


Special education has its fair share of myths and facts about inclusion for students with significant cognitive disabilities. This resource was developed to challenge those myths and highlight the facts of why inclusionary practices work for each and every student.



**MYTHS & FACTS**  
about Inclusionary Practices  
in Washington State

**MYTH #1: COSTS OF INCLUSION**

**MYTH #2: WHO CAN PROVIDE  
SPECIALLY DESIGNED INSTRUCTION?**

**MYTH #3: READINESS FOR INCLUSION**

**MYTH #4: CURRICULUM & STANDARDS**

**MYTH #5: PARENTS & INCLUSION**

**MYTH #6: DISABILITY & PLACEMENT**

**MYTH #7: ASSESSMENT & ACADEMICS**





## MYTH #1:

Including students with significant cognitive disabilities costs more than educating them in segregated special education programs.

## FACT:

Providing flexible services in general education settings is not more expensive. In fact, it enables schools to maximize resources to meet the needs of each and every student.

### The Truth Is...

- Schools do not automatically receive more funding for placing students in more restrictive placements.
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities do not always need 1:1 support to be included in general education classrooms.
- Special education funding is connected to student needs and not tied to specific programs nor the percentage of time students with IEPs spend in special education settings.
- Safety net funding (reimbursement for high-cost services) is based on the services in a student's individualized education program (IEP), not the student's placement or program.

## EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

### Keep in Mind:

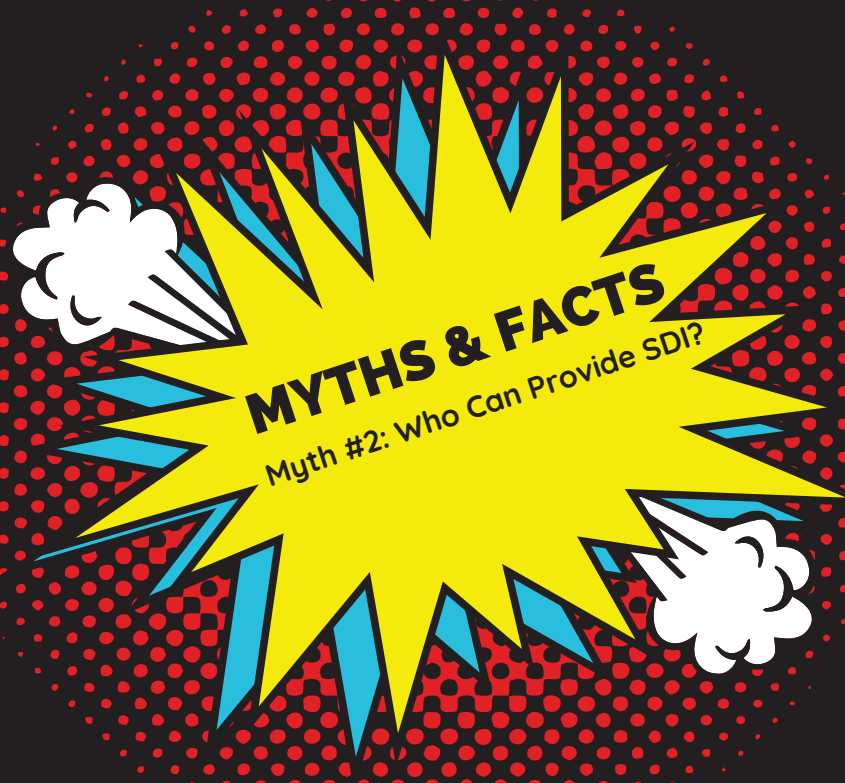
- Financial resources follow students based on need, not placement decisions.
- WA implemented a tiered multiplier for special education funding in 2020-21, [RCW 28A.150.390 \(2\)\(b\)\(i\)\(B\)](#).

### Supportive Research/Articles:

- Myth: [The High Cost of Inclusion](#)
- TIES Center TIP#1: [How Peers Can Support Augmentative and Alternative Communication \(AAC\) Use by Students with Significant Communication Needs](#)
- [Economic and Demographic Predictors of Inclusive Education](#)  
- Cosier, M. & Causton-Theoharis, J. (2011)

## STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- Examine [system resource decisions/allocations](#). Are they based on research and best practices or beliefs and historical practices?
- Redesign master schedules and resource allocation (staffing, etc.) for inclusive education and supports and to [center family voice in decision making](#).
- Reconsider instruction in special education classrooms: create flex spaces that support all students, with and without disabilities.
- Design and implement systems for providing universal supports in general education settings to foster a culture where advocating for support and services is encouraged. For example, [utilize assistive technology](#) to make the environment accessible for all students (voice to text, a variety of writing tools, books read to students, etc.).



## MYTH #2:

Students with significant cognitive disabilities can only receive specially designed Instruction (SDI) from their case manager or assigned special education teacher.

## FACT:

SDI can be provided by any teacher or educational staff member as long as the SDI is designed and supervised by special education licensed staff.

### The Truth Is...

- SDI should be delivered across all instructional environments. There is no minimum amount of time that a student eligible for special education is required to be in a special education setting (e.g., a self-contained classroom) to receive SDI.
- Special educators are not the only staff who can provide SDI to students. General education teachers and paraeducators can support the delivery of SDI to students with IEPs who are in general education settings.
- All SDI counts toward a student's complete education program. IEP service minutes include SDI provided by special education staff in any environment as well as SDI provided in general education settings by paraeducators and general education teachers.

### EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

- [WAC 392-172A-02090 \(1\)\(i\)](#): General education teachers and paraeducators may assist in the provision of SDI so long as it is designed and supervised by special education staff. Student progress must be monitored and evaluated by special education certificated staff or for related services, a certificated educational staff associate.
- The “myth” that SDI provided by general education staff does not count may be predicated on a belief that a student's IEP is the entire education program. In fact, a student's IEP details a student's access to and progress in the general education curriculum based on grade-level standards. IEP service minutes are for special education services provided in addition to and as part of general education minutes to support access and progress in the general education curriculum.

### STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- [Consider the extent to which the IEP addresses](#): (1) access to and progress in the general education grade-level curriculum and core standards, (2) how SDI will be integrated across the school day through multiple means, and (3) how special educators will provide direct and indirect support for SDI (whether SDI is provided directly by special educators or designed and supervised).
- Consider whether special education staff roles and responsibilities are defined based on myths or formal/informal policies and practices rather than roles and responsibilities that support greater student outcomes.
- Consider [how funding sources can be braided](#) to provide flexibility in how staff meet a variety of student needs. For example, a school social worker or intervention teacher funded by both special education and Title 1 funds to provide small group support for heterogeneous groups of students.



### MYTH #3:

Students with significant cognitive disabilities must show they are ready for the general education setting.

### FACT:

Every student is a general education student. All students have the right to be educated in general education settings.

#### The Truth Is...

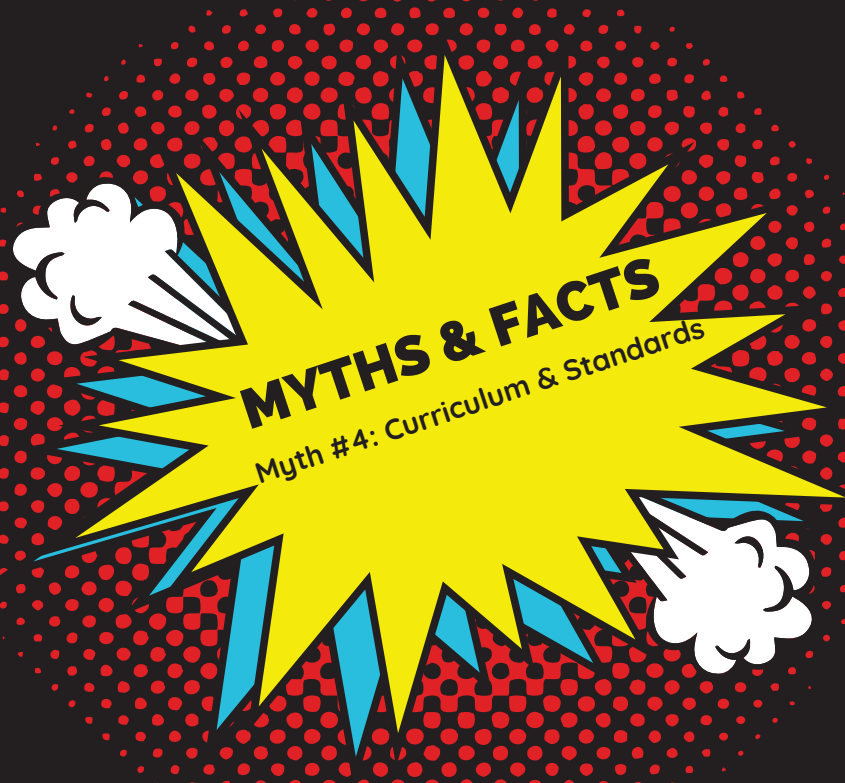
- Students should not be required to reach specified benchmarks (e.g., a 2nd grader at Kindergarten proficiency) before receiving instruction in general education.
- A student's needs, rather than disability, should determine placement. For example, a student with an intellectual disability should not automatically be placed into a segregated setting.
- Mission and vision statements that read "all means all" should include the experiences of students with significant support needs.
- Students with IEPs, including students with significant support needs, should not have to "earn their time" in general education or "prove" they will not engage in challenging behaviors before gaining access to general education environments.

### EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

- OSPI's [Inclusionary Practices Project \(IPP\)](#) defines inclusion as all means all: Inclusive instruction rebukes the problematic perspective that students receiving special education services need to 'fit in' or 'earn their way' into general education classes. The belief that general education instruction is not malleable and that students should be making adaptations to be included in the general education setting has contributed to the continuation of two parallel systems of education in which students receiving special education services are marginalized and devalued as a result of their environmental segregation.
- TIES Center Resource: [Taking the Alternative Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting!](#)
- [Outcomes of Inclusive Versus Separate Placement: A Matched Pairs Comparison. Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities](#) - Gee, K. Gonzales, M., & Cooper, C. (2020)

### STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- Provide [examples/frameworks that show how students with significant cognitive disabilities can engage in lessons/units](#) (e.g., lesson examples, share inclusive IEP process, and Inclusive Education at a Glance).
- Include core content data and stories about students with and without disabilities. [Identify environmental, attitudinal, and other barriers to general education curriculum and access](#). Presume competence for all and meaningfully consider supports needed for instruction in general education settings.
- Implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into all lesson planning and ensure students with significant cognitive disabilities are included in all aspects of classroom- and school-wide [Multi-tiered Systems of Support \(MTSS\)](#) including academic, behavior and social-emotional.
- Assign every student to the roster of a general education teacher with a seat in a general education classroom. This means that there is no negotiation about whether a student belongs in general education. It also clearly conveys that special education services are supplementary to general education.



## MYTH #4:

When a student has a significant cognitive disability, their curriculum is their IEP, meaning they focus exclusively on their annual IEP goals.

## FACT:

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require that all students make progress toward grade-level learning standards.

### The Truth Is...

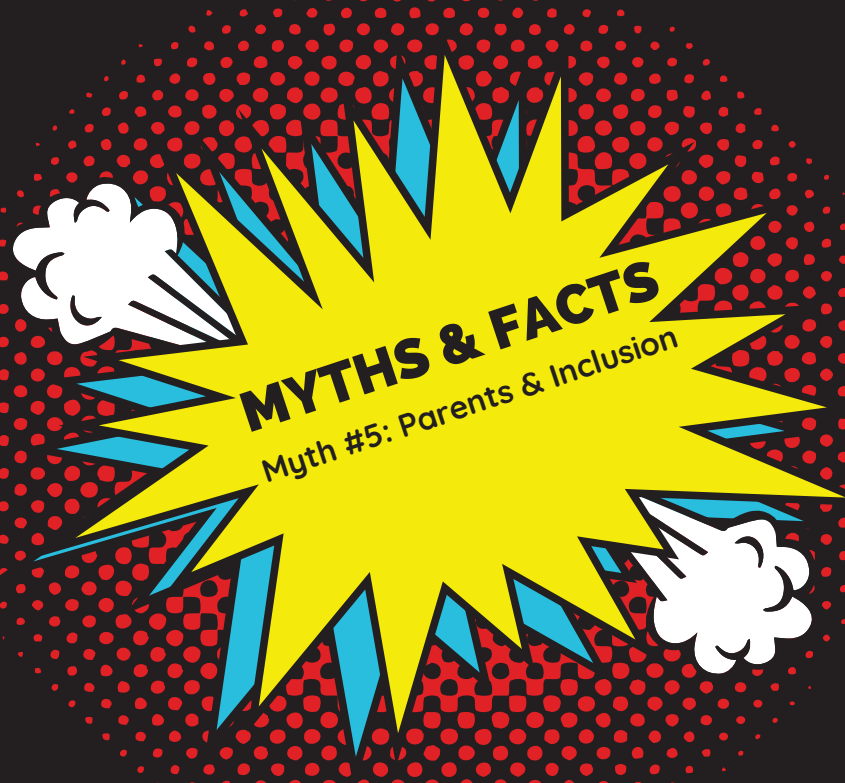
- All students eligible for special education should have IEPs that are aligned to grade-level learning standards, including students with significant cognitive disabilities whose instruction focuses on functional skills.
- Students with IEPs who are placed in special education settings should not have a separate/alternative curriculum with little connection/alignment to the general curriculum.

## EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

- [WAC 392-172A-01175](#) (2)(c): SDI means adapting the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of a student with a disability and ensure access to and progress in the general curriculum.
- TIES Center resources: [The General Education Curriculum–Not an Alternate Curriculum!](#) and [Academic Standards for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms: Same Content Standards, Alternate Achievement Standards](#)
- [U. S. Supreme Court Case Decision Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District](#): IEPs must be reasonably calculated to ensure reasonable progress in light of a student's unique circumstances.

## STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- IEP teams must [engage in discussions about how and when IEP goals and specially designed instruction \(SDI\) can be provided in inclusive settings.](#)
- Ensure that general education and special education team members have time to collaborate. This can be achieved through in person meetings, virtual meetings, and use of shared collaborative lesson planning documents. The starting point for collaborative planning is the general education standards and curriculum and the general education context. Refer to the [5-15-45](#) Tool for what meaningful collaboration can look like whether teachers have 5 minutes, 15 minutes or 45 minutes to meet.
- Consider how IEPs in the district are written. [Do the goals support:](#) (1) access and progress in the general education grade-level curriculum, (2) what SDI will be integrated across the school day through multiple means, and (3) the direct and indirect service minutes that special educators provide to support student SDI (SDI can be provided either directly by special educators or provided by others if they are designed and supervised by the special education).



## MYTH #5:

All parents of children with significant cognitive disabilities want their children educated in separate programs or classrooms.

## FACT:

Inclusive education helps students with significant cognitive disabilities and their families feel a sense of belonging as part of the entire school community.

### The Truth Is...

- Students with significant cognitive disabilities in inclusive settings build relationships with peers. Creating communities of belonging for students with significant cognitive disabilities and their families is central to meaningful inclusion.
- Higher education and/or integrated employment are options for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Planning with this end in mind supports the need for inclusive education throughout PreK-12.
- Post-school transition conversations and planning should start early for students with significant cognitive disabilities and their families, including strong agency linkages with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and/or the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA).

### EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

- [Achieving Inclusion: What every parent should know](#) - Causton-Theoharis, J. & Kasa, C. (2012)
- [Taking Sides: Parent Views on Inclusion for Their Children with Severe Disabilities](#) - Palmer, D. S., Fuller, K., Arora, T., & Nelson, M.
- [Supporting Students with Severe Disabilities in Inclusive Schools: A Descriptive Account from Schools Implementing Inclusive Practices](#) - Kurth, J., Lyon, K., & Shogren, K. (2021)
- [Caregiver Engagement: Advancing Academic and Behavioral Outcomes for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in Special Education](#) - Whitford, D., & Addis, A. (2017)
- TIES Center Impact Article: [From Isolation to Inclusion: Anne's Journey](#)
- UW Haring Center: [IPP Demonstration Sites Project: Ruby Bridges Elementary](#) (webinar recording)

### STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- Engage in meaningful discussions with educators and parents that challenge beliefs about outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities when they are educated in inclusive versus segregated settings.
- Emphasize evidence-based best practices for inclusive education and students' human & civil rights to non-segregated education. Begin with a meaningful, life long vision statement for the student. Write IEP goals tied to general education curriculum, grade-level standards, and environment.
- Communicate to families the vertical and horizontal alignment of an inclusion mission, vision, beliefs, and systems that demonstrate commitment to inclusion. Maintain a transparent school culture that includes collaboration, co-design, and strong communication with families.
- Show evidence of collaborative structures and systems in place that ensure special education, general education, and families are collaborating consistently on a comprehensive education program.



## MYTH #6:

A student's diagnosis or disability determines program placement.

## FACT:

Placement is not predetermined. A student's disability category does not drive placement in more restrictive settings.

### The Truth Is...

- For all students with IEPs, including students with significant cognitive disabilities, LRE is determined by student need, not disability category or label.
- General education placement should be considered before more restrictive options. For example:
  - The IEP team should consider general education placement with supplemental special education services for a student with autism before placement in a self-contained autism program.
  - Consider ways a student with a significant cognitive disability could attend their neighborhood school rather than a school with a specified special education program.

### EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

- [WAC 392-172A-020505](#): Special education services must be provided: "(1) To the maximum extent appropriate in the general education environment with students who are nondisabled; and (2) Special classes, separate schooling or other removal of students eligible for special education from the general educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in general education classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily."
- An IEP is tailored to meet student's needs. When an IEP is put in place to support a student's progress in general education, it is based on individual student needs; therefore, a prescribed program or placement plan is counterintuitive to this.

### STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- Prioritize all students attending their neighborhood schools and build the capacity of staff to teach all students in inclusive settings.
- Ensure that every student is on the roster of a general education teacher and has a seat in a general education classroom even if they currently are not in the general education classroom all day. This means that no one is having to negotiate where a student belongs in general education. It also clearly conveys that special education services are supplementary to general education.
- Consistently engage in placement discussions that strive to maximize the amount of time a student spends in general education settings with additional supplemental instruction and supports, before considering segregated placements.
- Monitor [district data related to disability categories, meaningful access to general education settings](#), and progress in the general education curriculum.



## MYTH #7:

Cognitive assessments (or a minimum IQ score) are necessary for academic goals and instruction.

## FACT:

All students are general education students. All students receive academic instruction.

### The Truth Is...

- IEP goals and service areas—including academic, adaptive, social, and functional skills—should be aligned to grade-level learning standards and reflect student needs. They should not be determined by a single test score or measure.
- Students with significant cognitive disabilities should have access and exposure to age-appropriate, grade-level content in addition to instruction that meets their functional and adaptive needs.
- Online IEP systems used by districts should offer case managers flexibility to individualize service areas. For example, IEP service areas should not have "locked" categories that only map back to the evaluation.

### EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FACTS:

- Federal education laws require that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities receive instruction in the same grade-level content as all other students, although the achievement expected on grade-level content can be reduced in breadth, depth, and complexity.
- [OSERS Policy Guidance on Free Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\)](#)
- OSPI assessment resources: [Guidance for IEP Teams: Student Participation in Statewide Assessments](#); [WA-AIM Access Point Frameworks](#)
- TIES Center Brief #4: [Providing Meaningful General Education Curriculum Access to Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities](#)
- TIES Center Resource: [Comprehensive Educational Planning tool](#)

### STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING THE MYTH:

- Plan instruction based on grade-level standards and utilize [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) to make general education lessons accessible and effective for all.
- Identify natural learning opportunities during general education transitions/routines and maximize these embedded opportunities to teach adaptive skills using effective instructional strategies.
- Special curriculum resources used for students with the most significant disabilities should be based on [peer-reviewed research](#) and aligned to the student's enrolled grade-level content.
- Provide training to support IEP teams (including parents) on how to write inclusive, standards-aligned IEPs and IEP goals.
- [All students with disabilities, including those with significant cognitive disabilities, must be included in MTSS planning and implementation.](#)