



**Position Paper:  
EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE  
LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT (LRE)**

In 1975, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) was passed. This was updated in 1990 and called the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA was reauthorized and signed into law as Public Law 105-17 in 1997. In 2004 IDEA was updated and reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, yet retained the IDEA acronym. Prior to the passage of this federal law, many children with disabilities were excluded from the public schools. IDEA guaranteed that children with disabilities could no longer be denied a free, appropriate education.

**IDEA states that the education of children with disabilities must be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Each public agency shall insure that to the “maximum extent appropriate” children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other health care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled; and that special classes, separated schooling or other removal of disabled children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. The law takes a common sense approach to this issue: children with disabilities should be educated with children who are not disabled to the “maximum extent appropriate”.**

IDEA requires that a continuum of alternative placements be made available “to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services.” This would range from the most restrictive (a full-time residential school or hospital setting) to the least restrictive (the regular classroom) with a variety of settings in between.

A student would be placed in an educational setting based on his or her individualized education program (IEP) and as close as possible to the child’s home. “Unless a disabled child’s individual education program requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school which he or she would attend if not disabled; and in selecting the least restrictive environment, consideration is given to any potential harmful effect on the child or on the quality of services which he or she needs.”

As a result of the least restrictive environment provision in IDEA, two practices have evolved: mainstreaming and inclusion. Mainstreaming means placing students who have been in self-contained classrooms into regular classes for most or all of the school day. Additional services may be provided by a consultant teacher or by pullout programs. Students are placed in the regular classroom with the expectation that they will be able to maintain similar academic progress with their non-disabled peers in the class.

Inclusion is a philosophy that defines inclusive education as: providing to all students, including those with severe disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate classes in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of the society. Inclusion differs from the mainstreaming philosophy in that students with special needs are placed in age-appropriate classes and are not necessarily expected to maintain the same academic progress as their non-disabled peers.

Many schools continue to move from mainstreaming to inclusion. In some cases, this shift has been made thoughtfully with adequate staff development, planning, and support services. In other cases, financial constraints or other pressures have created situations where students with disabilities have been placed in regular classrooms without the appropriate staff preparation and/or support services.

New York State PTA accepts the opportunity and the responsibility to advocate for the educational needs of all children. Within the population of students with disabilities there is a wide range of needs from mild to severe. Academic expectations should increase for all students as they progress from primary through secondary school.

New York State PTA supports the IDEA requirements that a continuum of services must be made available to students with disabilities and that placement decisions are made on an individualized basis, based on the student’s needs, with parents as equal partners in the decision-making process. When students with disabilities are placed in regular classroom settings, appropriate staff development and support services must be provided for staff so that the learning environment benefits all children.

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