



Transcript- Special Episode

You Say You're Inclusive... But Your System Says Otherwise

Hello everyone, and welcome to a very special episode of the Inclusion Podcast.

So, here's what happens when Kristie and I meet with school leaders. They often say to us, we believe in inclusion. But then, we look closely at their schedules, we look at their service delivery maps, we look at their practices, and the system itself tells a different story.

The system basically says, we don't believe in inclusion. So today's episode, what we're doing is we're sharing seven simple indicators that reveal whether a system is truly inclusive, or just trying to be, or just hoping to be, or just wishing it was inclusive. And along the way, we're going to share exactly what leaders can do to support a truly inclusive system.

Yeah, so we love this episode because we get to talk about kind of the bigger picture. And Julie, I thought we could, before we dive into the seven indicators, we should probably tell people a little bit about where this came from. And so, it comes from our book.

Of course, we're going to link to anything Julie and I reference in the show notes for this special episode. But just to back up for a minute, along with several of our co-authors, Julie and I wrote a book, [The Way to Inclusion](#). And it has seven chapters, and it has seven milestones, and then we realized it has at least seven barriers, right, Julie? Seven ways that, like, we love to be strength-based and positive, but it was like, oh, we can actually see where you're not inclusive by these seven indicators.

That's right. That's right. And so, these indicators, when we get into them, are kind of written in this form called, You Know You're Not Inclusive If.

So, I think it's going to be really fun for folks to even get out a piece of paper and just think about each and every one of them as we go. So, as Kristie said, this comes from our book, [The Way to Inclusion, How Leaders Create Schools Where Every Student Belongs](#). And if you don't have that book, I think it is a really, really useful piece of writing that is simple to the point, and it's just made for school leaders who want to create a more inclusive school system.

And if you do have the book, go grab it now, because each of the seven indicators we talk about in this episode will align with each chapter, so it'll help you out. So, let's do a couple, Julie, and then we'll talk about what the download is for this episode and things like that.

Okay. So, seven ways to know your school or district isn't inclusive. So, You Know You're Not Inclusive If, if you were to ask five leaders in your district to define inclusion, and they would all do it in absolutely different ways. I was teaching Julie yesterday because we have this slide.

I don't know, Julie, I don't even know what year you created it, but at the time of this recording, you and I have been together for six years. So, it's at least six years old. And she has this slide that's showing service delivery.

And in the before phase, there's this image on the slide that says inclusive classroom or teachers that are doing inclusion. There's some little thing. And we always say, hey, people, what's wrong with this picture? If you see kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade, unfortunately, you still see these pull-out self-contained rooms.

And then you see the inclusion classroom. To me, Julie, when people don't know what you mean when you say what's wrong with this, or when we keep seeing districts that say we're inclusive, we have this inclusive classroom, or we have this grade level that's co-teaching, so we're inclusive, to me, that's the evidence of this indicator. Can you kind of bring that for people, like what I mean by that?

Yeah. So, if you have to delineate a classroom as inclusive, it means the rest of your classrooms aren't. And so, you don't have full-scale inclusion. It's like being a little bit pregnant.

It's like you're not a little bit pregnant. You're either pregnant or you're not. You're either inclusive or you're not.

And so, in this particular – Kristie's laughing.

Sorry. I've never heard you say that one before.

No, but it's – It's really true, right?

It's true. Not being a little bit inclusive by co-teaching in third grade.

That's right.

And so, this concept, this first one, is like if you ask a bunch of school leaders what inclusion means, and they have five very different ideas, we know that we have not come together and decided our definition of inclusion and what we mean by it, which means we're going to struggle to achieve it if we don't even know where we're headed.

Yeah, and before we move on to the second indicator, because I know we don't want this episode to be a two-hour webinar like we usually do, but the idea is that if you aren't clear on your definition, then your decisions will not be in alignment. You'll say, oh, we can be inclusive by having just one co-taught classroom, and that makes us inclusive, right? Or like we can look at our LRE data, and we can say, you know, we're doing inclusion better because we are at 48% or something like that.

That's like I'm 48% pregnant, right? I'm going to use your analogy, which I'm not going to do well about. But, you know, it's like I just think having inclusion be a goal is kind of strange and/or having a percent of how inclusive you are is kind of strange. But anyway.

Yeah, no, it really is. It's a mindset. It's a heart set. It's a skill set. Your systems would be aligned in every single aspect of it. So it's very important to have the conversation and get aligned with what the definition of inclusion is.

Now, in the show notes, we will also put the definition of inclusive education that we offer as a starting place for you. You could take it, whole scale, adopt it, and move ahead, or you can make tweaks to it for your specific school system.

Okay. The second, you know, you're not inclusive is if students with disability labels have less access to general education, classrooms, curriculum, or extracurricular life. So, Julie, let's give two examples. I'll give a pre-K or early childhood example, and then you can maybe give one even about cohorts or something.

Okay. So this is indicator number two of, you know, you're not inclusive if. So oftentimes in early childhood, three-year-olds are in the most restrictive placements, partially because a school district has to serve three, fours, and of course five-year-olds who have qualified for special education under IDEA.

Depending on your state, you may serve four-year-olds, but it's usually still under an entitlement program of something under your universal pre-K, which I'm using air quotes, and you can't see me because universal pre-K would mean everyone, not just four-year-olds who meet some sort of qualification. So anyway, side note, but that leaves out three-year-olds. We don't routinely serve in most districts in the United States, three-year-olds who don't qualify.

So that means it becomes very challenging, Julie, to find a least restrictive environment. It's actually not hard to find because you could use homes, childcares, Head Starts, they're easy to find, but harder for us to think about how do we deliver services and specially designed instruction because of a whole other host. So that's one example of if you know that because a child has autism or developmental delay and is three, they will have less access to their community childcare or Head Start or even a faith-based program, then you know you're not inclusive.

That's my example. That's a good example. I'll take what I'd like you to do is just think across all general education environments.

And so if you're teaching in a middle school and there is Spanish class, there's French class, there's AP Bio, there's all these different courses, what you want to do is take a look to say, all right, if we have 12% of our population are kids with disabilities, then we'd expect in every one of those classrooms, we would have about 12% of our kids having disabilities. And I can talk a lot about why that doesn't happen, but essentially that's the test to say, hey, are we really, really, really inclusive? And if that's the case, you'd expect. And so if there's a school play, you'd expect 12% of the students to be in that school play of kids with disabilities.

If there's a football team, if there's a dance, if there's right, you just, you play with this concept and say, hey, I cannot see kids with disabilities represented at all in X. And that's the place where you do some work to think about how do we make that more inclusive.

And Julie, maybe you could just take that one step further. Cause people will say, oh sure. Students with disabilities can, you know, have a coffee club or they can, you know, be in Special Olympics. You know what I mean?

Like, yeah. So yeah, yeah, yeah. So we're not talking about segregated things like a coffee cart where kids with disabilities travel around the adaptive PE or adaptive PE. We're definitely not talking about that. What we're meaning is in natural proportions to students without disabilities.

So if we're saying 12%, we're meaning the rest of the group are kids without disabilities. And I think that's a really key factor in understanding least restrictive environment, because the goal is for students with and without disabilities to be together. So Kristie, when you say something like a coffee cart, usually those are run by kids with disabilities, maybe with a teaching assistant to support that. And that is highly segregated. Okay. So it's the opposite of inclusion.

Yeah. Okay. And Julie, that makes me think, I'll put some show notes about LRE episodes so that we've opened a can of worm with indicator number two, people have a place to go.

All right, let's do number three. You know that you aren't inclusive if your vision statement says all students, but no one really can explain what that means in practice. In fact, we often see vision statements where we capitalize the word all right.

A L L all, but when we work with that school system, they go, oh, sorry, sorry, sorry. We didn't mean the kids with autism that don't use verbal communication. And we're like, oh, cause all to me meant all.

Nope. We don't actually mean, and what they are. They'll tell you who is not given access to general education, content, curriculum, and peers. And so we've got to figure out what all that means and how to make all that happen.

Yeah. So here's another quick way to ask the question, Julie. If, if you say, Hey district ABC, how many kids are in out of district placements out of, you know, like, or served by a regional entity. Correct. Then you would be like, oh, we mean all of our students, except for the 18 that we ship to or bus, sorry, bus to.

So I think, you know, there are historical realities about why we've done that in the past, but our argument is, and as you'll read in chapter three of the way to inclusion is that this is another indicator that all doesn't really actually mean all, and you don't have a common or shared or public vision that is in alignment with your practices.

You know, Kristie, I'm really glad. I don't know. You said a word that made me think about this. And as I'm listening and thinking to myself, if I'm almost 98% of

school systems listening right now, I'm going to go, oh my gosh, we're not very inclusive.

Okay. That's step one is to realize that maybe when I thought I was inclusive or we were really inclusive, we're not as inclusive as we thought we should be. Now, this isn't the goal to feel shame or to feel like, oh, we're, you know what, this isn't going to be our reality. It's to go, where do we start? Okay.

Okay. Okay. Okay. When I think about our theater program, I can find no students with significant disabilities in our theater program. That is a place to start. And so when we reveal these things to you, listener, the goal is to say, all right, we can find them the places to make action happen, to create more inclusive spaces and places.

So I love that Julie, because this is where we can pause for a minute and talk about the download and additional ways to get support before we move on to the rest of the seven indicators. So I love how you said, this is not a time to feel shame or say we're the exception or yeah, but, or we have to do it. Or our IEP says cause like IEPs don't talk, but we hear that all the time.

So Julie and I have an event coming up. It's a virtual event for leaders and it's really built upon the way to inclusion, the book, and it's a book club. And so we have these five virtual sessions that Julie and I are leading.

So we're coauthors of the book and we're thinking about, oh yeah, we have all these real life indicators, Julie, but what are some like actual solutions? We're hinting at a few today and we'll put some in the show notes, but what are the actual levers that will get us not to be only 48% pregnant? If you will, how do we become truly inclusive? What are additional examples or what are other districts doing to overcome these systems level? Can we talk to other administrators? Can we hear from people who have had success? So if that sounds exciting, which we hope it does and useful, we invite you all to register. And upon registering for our summer event, which we can talk about and the details it's called the way to inclusion Wednesdays, because they're all on Wednesdays in June and July. You will get two things immediately.

Our facilitators guide for the book and a self-study guide for the book. So those are two ways that you can start putting the book into action. So Julie, I'll tell them where to register and get the downloads, but you may want to add something about the book club.

So to register or learn more about the dates and the series and get the two guides go to [inclusiveschooling.com/book-club](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/book-club).

Okay, good. And I'm imagining that will be also in the show notes.

So you can just go to the show notes and click right there. What we want to tell you is this book club is going to be really exciting for many, many reasons. One is people from all over the U S are already joining for it.

So we put up the registration link last week and people are already joining and already excited about joining this book club. It will be live with the two of us,

meaning you're going to be able to interact with us. You'll be able to ask real questions.

The other thing I want to tell you is you'll be creating a community of like-minded leaders who are doing this work together. And I think that is an incredibly powerful thing. And we thought long and hard about when to offer it.

So we thought we, we, we assumed administrators that June and July might be an okay time on Wednesday nights to get you together. And if you can't join us, you can also get the recorded sessions too, but all you have to do is register. So check it out.

See if this is interesting to you, please invite your colleagues. If you attend this book club with your entire team of administrators, I can promise you that is the biggest lever you can push to get your school to be more inclusive or your district be more inclusive. Perfect.

Okay. Let's go on to number four and we'll, we'll speed through four and five. They're very similar.

And then we'll finish you out with six and seven. Okay. Four and five.

Four is you know you're not inclusive if your school has rooms organized by disability labels. So you might even have an autism program. You might even have a behavior room.

You might even have something that's a little bit more coded called a life skills room. And that's for kids with intellectual disabilities. And so essentially we want you to think about not organizing rooms, spaces and places by disability label, but instead thinking about the concept of natural proportions.

Meaning if 12% of your kids have disabilities, you'd want 12% in every single classroom. And then number five, you know, you're not inclusive. If when you think about where are your staff and oftentimes Julie, we hear we would be more inclusive if we had more and it's usually more special education, teachers, more paraprofessionals, more staff, totally could use in education, more qualified staff certainly so that we can build relationships with students and all of that good stuff.

But we know we're not inclusive if the current special education teachers that we do have work mostly in a pullout setting. So in a resource room or like you said, a life skills room or in the autism program, and there's rarely any crossover or time to plan and work together because we're spending half the day or 80% of the day in separate places doing separate things.

Yeah. And number six, you know, you're not inclusive if the main strategy for supporting students with higher needs or more significant support needs is to add another paraprofessional. We see this often and people think, aha, I have the solution to how to best support the student with a significant disability. And we're going to hire more and more and more one-on-one paraprofessionals.

Now, certainly we know that one-on-one paraprofessionals are sometimes needed or often needed in different ways, but just the hiring of another paraprofessional is not the solution to really good inclusion. And Julie, I'll link in the show notes to our handout for leaders about why we're not going to be hiring more. And it, it helps to understand that it's not about that, that they, sorry, it's, we understand the value that paras and teaching assistants bring.

We also understand that the solution isn't more adults. So this one, this, you know, you're not inclusive if we're on number six, right?

Yeah. Yeah. Is this idea of like offering support is by a human is actually just like one of several what ifs? So we're trying to do just seven today, but in reality, this is chapter six and milestone number six.

And this is where a lot of our time will be spent diving into solutions because there are five powerful classroom practices and how that gets played out in terms of co-teaching differentiation, anticipating the range, how we think about support as a verb, how we think about the nervous system. All of that Julie is going to come into play when we think about how we utilize the humans, peers, and the environment.

Yeah, that's right.

That's right. Okay. I'm going to jump to number seven, which is, you know that you're not inclusive. If inclusion starts out strong, but fades when challenges show up. So you might have done all sorts of work. You're really clear on it. You're going to do it. It's going to be great. And then challenge after challenge after challenge inevitably will show up.

But if you start immediately separating and segregating kids because you don't know what else to do really is a common pitfall. And what we want people to do is hold strong to their value of inclusion, hold strong to their idea of inclusion. And then instead of tweaking the system and making it less inclusive, we want you to tweak the strategies and make them more inclusive.

And this is where we go into a deep dive to Julie, because we talk a lot about in the book and in the book club about how people resist change, even if the idea was their own. And when discomfort happens, where do practices go? And then you and I both know there's a lot of turnover with leadership, either because people are moving to different roles within the district, people are retiring, people are going to a different district. And then we don't want all of this progress we've made to be tied to a person.

So how do we make this really something that is, as you talk about, the plate upon which all other initiatives, you know, we just heard from that group yesterday that was like on the path to really investing in a lot of professional development around inclusion and then got derailed because of a new reading curriculum.

That's right. Yep.

Yeah. And it's so disheartening to think about each of these things in such siloed ways, instead to say, Hey, here's where we're investing. We're investing in all capital

ALL students, and we're going to figure out how to make all reading curriculums inclusive.

And so you balance any other initiatives onto the plate of inclusion. So Kristie, I just want to say to the listeners today, if this conversation is making you think, yep, yep, yep. That sounds like us. That sounds like me. That sounds like my colleagues. You're not alone.

Okay. And that is exactly why we created the Way to Inclusion book club. It's a five part author facilitated by the two of us series, which is live, where we walk school leaders step-by-step through these milestones and go deep, deep into solutions. So you can learn more and register yourself or better yet, please register your entire administrative team at [inclusiveschooling.com/book-club](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/book-club).

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

Many school leaders say, “We believe in inclusion.”

But when you look closely at schedules, service delivery, staffing, and daily practices, the system often tells a different story.

In this episode, Julie and Kristie share **7 clear indicators that reveal whether a school or district is truly inclusive, or just trying to be.**

If you are:

- A school or district leader working toward inclusion
- Reviewing your LRE data or service delivery model
- Seeing inconsistencies across classrooms or schools
- Feeling like your system “believes in inclusion” but isn’t fully there yet

This episode helps you identify where your system is aligned, and where it's not.

Three Moves That Actually Shift Systems

1. Get painfully clear on what inclusion means (in practice)

If your team defines inclusion differently, decisions will always be inconsistent.

This week, ask:

- Where do students learn?
- Who do they learn with?
- How is support delivered?

Write it down. Use it. Hold decisions against it.

2. Audit access — not just placement

“Inclusion” isn’t where students are assigned. It’s where they actually show up.

Pick one area this month (course, activity, or program) and ask:

- Who is missing?
- Why are they missing?
- What would it take to include them?

Fix one area. Make it visible.

3. Interrupt patterns rooted in ableism and racism

Many systems still reflect assumptions about who can handle rigor, who belongs in certain spaces, and who needs to be “somewhere else.”

In your next leadership meeting, name this directly and take action:

- Which students are we still not including, and why?
- Are our decisions influenced by assumptions about disability, behavior, race, or perceived capability?
- What would it look like to presume competence and belonging for every student?

Then act on it:

- Expand access to advanced coursework
- Eliminate label-based placements
- Redesign supports so they follow students — not separate them

Key Takeaways

- Inclusion is not a program, classroom, or percentage, it’s a **system-wide commitment**.
- If leaders cannot define inclusion consistently, implementation will be inconsistent.
- Access to general education, peers, and curriculum is a **core indicator of inclusion**.
- Systems often unintentionally reveal their priorities through schedules, staffing, and placement decisions.
- Inclusion must be stable, even when challenges arise, not something that disappears under pressure.

Additional Resources

Definition of Inclusion: This resource defines inclusive related services as supports that are seamlessly embedded within general education environments, rather than delivered in isolation or through pull-out models. It emphasizes collaboration among educators, specialists, and families to ensure services are responsive to individual student needs while promoting access, participation, and belonging. By reframing related services as integrated, flexible, and student-centered, the document supports a shift toward more inclusive systems where all students learn and receive support alongside their peers.

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.

Why are we Still Segregating Students?: The short video highlights ongoing inequities in educational placement for students with disabilities, questioning why many are still separated from their peers despite inclusive education mandates. It emphasizes the moral and legal responsibility of schools to provide equitable learning opportunities in general education settings whenever appropriate. This message directly relates to the principle of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which requires that students with disabilities be educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, promoting inclusion over segregation.

Inclusion Podcast Episode 63- We're Doing Breaks Wrong — And It's Backfiring: This piece challenges the common practice of sending students out of the classroom for “breaks,” highlighting how these well-intentioned strategies can unintentionally reduce access to learning and reinforce patterns of escape. It encourages educators to rethink breaks as opportunities for regulation that happen within the learning environment, rather than away from it. The resource offers practical, inclusive alternatives (such as movement, sensory tools, and whole-class supports) that help students stay connected while meeting their needs. By shifting from removal to in-the-moment support, educators can build students' long-term capacity for regulation and belonging.

Inclusion Podcast Episode 64- A Para is Not an Environment: Clearing up the LRE Confusion: This resource reexamines a widely held misunderstanding in special education — that the presence of a paraprofessional defines a student's placement — by clarifying that a person is not an “environment.” It emphasizes that Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) decisions should be based on where students have the greatest access to peers and grade-level curriculum, not on the level of support they need. The piece encourages teams to separate placement

from support decisions and to bring services to students, rather than moving students to match available supports. By reframing paraprofessionals as flexible, in-class supports rather than reasons for removal, it helps educators make more inclusive, legally aligned, and student-centered decisions.

[3 Reasons Why We Won't Be Hiring More Paraprofessionals](#): This resource examines why hiring additional paraprofessionals, while often well-intentioned, may not lead to better outcomes for students or schools. Drawing on decades of research, it highlights unintended consequences such as reduced teacher engagement, increased student dependence, and diminished opportunities for peer connection and belonging. Rather than relying on more adult proximity as a solution, the piece encourages schools to address deeper instructional and systemic challenges through collaboration, training, and more inclusive practices. By shifting the focus from adding staff to strengthening systems, it offers a more sustainable path toward meaningful inclusion.

[Leading Inclusive Systems Change: Practical Moves for Resistance & Momentum](#): This resource offers school leaders practical, actionable moves for navigating resistance and building momentum during inclusive systems change. It emphasizes that resistance is a natural and expected part of the process, and provides strategies to support educators through discomfort while keeping progress moving forward. By focusing on clarity, small wins, and intentional leadership actions, the guide helps teams shift from hesitation to engagement and shared ownership of inclusion. Ultimately, it supports leaders in creating sustainable change by aligning vision, supporting people, and steadily building a culture where inclusion can thrive.

[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.

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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