

To Include or Not? The Day School Dilemma

■ by **BEVERLY BERNSTEIN**

Is inclusion a legal “right” in Jewish day schools? According to IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), students with disabilities have a right to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Local public schools districts have an obligation to test students with special needs enrolled in a public school and develop an IEP (individual educational plan) to be implemented in the public school classroom. Parents who choose to leave the public school arena and enroll in a Jewish day school cannot expect the day school to follow through on the IEP. There is no legal basis for a day school to implement any recommendations written on an IEP. There might be, however, some exceptions. A student placed in a day school by the local school district can have an IEP implemented in that setting by the school district, or IEP services might be provided on the premises of the local public school with the parents usually responsible for bringing the child there at the time provided to access these services.

If there is no legal basis for inclusion in day schools, should these schools address the needs of the moderate to severe learning disabled, of those on the higher end of the autistic spectrum, of children with moderate to severe ADHD, and of children with mild to moderate developmental disabilities? Proponents of inclusion say children with disabilities have a right to be afforded equal educational opportunities and should not be denied based on disability. But will equal educational opportunities teach these children in a manner in which they can learn? Inclusion allows children with special needs to socialize with their peers and reduces social stigma. If we look at the student as a “whole” child, we cannot minimize the importance of socialization.

Critics of inclusion say that full inclusion takes away valuable resources needed by the child. They also say that few regular education teachers are trained for full inclusion. Special education teachers are trained in approaching educational tasks with flexibility. If one method is not working they can quickly change to another method within the curriculum. They must have the various strategies and techniques needed to help their students learn content area material. The pace of a special education classroom is different, and more reinforcement of cumulative material is done.

Should Jewish day schools open their doors to inclusion? The best way to answer this question is to ask what type of inclusion we’re talking about. Are we including

moderate to severely challenged students into the mainstream classrooms, expecting the teacher to meet their needs? Or are we including self-contained classes into a mainstream school where the child with special needs has a chance to socialize with typical peers? Additionally, we have to ask what the goals of inclusion should be in a Jewish day school. Is it just to embrace the child Jewishly and make



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him feel he is a valued member of our people, or to maximize the child’s academic potential so he can be a productive member of society?

The rigors and demands of a two language curriculum and the stress of getting through the yearly curriculum make it very difficult to include the child with special needs into mainstream classes even with in-class support. Most often the pace of the curriculum and the presentation of material is done with the typical child in mind. There is simply no time for the review and reinforcement needed to appropriately educate the child with special needs. To put a moderately to severely challenged student in such a learning environment would be counter productive.

If a Jewish day school believes all Jewish children deserve a Jewish education the school is then responsible to provide an academic environment which is conducive for learning and meeting the needs of its students. Many day schools today have instituted academic self contained classes with social inclusion. In this mod-

el students are taught all academic subjects in a separate classroom with a special needs teacher and included with typical peers in all non-academic areas. Students with special needs have their academic challenges met in self contained classrooms while given opportunities to socialize with their typical peers. Pedagogically, this type of program meets the academic and social needs of the child, providing him or her with all that is needed for a solid Jewish and secular education on his level.

This type of program, however, is costly. It means, at the very minimum, hiring at least one special needs teacher for Judaic studies and one for Secular studies and buying materials and manipulatives to enhance the learning experience. Class size needs to be kept to a minimum in order to individualize as much as possible. Many day schools charge extra tuition for this programming. With day school tuition already out of reach for many people, is it feasible for day schools to implement this form of inclusion? Obviously, this is a question each school has to answer for itself, but there are day schools who feel strongly about this issue and who make special education another budget line to incorporate into fundraising plans.

Accepting children with special needs into a day school environment should be a group decision. Boards of directors and administrators must feel strongly about including all types of learners because this attitude filters down to the faculty, students, and parents. With the academic self contained social inclusion model, day schools can say they are following the dictum of "educate a child according to his way" (Proverbs 22:6). Typical learners are getting what they need and children with special needs are getting what they need. That's called fair!

Then there are those, parents and teachers alike, who are afraid the quality of education will diminish once the Jewish day school starts to admit children with any type of special needs. Perhaps if administrators carefully construct the curriculum for the child with special needs to reflect that the special needs teacher is in charge of educating the child, this stigma may, in time, recede. The mainstream teacher may be asked to incorporate the child with special needs into the typical classroom, perhaps accompanied by the special needs teacher. Once the mainstream teachers are comfortable working alongside their special needs counterparts, parents may come to see that education is not diminished but enhanced! Parents in day schools that follow the academic self contained social inclusion model have seen the benefit of this model on typical children who learn patience, kindness, acceptance and tolerance for those who may be perceived as different.

The challenges for some type of inclusion in a Jewish day school environment seem daunting but they are surmountable. There are many schools who have found a way to overcome the obstacles in providing a quality education for children with special needs. In the words of John F. Kennedy, "All of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an opportunity to develop our talent." ■