

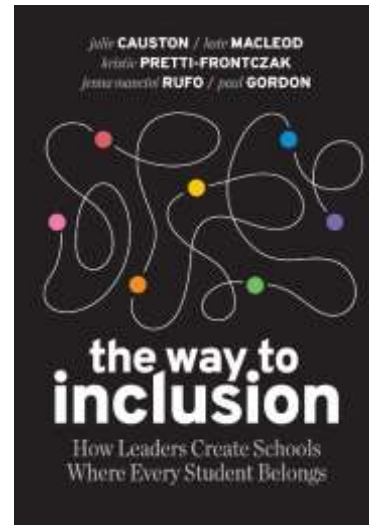
Causton, J., MacLeod, K., Pretti-Frontczak, K., Rufo, J. M., & Gordon, P. (2023). *The way to inclusion: How leaders create schools where every student belongs*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Pp. 137

ISBN: 978-1-4166-3180-4

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From widespread institutionalization to various forms of exclusionary practices, the history of educating students with disabilities is one with a grim past (Karten, 2015, pp. 3-4). Policies and practices have improved since those times, especially with the passing of legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), later renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990) or more commonly recognized as Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004). Such laws have been put in place to ensure that students with disabilities have a right to a free and appropriate public education with challenging curriculum in the least restrictive environment possible. Yet, when put to the test years later, school systems are faced with the reality that many of these students continue to fall through the cracks when it comes to equal opportunity to receive an inclusive, quality education (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2020, pp. 36-38).



With legislation in place to protect the education rights for students with disabilities in the United States, many educators, advocates, and parents of students with disabilities realize that the laws themselves are not enough. In her biographical introduction, Jenna Rufo states that when she first started teaching in her hometown, she was shocked to learn how the school districts in her state still relied on segregated and self-contained special education programming. She felt as though she was stepping back in time. Also, from my personal experiences as a former special education teacher and current university supervisor for special education intern teachers, I have seen how easy it is for the line between historic mainstreaming and current inclusive practices to become blurred.

For the authors' purposes in this text, inclusive practices are multidimensional and highlight three core components:

1. Students who have any type of educational label being educated together with same-aged peers without labels by teachers who collaborate and co-teach to design lessons for all;
2. Educational spaces being designed to be welcoming to students, where multiple identities are seen and celebrated;
3. Partnerships with families being formed with an understanding of our own and schoolwide biases are examined.

For schools nationwide to become uniformly truly inclusive spaces for all students, the authors of this text suggest that the construct of an inclusive school system be reimagined and reconstructed. Julie Causton details how after landing her first job as a special education teacher she hoped to enter a school system that would embrace her inclusive practices mindset; however, she was met with apprehension and backlash. She found it hard to change these institutionally segregated practices from within.

These coauthors believe that any school can improve their inclusive frameworks, no matter where they are on the continuum of practices currently used in their school system. So, to help other professionals who might be facing the same resistance to change, Causton and company tackle the age-old question, "What concrete steps can a school system take to effectively create an inclusive school system that is functional and equitable to all?"

The Way to Inclusion is designed for any school leadership team that is committed to taking on the challenge of improving their own inclusive frameworks and practices. It is set up to be an easy to use guidebook that provides school-based teams with explicit steps to take along the path to better inclusive practices for educating every student who walks through the doors of a school in their school system. The major components of the book are broken down into an introduction, seven main chapters, and an appendices section, all of which are connected. The authors start out with an overview of the theoretical framework that they created—the Inclusive System Change Path. They explain that this system is grounded in ideas derived from studying five decades of research regarding inclusion and education reform as well as their own personal experiences as former teachers, college professors, and advocates. Similar to a testing blueprint or pacing guide that a teacher would use when designing instruction for their students, the introductory section gives a zoomed out, wide-lens version of the Inclusive System Change Path. It describes the main objective of each chapter (or milestone), provides leadership questions teams should use to assess the current standing of the school's understanding of the topic or success in each field, and a list of action steps to take to achieve each milestone.

The Inclusive System Change Path centers on seven major milestones that the authors believe any facility educating students in a K-12 setting should work toward to achieve real change within their buildings. These milestones would be the equivalent of what educators would use as guiding questions to help design lesson plans. They include:

1. Do we understand why inclusive education is the way forward?
2. Have we seen our school system through an equity lens?
3. Do we have a clear public vision for inclusion and understanding of the needed system-level changes?
4. How can we realign existing service-delivery structures to create an inclusive system?
5. How can we reimagine schedules and collaborative staff roles?
6. Do our educators use powerful inclusive classroom practices?
7. How can we provide ongoing support for this new inclusive system?

Chapters one to seven take an in-depth dive into the steps necessary for schools to achieve each milestone. As the first step in the Inclusive System Change Path continuum, team members are given four main questions to ask themselves regarding the topic of inclusion, both as individuals and as a collective school system. The team members receive coinciding action steps to take for the team to come to a consensus on whether they can answer each question clearly. For example, the first chapter in the book focuses on understanding the importance of inclusive education and why it should be the way forward. The team is then directed to answer the first question, “Is the leadership team clear on what inclusion means?” Ideally, by the end of the chapter, the team will have successfully developed a shared understanding of inclusive education. To aid in the construction and guidance of each chapter, the authors have generously provided an appendix section filled with resources and templates such as a bank copy of the action plan for each school to use.

The chapters are generally well organized and accessible. Any team could successfully use them, including teams consisting of novice teachers, seasoned teachers, or a mix of both. The authors take great care to explain the meaning or context of words or phrases that may be unclear to readers. When asking teams to complete steps, authors provide visual models to convey a clearer understanding of what is expected at each level.

Although the path to greater inclusion is meant to be clear, linear, and sequential, the authors recognize that school teams will undoubtedly run into various barriers and restraints like limitations with common meeting times and struggles to find team members who are fully committed to such a cause. They are realistic with readers. They explain that the work of building pathways for greater inclusion is not something that will be instant. In fact, for lasting change, Causton and colleagues estimate the process covered by the chapters in this volume may take as long as three to five years.

As a special educator and advocate, I can see several ways this book could be used to benefit schools that are ready to commit to better inclusive practices taking place within their walls. For schools with more segregated, outdated practices regarding inclusion, this book can be used as a starting point. It serves as a guidebook with necessary resources so teams just starting along this path do not feel so overwhelmed or have to waste precious time researching to find steps to take and templates to use. For schools that have adequate inclusive practices, but would like to see their strategies improved, this book can also provide a path forward without the task becoming overwhelming to teams with so much already on their plates.

Finally, for schools that feel they have proficient inclusive practices already in place, this book can serve as a way to check that they are fulfilling the best inclusive environments and implementing the best strategies with fidelity.

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About the Reviewer

Kristy McCowan is a doctoral student at Virginia Tech pursuing a degree in curriculum and instruction. For the past four years, she has been a lecturer at Radford University where she teaches graduate and undergraduate special education courses and serves as a university supervisor to interns completing early field placements as a requirement of the special education program. Kristy's personal interests include researching exceptional learners receiving instruction in the current educational climate, as well as researching inclusive teaching strategies being used by educators today. As the mother of a child with a significant intellectual disability and an educator with a strong background in the field of special education, she has a drive for advancing inclusive practices in today's classrooms and ensuring the best educational opportunities are made accessible for students with disabilities in public-school systems throughout the United States.



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