

# Inclusive Practices



Most of us can get passionate about the education of our children. And it is safe to say that there is little that will touch us more deeply than their inclusion in—or omission from—the classroom.

This brochure has been developed to help parents ensure that their children with Down syndrome are provided with a quality education in the most inclusive possible setting.

**Inclusive Practice—a Definition** Inclusive practices is the idea that all students, regardless of ability, can and should receive a solid education in a general classroom alongside their peers.

It's the idea that our thinking ought to start with having all kids in a general classroom and involved in all activities. No one should have to prove their right or ability to be part of their community in school. Instead, steps away from the general classroom ought to be exceptions.

By law, all students must be treated equally, but there is no official definition of “inclusive practices.”

Despite clear benefits, including improving the education for ALL students, inclusive practices are not a right nor a formula for effective education.

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Joan Guthrie Medlen, RD, LD, Michael Remus, MS, and  
Toni Robinson for their professional, parental and editorial  
counsel throughout the preparation of this brochure.*

## IDEA— the Legal Foundation for Inclusive Practices

Inclusive practices are at the core of the US Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)— the law, passed on October 30, 1975 and reauthorized with amendments in 2004, defines the educational rights of our children.

IDEA lays out two standards.

First, students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Second, education must be delivered in the “Least Restrictive Environment” (LRE) in which students’ needs may be met.

IDEA defines a process that, in an ideal world, would put every student with a disability in a setting perfectly matched to his or her needs. And, if the world were perfect, that would be the general classroom.

The process is the development of an Individual Education Program by an IEP team made up of parents, general and special education teachers, school psychologists, related service personnel and administrators. It is also good to invite the student so he or she can start advocating and developing self-advocacy skills from the start. Student have to be invited to the IEP meeting when they turn 16.

That’s about where the clarity of IDEA evaporates, often to be replaced by confusion, confrontation and, sadly, animosity.

On the following pages we offer explanations, advice and approaches that can help make school a positive experience for your child.

This is just the start. A small library has been written about inclusive practices and we encourage you to become a student and then an expert by exhausting the bibliography and other resources accessible through the links provided on page 11 of this brochure.

So, to start.

There are at least three reasons things can get confusing with IDEA:

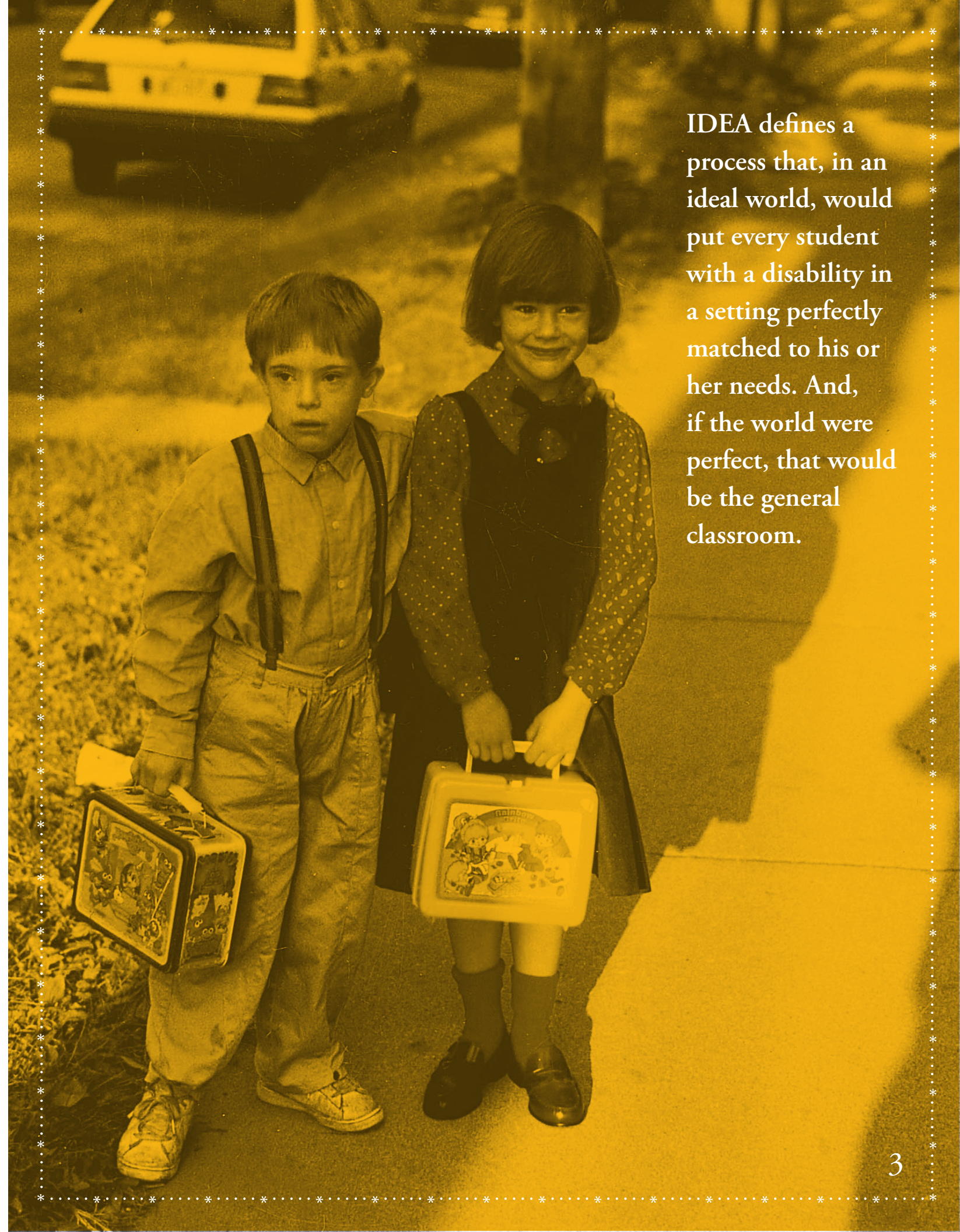
- The term “individual.”
- The idea that each student’s needs should be met in the least restrictive environment.
- Making a team the authority on student needs and placement.

Customizing anything is bound to be messier than applying one-size-fits-all solutions.

Then, just what is the environment in which a child’s needs can be best met? IDEA doesn’t say. Instead, it suggests a range— or “continuum”— of environments from the general classroom to special classrooms such as “resource” rooms, self-contained, special education enclaves and on to health-care facilities, homebound, and so on.

Finally, there’s that team thing. While this can vary from state to state, IDEA does not give any individual— parents, administrators, therapists or classroom teachers— the power to make all decisions. Instead, it defines the IEP team while giving parents equal standing with other members.

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## Begin At The Beginning

Perhaps you feel the proper path is to take IDEA at face value. Clearly, your child has the right to an education and, per IDEA, it must be delivered in the least restrictive environment in which your child's needs can be met.

That can— and for many students does— mean supporting your child in the general classroom, adapting and/or modifying the curriculum and delivering services, such as speech and physical therapy, to your child in that same classroom.

If you have made that happen, take a bow. We'll applaud.

With IDEA, however, there is no one fix for all students. As mentioned, the schools are supposed to offer a continuum of services. A child may be placed in the general classroom for all instruction or only for non-academic activities. And, schools may deliver some services in the general classroom or special classrooms such as "resource" rooms where, for example, speech or occupational therapy may be applied.

### How to Cope.

Welcome to a passage known to many.

You have choices.

You may, of course, choose to go with whatever is offered. Life is short— your kid only has a bit of time— from the time he or she enters kindergarten until the end of transition— from say age 5 to 21— to get an education.

Conversely, the very idea that your child would be denied anything short of an education in general classroom with typical peers for community could put you in a fighting mood.

First choice: which will it be?

Tough decision, but this may help. Dozens of studies conducted over the past 20 years or so show that students with mild to moderate learning disabilities who are included do better in fundamentals, such as reading and math, than those not included.

Many of those studies show that typical students in those classrooms also did better.

It's simple— inclusive practices work for all

And, for those being told that their districts can't afford inclusive strategies, the studies show that those strategies are more cost effective than isolating children with special needs – in at least one case, segregation doubled costs over inclusive practices.

Better. More Cost Effective.

Start there. Regardless of who you are trying to work with, start with the idea that inclusive practices will be more efficient and effective than a segregated alternative.

Get the facts— get ready to prove your case that inclusive practices are the better, more cost-effective alternative.

## Cooperation Versus Confrontation

We suggest that cooperation is better than confrontation. While you may have both the law and statistics on your side, the law says there is a wide range of what can happen when providing a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

You may find yourself disagreeing with people recognized for their professional expertise. Their opinion and assessment of your child's needs will— and probably ought to— carry weight. So, the question is how to manage the situation.

### Take Your Time

Perhaps all members of your IEP team are wild about inclusive practices, understand the value and know how to make them work in your school.

Or, your school system may be centered on segregated classrooms for students with disabilities.

If so, change will not come overnight. While you should challenge exclusion from the start, be prepared to bide your time.

### Recruit Allies

As a first step, seek professionals— special ed instructors, classroom teachers, therapists— who endorse inclusive practices and recruit them.

No matter where your child may be in his or her formal education, this may all seem scary. This brochure, however, was created with optimism— with the idea that parents, teachers and schools systems share goals and will work together to meet them.

### Common Sense Rules

Making inclusive practices work is mostly a matter of using common sense.

That is not to minimize the skills, knowledge or experience of professionals. Their training and background are essential. The foundation of

successful inclusive practices however, is composed of things we all ought to share.

### Attitude

Success starts when people— and especially leaders— embrace diversity. Notice we did not go to disability. The idea is bigger, broader— it's the fact that we live in a rich melting pot of ideas, cultures, conditions and abilities. Inclusive practices work where diversity— including the fact that some of us have disabilities— is accepted and even celebrated.

Inclusive practices work when leaders— members of boards of education, superintendents, principals and parents— see diversity as an asset.

### Knowledge

Knowledge is your most important asset. The law demands that your child be provided with a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, but that can be defined across a broad spectrum. The more you know about the law, the processes it establishes and, importantly, your child's abilities and needs, the more likely your child will be included.

Tap into the bibliography and resources accessible via the links provided on page 11 of this brochure to become an expert in the law and educational best practices. Equally, however, be sure you have an objective and comprehensive assessment of your child and his or her educational needs.

Effective education teaches a whole person. Intellectual or cognitive ability of a child is of great importance, but so too is the child's physical and mental health.

Teachers need to know about factors that may affect a student's performance, however, as you work through your assessment, be careful. Many tests used to assess learning ability and attainment under rate children with Down syndrome. It is often better to assume a child with Down syndrome is more capable than tests indicate. That aside, make sure a fair and complete assessment of your child is considered by all members of your IEP team.

## Know What You Want

You need to know what your school must help your child achieve.

That has two parts.

First, what does your child need now so he or she can learn the next set of skills and knowledge? And, what are the social skills needed and expected of a child of his or her age?

Second, what do you see for your child when formal education ends? Do you hope for independent living? What does that look like? Will he or she have a job? Will that be in an office or factory? What knowledge will be needed to reach the goal?

For all of their professional skills, teachers and therapists are just people. Like all of us, the more they know about goals, the better they will do. And, the more concrete you can make the goals, the more effective the members of your IEP team can be.

### *Demand the Possible*

As you work toward inclusive goals, try to find ways your IEP team can succeed. It may be better to build acceptance of inclusive practices on small successes with faculty excited about inclusive practices than to force people to deal with difficult challenges. That may mean working around or without a resistant teacher now with the aim of using a success to change a mind.

### *You Child Should Not Be Alone*

Students learn in a community—from their teachers, other support staff and specialists and each other. That idea is at the heart of inclusive practices and the success of inclusive practices depends on the support it implies.

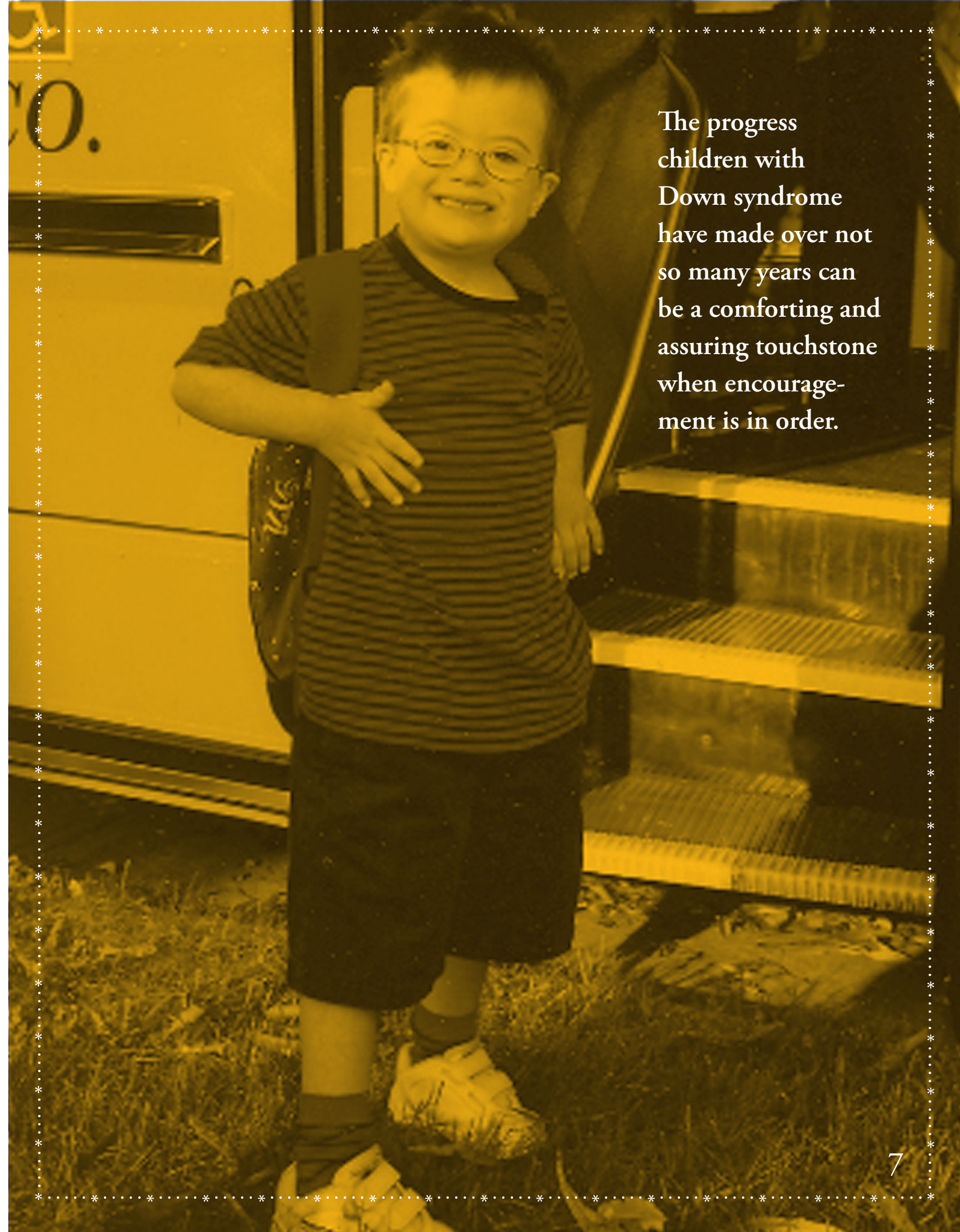
Support in an inclusive classroom, however, includes team learning and peer tutoring and aides can quite often extend their support to all students.

The easiest tactic which may be applied to defeat your inclusive goal is saying it is too expensive. No secret, school systems are under financial pressure. Adapting curriculum, providing classroom aides for a few students can appear costly.

Problem is, research doesn't support the idea. If it is suggested that lack of funding is the reason your child can't be included, ask for the facts that support the assertion.

While you are at it, point out that IDEA and two decades worth of judicial review disqualify the excuse. Recall, IDEA says your child is entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) delivered in the "Least Restrictive Environment" (LRE) in which his or her needs may be met. It says nothing about setting those requirements aside when financial resources press.

The progress children with Down syndrome have made over not so many years can be a comforting and assuring touchstone when encouragement is in order.



## Consider How Very Far We Have Come

It is important in all of this to try, on occasion, to take the long view.

As you make your way from that very first day of kindergarten through graduation and transition, there is sure to be frustration.

The progress children with Down syndrome have made over not so many years can be a comforting and assuring touchstone when encouragement is in order.

Recall, it was not so many years ago that even the most enlightened educators thought students with Down syndrome “trainable” but couldn’t learn.

Of course students with Down syndrome can learn and are often avid students capable of competing with their typical peers.

Moreover, they can learn virtually anywhere—in the classroom, on field trips, at home, on the playground— anywhere anybody else can learn.

Sure, they may learn differently. Their pace may not be that of the average student and they may do better with hands-on experiences than when confronted with abstractions in lectures.

Importantly, they often prosper when given the opportunity to gain command of a specific set of facts before being asked to move on to new facts or ideas.

The primary role of an IEP team is to assess the abilities of the student and then match the teaching techniques and interventions that will allow kids to thrive.

Notice we did not go at the idea of overcoming a disability. We intentionally framed the idea of supporting strengths.

Of course students with Down syndrome have weaknesses— all students do. We urge you and your IEP team to never lose sight of the strengths of your child. Here again research supports a conclusion— students with Down syndrome are almost always more capable than standard assessment tools might indicate.

Finally, there is the Individual Education Program. Long before the question of placement is addressed, your IEP team must complete the hard work of framing the specific services and supports your child will need to be successful.

There is no reason to assume that students with Down syndrome ought to be held to a different, more permissive or lower set of standards than their typical peers.

We hope you want your child to learn what all other children learn. There is no reason to set your sites lower— you have every reason to assume your child can learn what all other children are expected to learn.

As you approach the IEP process make sure everybody has a clear understanding of goals and expectations. Then focus on blending teaching techniques with learning styles to attain these goals.

Only when you have agreement among all team members on all of the goals should you go to the question of placement— and, if all have done their jobs up to that point in the process, placement— the least restrictive environment in which your child’s needs may be met— will be obvious.

There are more than 15,000 school districts operating perhaps 140 thousand schools in the United States employing about 3.7 million teachers working with some 53 million students.

American education is enormous and, so, there is little one can say that fits all. But one fact is clear: students with disabilities do better when included in classrooms and activities with all other students.

The Down syndrome community is and has been a powerful advocate for creation of inclusive schools.

Increasingly, teachers, administrators and boards of education are allies and a growing number of families enjoy productive, collaborative relationships with teachers and therapists. Some— arguably too many— their kids, sadly, are excluded.

We extend our sincere thanks to those who, with open hearts and minds, support our kids inclusively while offering this brochure as a start for families facing an older challenge.

Knowledge and information are the most important and powerful tools for those addressing an inclusive challenge. One of the most effective sources is your local or regional Down syndrome organization which may be located by going to the Down Syndrome Affiliates In Action web site at <http://www.dsaia.org/> and clicking on the “Affiliate Directory” on the home page.

For direct access to a wide range of in-depth information on the inclusive process, please go to <http://www.dsaia.org/XXX>.

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