I'm going to just call out the state of New York. I've got to say it. New York is famous for telling families, nope, this is a more or less restrictive environment because of a paraprofessional.

And to say, you've got it wrong. We've got to change the legal thinking about this and we cannot convince families to put kids into more restrictive environments just because the kid needs some adult supports.

Yeah. And Julie, as we were prepping for this episode, you had these three shifts in language. I think they're worth reading or stating succinctly. Again, people can get the transcript for this episode.

There's actually a handout that we'll talk about here in a minute of what you can also get for this episode at [inclusiveschooling.com/download64](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download64). But before we do that, I think that these three sentences helped me. And so let's just read them.

Okay. The first language change is we don't place students with paras. We support students with paras.

Oh, that one is like, that's proven for me.

Mm-hmm. A really important one.

So if people didn't hear it, let's say it one more time and then make sure you get the transcript because I think saying this at an IEP meeting or an ARD or in the hallway or any time, this is going to be important. We don't place students with paras or paras with students, right?

Yep. That's not a placement decision.

We don't have enough paras to place with that student. We support students with paras because paras are going to offer the verbs. They're going to do the [offering of choices](#), the increasing of [access points](#), dah, dah, dah, dah.

Okay. That's right. Okay.

The second big shift in language is we don't say they can't be included because they need help. We say they can be included with help.

Oh, I like that one too.

I do too. And then the last one is inclusion isn't about who is in the room in terms of adults. It's about the support we bring into the room.

And so again, it's just really separating the placement discussion with the supplemental aid supports discussion. And the goal for [least restrictive environment](#) is that all kids have the maximum access to students without disabilities, content, and curriculum of general education. And so that's the goal.

So remember, a para is a [supplemental aid and service](#), not an environment. And when we get this right, we give students what they legally deserve, which is access, belonging, and the right to learn, learn alongside their peers with the support they need to shine. So Kristie, let's tell them a little bit about what the download will give them.

It's just like a preview so that those who need it know that they didn't have to madly commit all of this to their memory or even just rely on the transcript, but that the, the handout for Episode 64 at [inclusiveschooling.com/download64](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download64) has some really important pieces and parts for them, as well as hyperlinks to other resources and supports.

Yeah. So I just have to say that on Facebook recently, I just addressed this and I was explaining what [least restrictive environment](#) meant and I was using IDEA's definition, right? But somebody wrote, I don't agree.

And I was just like, oh, well then go back and read IDEA's definition of least restrictive environment. And I'll put a link in the show notes to IDEA, which is the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004](#), which hopefully continues to be there at the time you all are listening to this. That's right.

So the first, the handout is called a [paraprofessional is not an environment](#). And we have information about what is least restrictive environment. We have information about what are supplemental aid supports and services.

We have misunderstandings and inclusive truths. So we've got this nice column side by side. And then the para's role as a supplemental aid and service.

We even have IDEA's definition of a supplemental aid and service. And then we have a whole section on what should teams be asking in order to make these decisions and in order to give kids access to the actual least restrictive environment. So I think that the last part of the handout is probably my favorite, Julie, and we can use that as we begin to wrap up the episode.

But the handout has this moment where you can just say, what do I do in the moment? So when someone says this student can't be in general education because they have a para, then you go, okay, I'm going to say to the team or the person, hey, let's pause for a second. Are we confusing support with a setting?

Because support is how we make inclusion possible, not how we restrict it. And that might, they might think you're speaking a different language, just like maybe you felt at the start of this episode and say, well, let's listen to this episode together, or let's take this handout and explore what is the difference between a support and a setting? What's the difference between paras offering [support as a verb](#) versus we're limiting access, participation, and progress, which is actually the restriction?

Yeah.

Yeah. So we hope this hasn't confused you more. We're trying to make this as simple as possible, but I'll just say if someone tells you that a paraprofessional is an environment or it's a factor in deciding least restrictive environment, they are not legally correct, and there is much more to the conversation that needs to happen before you move a kid to a self-contained or resource room because they need a paraprofessional.

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.

SHOW NOTES

What This Episode Is About

Families and educators are still being told that a student *cannot* be included in general education **because they need a paraprofessional** — and that this somehow makes inclusion *more restrictive* than a self-contained setting.

That statement is **legally incorrect** and deeply harmful to inclusive practice.

In this episode, Julie and Kristie unpack where this misunderstanding comes from, why it keeps showing up in IEP meetings, and how teams can correct it calmly and confidently.

Key Takeaways

- A paraprofessional is a **supplementary aid or service**, not a placement or environment.
 - Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is determined by **access to general education content, curriculum, and peers** — not by whether a student has adult support.
 - Needing help does *not* make an environment more restrictive. Removing a student from peers does.
 - Supports and placement are two separate decisions — and confusing them leads to unnecessary segregation.
 - Inclusion starts in general education. We **add supports** to make it successful; we don't remove students because they need them.
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Answering the Question We Hear Most Often

Does having a paraprofessional make a general education classroom more restrictive?

No.

The presence of a paraprofessional does **not** increase restrictiveness.

Restrictiveness is about **where** a student learns and **who they learn with**, not **who supports them**.

A general education classroom with appropriate supports is, by definition, **less restrictive** than a separate or self-contained setting.

Common Misunderstandings This Episode Clears Up

- “We place students with paras.”
→ No. We **support students with paras**.
- “Students can’t be included because they need too much help.”
→ Students **can be included with help**. That’s the purpose of special education.
- “The para makes the setting restrictive.”
→ What makes a setting restrictive is **removal from general education**, not support within it.

Episode Download / Handout

A Paraprofessional Is Not an Environment

This clear, team-friendly handout helps educators and families separate **placement decisions** from **support decisions** — and gives you language you can actually use in meetings.

Inside the download:

- A plain-language explanation of Least Restrictive Environment
- The difference between *settings* and *supports*
- Common myths vs. inclusive truths
- The role of paraprofessionals as a **support (a verb), not a placement**
- Reflection questions and ready-to-use language for IEP conversations

Why download it?

Because this misunderstanding keeps showing up — and when it does, students lose access. This tool helps teams pause, reset the conversation, and make decisions that align with both the law *and* inclusive values.

👉 Download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download64](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download64)

Practical Tips for IEP Teams and Leaders

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- **Separate the questions.** First ask where the student has the most access to peers and curriculum. *Then* decide what supports are needed.
 - **Bring supports to the student.** Don't move students because support is required — make support portable.
 - **Train paraprofessionals for independence.** Adult support should increase access and autonomy, not create dependence or separation.
 - **Listen for red flags.** If you hear “they can't be included because they need a para,” stop and reset the conversation.
 - **Use shared language.** Simple phrases like “*Are we confusing support with setting?*” can shift an entire meeting.
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Additional Resources

[3 Reasons Why We Won't Be Hiring More Paraprofessionals:](#) This resource challenges the common assumption that hiring more paraprofessionals is the best response to increasing student needs, drawing on over 20 years of research to highlight unintended negative consequences for students, educators, and systems. It explains how overreliance on paraprofessionals can reduce teacher engagement, limit student belonging and agency, and act as a costly band-aid for deeper instructional and systemic issues. The piece offers a practical, relationship-centered alternative — using an “I agree” strategy — to support educators through training, collaboration, and more sustainable inclusive practices.

[Inclusion Podcast Episode 31- Understanding LRE and its Role in Supporting All Learners:](#) This episode unpacks the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and its essential role in fostering truly inclusive classrooms, emphasizing that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers whenever possible. Through real stories and practical strategies, the hosts explore how schools can thoughtfully use supports and services before considering more restrictive placements, reframing challenging behaviors as opportunities for growth rather than exclusion. Listeners will come away with actionable insights for implementing LRE principles in their own educational settings and a free checklist of supplementary aids to support all learners.

[Inclusion Podcast Episode 63- We're Doing Breaks Wrong — And It's Backfiring:](#) This episode challenges the default practice of sending students out of class for breaks, explaining how well-intentioned adult-led removals can unintentionally reduce access to instruction, belonging, and opportunities to build regulation skills. Instead, Julie and Kristie advocate for in-class “stay-put” support strategies that help students regulate right where learning happens, preserving peer connection and instructional time. Practical takeaways include offering choice, portable regulation tools, and teaching regulation routines explicitly to avoid patterns where students learn that relief only comes from leaving the classroom.

120 Ways for Paraprofessionals Can Support Students: This practical guide offers 120 concrete, inclusive ways paraprofessionals can support students in virtual and blended learning environments without creating dependence or unintentionally pulling students away from peers and instruction. Organized across the learning cycle (before, during, and after lessons), it emphasizes teaching skills, fostering peer connection, supporting regulation, and providing “invisible” supports that preserve dignity, agency, and belonging. The resource reframes the paraprofessional role as one that strengthens classrooms and teams as a whole, positioning paras as essential partners in building sustainable, inclusive systems rather than one-to-one fixes.

Individuals with Disabilities Act Web Site: This official U.S. Department of Education page provides direct access to the full text of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) statute and the federal regulations that implement it, allowing users to explore the law’s parts and requirements in detail. It organizes IDEA into four major sections — general provisions, support for school-aged children, early intervention for infants and toddlers, and national activities — and links to indexed and printable versions of the statute and regulations. By serving as a central statutory and regulatory reference, the site helps educators, administrators, and families understand the legal foundation for special education rights, obligations, and procedural safeguards under IDEA.

Support is a Verb: What Inclusive Teams Do: This resource reframes inclusion by asserting that support is not a service or placement, but a set of intentional actions educators take every day to ensure all students belong and succeed. Organized across 13 evidence-informed categories, it offers concrete, practical strategies inclusive teams can immediately use to proactively build support into instruction, environments, relationships, and systems. By treating support as something we *do* — not something students *get* — the guide helps schools move inclusion from an abstract goal to a consistent, lived practice.

Is My Support Actually Supportive?: This reflective tool helps educators examine whether the support they provide truly promotes dignity, independence, and belonging or unintentionally creates dependence, stigma, or barriers. Grounded in the “Golden Rule” of support, it offers 30 practical questions that prompt teams to consider student voice, privacy, peer relationships, and plans for fading adult assistance. By encouraging educators to pause, redesign tasks, and right-size support, the resource centers inclusive practices that feel respectful, empowering, and “just right” for students.

Inclusion Podcast Episode 49- Support is a Verb — Not a Human: This episode reframes support as an active process — something educators do through specific, thoughtful actions — rather than a static placement or category. It clarifies common misconceptions about support, highlighting how well-intentioned practices can unintentionally create dependence, stigma, or barriers when they’re not rooted in dignity, agency, and inclusion. By outlining key principles and practical examples, the piece helps educators shift toward support that genuinely enhances access, belonging, and student competence.

Checklist of Sample Supplemental Supports, Aids, and Services: This comprehensive checklist helps teams thoughtfully identify supplemental supports, aids, and services that are inclusive, least intrusive, and responsive to

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individual student needs. Organized across environments, instruction, materials, interactions, assessment, assistive technology, and staffing, it encourages teams to start with natural classroom supports before considering more intensive or adult-dependent interventions. Designed to guide collaborative problem-solving, the tool supports decisions that prioritize dignity, access, and meaningful participation for every learner.

10 Ways School Leaders Can Shift Mindsets towards Inclusion: This practical guide offers school leaders clear, actionable ways to advance inclusive mindsets by strengthening communication, clarifying expectations, and leading with purpose and consistency. It emphasizes compassionate leadership and intentional practices that help teams move beyond surface compliance toward a deeper, shared commitment to meaningful inclusion. By focusing on mindset shifts rather than just procedures, the resource supports leaders in creating school cultures where every student is valued and well-served.

Inclusion Podcast Episode 55- Paraprofessionals: How to Hide in Plain Sight: This episode guides educators in using paraprofessionals in ways that support student access, agency, and connection without overshadowing instruction or creating dependence. It shares practical strategies for making adult support *invisible* — positioning paras to collaborate with teachers, circulate the room, and prompt student success subtly and respectfully. By focusing on intentional placement and purposeful actions, the piece helps teams strengthen inclusive practices that keep students centrally engaged with peers and learning.

Least Restrictive Environment Family Resource Guide: This *Family Toolkit Resource Guide* from Early CHOICES equips families of young children with disabilities to understand and advocate for inclusion in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) within early childhood education settings. It bundles practical resources — from inclusion brochures and on-demand learning modules to checklists and federal guidance — with QR links and explanations to make navigating the system easier. The guide highlights the benefits of inclusive settings for all children, offers tools to prepare for IEP meetings, and clarifies families' rights under federal law to support meaningful inclusion.

Access Points for Common Activities: This handout offers practical guidance on creating multiple **access points** in everyday classroom activities so that all learners — including those with diverse abilities — can meaningfully engage with content, peers, and expectations. It highlights ways educators can differentiate instruction and embed supports into common activities rather than relying on separate adaptations, helping make inclusion real and actionable. The resource aligns with the broader Inclusive Schooling philosophy of equity and universal design for learning, showing how flexible entry points into learning tasks support participation and success for every student. By focusing on access rather than segregation, this tool helps shift instructional planning toward inclusion-driven practice.

101 Ways to Incorporate Choice in Learning: This free download offers educators **101 concrete strategies** for embedding meaningful choice and voice into everyday learning experiences, empowering students to take ownership of their education and engage more deeply with content and peers. By providing a wide

array of options for how students access, process, and express learning, the resource supports differentiated instruction and honors diverse strengths, interests, and needs in inclusive classrooms. It underscores how choice enhances motivation, independence, creativity, and a sense of belonging for all learners. Overall, this guide helps teachers move beyond one-size-fits-all instruction toward more personalized, equitable practices that benefit the full range of students.



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