



# Inclusive Education

Revolutionary Common Sense from Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

*For more than thirty years, Mike Galvin has been an innovative, caring, and thoughtful educator. For 12 years, he was principal of Columbine, an inclusive elementary school in Woodland Park, Colorado. This is the same school my two children, Emily and Benjamin, attended. Benjamin has cerebral palsy, and he—like other children with disability labels—were included in regular classrooms and extracurricular activities. (Note: This is not Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, site of the school shooting tragedy.)*

*In addition to being wonderfully inclusive, Columbine was also an award-winning school under Mike's leadership. It won an inclusive education award from Exceptional Parent magazine for the 1992-93 school year. In 2000, Columbine was selected as one of ten "National Schools of Character" by the Character Education Partnership (CEP). The CEP booklet describing the ten award winners details that Columbine's "impetus for expanding its character education initiative was not to reduce discipline incidents—it was to care better for students receiving special education . . . Inclusion, in its broadest sense, has become a core part of the school's character education."*

*Mike retired from Columbine after the 2000-2001 school year, and the new principal exclaimed, "This isn't just an inclusive school—this is beyond inclusion!" Mike's "retirement" has kept him busy: he was a Senior Consultant at McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning), one of eleven federally-funded regional education research centers. Today, he's part of Focused Leadership Solutions, LLC, an organization focused on school improvement. During this interview, Mike shares his experience as a public school educator, not as a representative of McREL or Focused Leadership Solutions, LLC.*

## *HOW DO YOU DEFINE AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL?*

An inclusive school is one in which educators create a natural school environment for all children. Services for kids with disabilities are as transparent as possible. The help provided to any child is based on what he or she needs, and it's provided in the natural environment. You take a child where he is and give him what he needs in the most natural and informal ways possible. An inclusive school provides all kids with whatever they need to master the regular ed curriculum, which may include curriculum modifications, supports, assistive technology, or other assistance. And in my opinion, you don't call a student an "inclusion student" or have "inclusion classrooms."

## *WHAT ABOUT "SPECIAL ED/RESOURCE ROOMS"—THOSE CLASSROOMS ONLY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?*

I've heard some people say "special ed is not a place" and that's true. At Columbine, we saw no reason to

segregate students with disabilities in a special classroom! A more natural way of providing services to all children is in the regular classroom. Now, there may be particular places in a school—like a reading lab, for example—where children with and without disabilities receive specialized help. Inclusion doesn't mean that every single thing happens in the classroom. Overall, however, the natural organization of a school is groupings of similar/same-age students, and that's true for kids with and without IEPs (Individualized Education Programs).

## *TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE "AGE-APPROPRIATE" ISSUE.*

It's really critical in a lot of ways. We need to look carefully at the research on retention. There's not much evidence to support its use, and there's a lot to suggest it's actively harmful. Research [Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Meisels and Liaw, 1993] demonstrated that (1) retention has a negative impact on

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“social adjustment, behavior, self-competence, and attitudes toward school” and (2) retention does *not* remediate academic difficulties. Children who are retained are at greater risk for dropping out of school. A study by Grissom and Shepard [1989] showed that children who have been retained just one year are five times less likely to graduate! This increases to almost 100 percent if a child has been retained two or more times. In one study [Yamamoto, 1980], students were asked to describe the greatest stresses they face. Being retained was in the top three; the other two were “going blind” or “losing a parent.” The fear of retention puts extreme pressure on children. Some people recognize how emotionally harmful retention can be to older kids, but they don’t think it’s a big deal to hold kids back in kindergarten. Well, we may not see an immediate impact when retention is done early, but the negative outcomes may show up later.

I believe kids need to be with similar-age peers for social needs. At Columbine, we were very concerned about the relationships kids have with others. First, being able to develop friendships and acquiring other social skills is important for every child. These are difficult to learn if you’re not with other kids your same age. Second, kids often learn as much from peers academically as they do from their teachers! Educators can learn to adapt the curriculum to the learning needs of a child. It may be more *convenient* for a school or a teacher to maintain the same curriculum for all kids and insist that a child must fit into the curriculum. But adapting the curriculum, when necessary, is in the best interest of the child. We didn’t hold kids back at Columbine. There were times we knew a child wasn’t at “grade-level,” but moving him up with his peers was the right thing to do, and that’s what we did. Then we adapted the curriculum and modified instructional strategies to meet his needs.

### *WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL?*

You really need an ethic or a core belief that relationships are at the heart of learning and what a school is all about. That’s a necessary first step. The relationship between the principal and teachers and the relationships among teachers are models for the way students relate to each other.

We created an atmosphere which we called “pervasive caring.” We believed it was very important to care about how kids feel and how they fit in with their peer groups. Under this operating procedure, the first priority is supporting kids’ emotional needs. The way you provide academics and deal with the technicalities of following the law are influenced by a core belief of caring. Inclusion is the result. It’s really about focusing on what it means to be a good human being. As adults, we try to do this within our families; as educators, we can do this in our professional lives at school, too.

Our mission was to help children maximize their own learning within this pervasive atmosphere of caring. Under these circumstances, it’s hard *not* to have an inclusive school!

### *WHY IS INCLUSION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IMPORTANT?*

Because the potential of every person needs to be recognized! And this is what happens in an inclusive school. Each and every student is encouraged and allowed to contribute and be part of something; no one is discounted or negated as a human being. Inclusion helps all students make the most of themselves.

When I was growing up, kids with disabilities were warehoused in one of those “special” rooms. I even remember where it was: in the basement next to the furnace room! The way I see it, schools can be the first place that *limits* a person’s potential. In our society, we have put so many limitations on people in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability, or some other characteristic. Society has set up these barriers, and thankfully, many have fallen by the wayside. With inclusive schools, limitations based on disability can fall by the wayside, too. Inclusive education is one way to eliminate the societal limitations imposed on people’s potential. What’s worse than putting limits on a child’s potential? We just can’t do this anymore!

Inclusive schools give us a new and different—and positive—way of looking at people. Educators are in this profession because they want to help children learn, but we need to carefully consider how our traditional special ed system may *limit* the potential of kids with disabilities.

School is where we open children’s minds, bodies, and spirits to their potential in life. At Columbine,

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the efforts to ensure all kids learned in an inclusive environment were driven by the hope that when children with disabilities left the educational system, they would have the same opportunities as kids without disabilities: employment, emotionally healthy adult relationships, successful families, self-fulfillment, the ability to accept personal responsibility, and being contributing citizens.

#### *HOW DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN INCLUSION?*

I was profoundly influenced and disturbed by the research about what happens when children with disabilities leave the traditional special ed system. The special ed system didn't seem to do very much to encourage self-reliance and independence; in fact, it seemed to *discourage* the development of these important traits! For example, developing an understanding of yourself—building on the strengths you have and understanding your limitations—is an important piece of any person's whole development. The traditional special ed system doesn't focus on strengths. I remember hearing research about people with disabilities who are still living at home at the age of 24, with no prospects for living on their own, having jobs, or doing any other "real-life" adult things, even though they went through many years and many programs designed to educate them. These programs seem to actually encourage dependence, instead of promoting interdependence!

#### *HOW DID COLUMBINE BECOME AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL?*

What got us started was a discussion of how classroom teachers could more meaningfully collaborate with specialists. For example, how could a third grade teacher have meaningful and effective relationships with a variety of professionals—therapists, teacher assistants, and others—who come into her classroom to support students with diverse needs? As a teacher, myself, I always had a problem with people pulling kids out of my class all day. I didn't know how to catch kids up with what they had missed when they were pulled out for therapy or other specialized assistance. This was very frustrating for me, as a teacher, and in my opinion, it was harmful to the children.

When I first became a principal, I once spent an entire day in a first grade classroom. I watched carefully when kids returned from their pull-out

programs. They had missed learning opportunities and instructions from the teacher, and their classmates had moved on to other things. The kids who had been pulled out were just lost. I thought, "What's the point? Why not have the pull-out teacher come *into* the classroom?" Pull-out just didn't make any sense. Here we were pulling kids out to give them additional help, but they were actually falling further behind! Our collective experiences led us to look at alternatives to the pull-out method.

#### *WHAT DID IT TAKE TO ACTUALLY IMPLEMENT AN INCLUSIVE MODEL OF EDUCATION?*

One of our first steps was to end special ed pull-out and make sure all students with disabilities were served in the regular ed classroom. It seemed to work okay for the students and the specialists who went into the classroom. But as it turned out, this wasn't an effective practice for the classroom teachers! They felt there were too many different people coming into the classrooms, and they were frustrated that they didn't always know what a specialist was doing with a student, how to continue the support once the specialist left the room, and so forth. From a practical standpoint, it really wasn't possible to have effective collaboration between so many adults.

So as a staff, we spent a lot of time talking and thinking, and came up with the concept of the specialists forming a resource team for the next school year. The team included special ed teachers, a gifted/talented teacher, a speech therapist, and a Title I teacher. With the permission of the rest of the faculty, we gave it a try.

These specialists essentially cross-trained each other. Each member of the team was assigned one grade level. For example, "Mary" was assigned to third grade. She worked with all the third grade teachers to plan instruction, develop curriculum modifications, create different instructional strategies, identify how to meet the needs of specific students, and so forth. This allowed us to be very proactive—educators weren't always playing catch-up, trying to help a student who had fallen behind. We *anticipated* who needed help and provided it.

**"You know, special ed is not a subject! "**

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Members of the resource team met every Friday morning to brainstorm, learn from each other, and have meaningful conversations about students and their work. And, of course, they met informally at other times as well. Throughout the year, as children grow and learn, their needs change, and the dynamics in each classroom change as the months pass. So these regular meetings helped the resource team stay on top of things.

Inclusion can be messy in practice. We had places where we fell down, places we learned from—we're imperfect humans! To succeed, we had to have an atmosphere where it was okay to fail! We learned so much from our mistakes. Parents need to give teachers permission to fail. Parents of typical kids give teachers a certain amount of trust; the parents of kids with disabilities in our school tended to do the same thing.

##### *WHERE DO PHYSICAL, OCCUPATIONAL, AND SPEECH THERAPISTS—AND OTHER SPECIALISTS—FIT INTO AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL WHEN PULL-OUT ISN'T PRACTICED?*

Well, this was something else we learned by doing. At first, therapists *did* pull kids out for the prescribed therapy. But, again, when kids were pulled out, they missed so much in the classroom! And we began to question how relevant “medical-type” therapies were to a child's education. We figured out therapists needed to come into the classroom and provide relevant, meaningful assistance to the child that supported the child's educational goals. In many cases, therapists moved from providing direct service to being consultants: helping teachers learn how to implement beneficial “therapeutic-like” activities throughout the day. Again, it's important that services for kids with disabilities be provided in the natural environment.

##### *WHY DOES THE IDEA OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SEEM TO STRIKE FEAR IN THE HEARTS OF MANY EDUCATORS?*

I don't think regular ed teachers are afraid of inclusion, per se, or of kids with disabilities. I think they're afraid of not being able to do the job. Almost every teacher I've ever known is really committed to teaching and helping kids learn. But if classroom teachers think they're not going to be successful, they probably won't support inclusion. I feel it's basically a fear of

the unknown. Many are afraid they'll be expected to do things they don't know how to do. For example, some teachers feel they haven't been trained in curriculum adaptation. To address those fears, teachers need to be assured they'll be provided with the support they need.

Special ed teachers often have different fears. Many are afraid that if they work in a regular classroom their role will be marginalized. Nothing could be further from the truth! Their skills are extremely important in inclusive classrooms. They're needed, and they're extremely valuable, in all areas—from the planning process through the actual teaching in the classroom.

Educators who have been trained in special ed and who work in the traditional resource room/pull-out model do very different work than classroom teachers. And it can be hard to address all their fears ahead of time. It's almost as if you just have to do it and learn as you go along. Inclusion helped our resource teachers experience great job satisfaction. Rather than trying to remediate a child's disability, they successfully helped a child master the general curriculum. And they were truly a part of a team, working with classroom teachers and parents in a meaningful way, toward a set of shared goals, based on real student needs.

You know, *special ed isn't a subject!* It's supposed to be a method of helping a child become successful in the same world the rest of us are in. And we can do this by using assistive technology, curriculum modifications, and different types of instructional methods, as well as finding other ways to help a child learn. Our teachers enjoyed great job satisfaction using unique skills in the general ed environment.

We had high expectations of success and achievement for teachers and students at Columbine, and these could only be met by providing massive doses of emotional and technical support. To be successful, we all need support from people around us. When we set up our inclusive model, the explicit agreement was this: as the classroom teacher, you're responsible for the learning of all your students; in exchange, we'll provide the support you need to be successful. We can't expect teachers to experience success unless they're provided with the support they need. And supporting teachers is no different from the process used with kids: create an atmosphere of pervasive caring.



*MIKE, MANY PARENTS AND EDUCATORS BELIEVE THE ONLY WAY A STUDENT WITH A DISABILITY CAN BE SUCCESSFULLY INCLUDED IS IF HE HAS A ONE-ON-ONE AIDE. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?*

You have to go back to your basic core beliefs. Why would we assume that every child with a disability needs an adult with him all the time? If you subscribe to the belief that everyone is either “able” or “unable,” then you may feel a child with a disability needs an aide. But all of us have a continuum of strengths to needs.

Things aren’t black or white! *Who really has a disability?* Research has shown that deciding which students “need” an IEP is a *purely subjective decision*. It’s not based on an objective disability category. Instead, it’s based on educators deciding to staff a student into special ed because they think that’s the best way to help a child with a disability. At that point, the child is turned over to the special ed teachers. This is not a good way to share responsibility.

In our school, we saw it this way: all students would be in regular classrooms, and if a classroom teacher had a student with significant needs, then another set of hands, eyes, or ears were probably needed. And that meant a person would be assigned to assist *the teacher and the classroom*, not just the child. The role of an assistant is to provide services to help a child learn and to level the playing field.

There can be many dangers when an adult is assigned to the child. Kathie, you taught me that “a full-time aide becomes a maid.” A one-on-one para doesn’t help a child become responsible for himself. A person in this role may actually feel sorry for the child, have low expectations for him, and/or do too much for him. In too many cases, a child actually *learns dependence!*

A para assigned to one child can send a very powerful message that the classroom teacher isn’t really responsible for the child—the para is. When one person is assigned to a child, only that person gets to know the child. Kids with disabilities don’t “belong” to the special ed department or the one-on-one aides! But this is what often happens if there’s not a sense of

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shared responsibility for all students. In an inclusive school, the para, the classroom teacher, and the special ed teacher all work together in the regular classroom to ensure all kids are supported in their learning. Sometimes the para works directly with a student with a disability, other times the classroom or special ed teacher provides direct instruction. Again, it’s very important to use a variety of instructional methods that meet the child’s individual needs.

We’ve mistakenly assumed that only adults should help children with disabilities. But children help one another all the time. So we need to make sure peer supports are in place, too. Kathie, I remember something you told us once about Benjamin: that before an adult stepped in to help Benjamin, we should first see if a child couldn’t help. We realized Benjamin’s classmates could help him with his coat and his backpack, as well as with many other things. Sometimes a peer can help a child learn math better than an adult can. We learned to focus on providing the most natural supports in the classroom.

Some needs, of course, can only be met by an adult helper; like when a child needs to be physically transferred to the toilet, for example. Even then, this responsibility should be shared among a variety of adults. If only one person knows how to do this, what happens if/when the person isn’t there? [Author’s note: Mike, as well as other educators at Columbine—not just the paras—helped my son in the bathroom. And no one thought this was a big deal—it was a natural outcome of the pervasive caring.]

Classmates can do a great deal. Friends can help a child in the lunchroom, during academics, on the playground, and every where else. This informal type of assistance routinely occurs among kids without disabilities. Why shouldn’t it happen to kids with disabilities, too?

*WHAT ABOUT KIDS WITH “BEHAVIOR” LABELS? MANY FEEL “THOSE KIDS” MUST HAVE A ONE-ON-ONE.*

The safety of all students is a real concern of teachers and administrators, and there *is* a fear of students

***“If a child is supported, feels good about himself, and is engaged in something meaningful, ‘disruptive behaviors’ often disappear.”***

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who are considered “disruptive.” But, again, pervasive caring is what’s needed. We looked at what *caused* a child’s behavior to escalate, then we worked on *preventing* that by creating an atmosphere in which the child was supported. And that support comes from teachers and other students, in a variety of ways, to meet the child’s needs. For example, some children need to be able to physically move around when they’re learning, so teachers allowed that. Whether or not a child is “disruptive” is often subjective, and it’s tied to the classroom environment, the teacher’s style, and more. Our teachers used very creative methods of helping children, and sometimes that meant modifying the environment to meet a child’s needs. If a child is supported, feels good about himself, and is engaged in something meaningful, “disruptive behaviors” often disappear.

*LET’S TALK ABOUT FUNDING FOR A MOMENT. MANY EDUCATORS SAY THEY CAN’T “DO INCLUSION” BECAUSE IT COSTS TOO MUCH. WHAT ABOUT THAT, MIKE?*

Columbine was the only elementary school in our district that was inclusive, yet we didn’t have any more money than the other schools. Colorado is in the middle of the pack when it comes to funding—in the neighborhood of \$5,500 per student. It was important to use our resources wisely. Special ed rooms are staffed at a really high level: a 5 to 1 student/teacher ratio. We didn’t have anything like that, so that saved a great deal of money.

In addition, we were very careful about not hiring a para unless it was absolutely necessary. And when we *did* hire a para, that person worked in three or four different classrooms. For example, one child needed behavior support during recess, so “Kay” was on the playground at that time. Another student needed support during the literacy block and another needed help with math. Through careful planning and scheduling, Kay could help all these students with their unique needs in inclusive settings. Thoughtful planning and a wise use of resources were very important.

Also, the atmosphere of pervasive caring included the belief that children with disabilities can reach higher levels of achievement. This flies in the face of the notion that kids with disabilities are limited in their learning because of “lower-intellectual func-

tioning” or physical limitations or whatever. In other words, we didn’t put limits on kids’ potential. We set high expectations and then did everything we could to help children meet them. To ensure higher levels of achievement, we needed to create a whole menu of instructional strategies. So we used staff development funds to help teachers learn different strategies to meet children’s learning styles.

At Columbine, we saw it this way: what society calls a “disability” often simply represents differences—sometimes extreme differences—in learning styles. We know that everyone has different ways of learning, and the belief that *every child is a lifelong learner* permeated the culture at our school.

When an administrator believes the school is responsible for helping every child learn in the regular environment, and when an administrator equips all teachers with the tools they need to do this, the payoff is more “real learning” and less remediation. Part of the inclusion model at Columbine involved the staff—with the help of parents—working hard to predict which children might have difficulty learning, and then coming up with strategies to help kids learn right from the start. If you identify and meet a child’s learning needs from the beginning, you spend less time on remedial instruction. Being thoughtful about instructional practices, having the willingness to try new things, and embracing the “whatever it takes” philosophy ensures more real learning and less remediation.

*ANOTHER BARRIER IS THE BELIEF THAT EDUCATORS CAN’T DO INCLUSION UNTIL THE STAFF IS “READY.” HOW CAN AN ADMINISTRATOR ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?*

Before we moved toward inclusion, we spent a lot of time on a “Best Hopes/Worst Fears” exercise. We talked about the best things that could happen if we became an inclusive school, and then we shared our worst fears. We listed all these on chart paper, taped them to the walls in the teachers’ lounge, and left them there for two weeks. This gave us time to think about things.

After the two weeks, we talked about what we needed to do to make sure the Worst Fears wouldn’t happen and the Best Hopes would! It’s always helpful when administrators give teachers the opportunity and the freedom to express their feelings—you can’t

deal with fears until they're out in the open. So I feel it's really important to go through this exercise.

Attending an inclusive education conference was something else we did to learn more, and it had mixed results. There was a lot of teacher bashing by some militant parents. This actually created more fears! Some of our teachers felt they would become targets of angry parents if they didn't know how to do inclusion "right." When we analyzed this, it seemed these parents were angry for two main reasons: they felt they weren't being listened to and they felt their children's needs weren't being met.

We believed we *did* know how to listen to parents and that we *could* meet children's needs. So we thought, "We can do inclusion." We knew we didn't know everything, but we believed we could figure it out. You learn as you go along. Every child is different; every classroom is different. Children change and grow; teachers change and grow. Inclusion is a dynamic, evolutionary process. It requires that we put meeting a child's needs—learning needs and other needs—first.

Inclusion also requires educators to embrace an atmosphere of risk-taking. When we didn't get things right the first time, we had to take risks and try something new. And we always hoped parents would give us the space to learn. We discovered that if we listened to parents, if we were on the same page, and if our interests were the same, parents allowed us the freedom to experiment with new ways of doing things to help their children learn.

#### *WHAT'S THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL?*

To communicate very clearly about their child's needs and to share the hopes and dreams they have for their child. Also, parents need to tell teachers when they're doing a good job and when they're not, and give them permission and encouragement to do something different or better. Parents need to trust educators, but

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they also need to advocate for their children. And that's the job of every parent, not just parents of kids with disabilities.

Parents need to be both positive and constructive, and they also need to realize they're probably not going to have it all. For example, if your daughter has Down syndrome, and you want her in an inclusive classroom, don't expect educators to spend hours teaching her functional skills like cooking or tying her shoes! If she's in an inclusive classroom, she'll be part of the school, just like kids without disabilities, and she'll be learning from the regular curriculum. There are trade-offs. If you want educators to focus on teaching your daughter how to cook or tie her shoes, then an inclusive classroom probably isn't the best place for your daughter.

It might not be politically correct to say this, but it's the reality: schools can't do everything for every child. A school is a resource parents can use to help their children become successful. Parents need to consider what they really want the school to do for their children.

I feel it's really important for parents to believe in their children—to see them as learners who have great potential. Do you want your child to acquire only functional abilities, or do you want her to have a real future that includes post-secondary education, a real job, and so forth? Traditionally, we've spent too much time and energy trying to remediate the effects of the disability and/or focusing on a very narrow aspect of a child's development, instead of focusing on the child as a whole person.

Inclusive education, coupled with positive relationships between parents and educators, creates the opportunity for children with disabilities to learn, grow, and be part of life. Children with disabilities—like all children—can succeed in boundless ways.

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Contact Mike at [mikegalvin17@gmail.com](mailto:mikegalvin17@gmail.com). Here are some web sites of interest: [www.focusedleadershipsolutions.com](http://www.focusedleadershipsolutions.com); [www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org); [www.ed.gov/offices/OERI](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI); [www.character.org](http://www.character.org); search the Internet for "social promotion" regarding info about holding students back.

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