

# MEMBERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION FOR LEARNING

**A Planning Approach to Include Students  
with Complex Support Needs in General Education**

# PURPOSE

This packet is intended for school personnel who want to increase the quantity and quality of educational experiences for students with complex support needs<sup>1</sup> in general education classrooms. The student-planning approach Membership and Participation for Learning (MPL) is highlighted along with related tools, including membership and participation indicators and planning forms.

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<sup>1</sup> *Complex support needs* is an umbrella phrase used to describe students with labels of developmental disabilities such as intellectual disability, autism, Down syndrome, and learners who participate in the alternate assessment. To respect the preferences and perspectives of our community, Evolve & Effect uses both identity- and person-first language. For more information on language, see the [NH Disability RAPP Winter/Spring 2023: Words Matter](#).

## WHY INCLUDE STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX SUPPORT NEEDS IN GENERAL EDUCATION?

The imperative to include students with complex support needs alongside their nondisabled classmates in the school and grade they would attend if they did not have a disability is rooted in three rationales. First, the law provides equal opportunity for it. Second, decades of research show that outcomes for all students are improved when they learn together. And third, those with lived experience with disability request to share in, and learn from, the same experiences as others in their neighborhood. When students learn together, all students have improved educational, social, and employment outcomes. This especially holds true for students with complex support needs.

### 1. It's the law.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grew out of the civil rights movement of the 1950s, when the Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case that “separate but equal” was a violation of the United States Constitution.

Each reauthorization of IDEA has held and strengthened the message that “disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in, or contribute to, society” (IDEA § 601(c)(1)). For students with complex support needs, this federal policy framework calls for high expectations; the provision of supports so that disabled students are involved with, and make progress in, the general education curriculum; learning alongside nondisabled age and grade-level classmates; education in the school they would attend if they did not have a disability; and preparation for college and careers.

Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act establish that discrimination by public entities against disabled children and their families is prohibited.

Federal policy recognizes the legal right for students with complex support needs to attend, participate in, and receive the supports and services necessary for success in the school and class they would attend if they did not have a disability.

### 2. The research supports it.

There is a solid foundation of evidence demonstrating that placement in general education with inclusive educational practices leads to greater outcomes for learners with disabilities. A landmark study, named one of the ten most significant educational studies of 2022 (Terada & Merrill, 2022), found that students in general education settings scored significantly higher on statewide assessments for reading and math than those in special education settings. In addition, it found that disabled learners educated in general education settings were more prepared for successful post-secondary and career opportunities (Cole et al., 2022). These findings are consistent for learners with complex support needs.

Decades of research shows that students with complex support needs do better in inclusive education placements than in segregated settings (Mansouri et al., 2022). They exhibit greater growth in academic achievement, communication, self-determination, and social interaction (Agran et al., 2020). Even within the same school district, comparing students with similarly complex support needs, those who were *included* made greater gains in academics and individualized goals (Gee et al., 2020). This may be due to greater access to the general education curriculum, engagement in curricular activities, educators with content-area expertise, age- and grade-appropriate instructional materials, classmates models, and social engagement and social networks (Agran et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2022; Jameson

et al., 2022). Finally, more restrictive settings do not result in superior outcomes (Kurth & Jackson, 2022; Zagona et al., 2022).

Research shows positive benefits of inclusive education for nondisabled students. Nondisabled classmates who are taught in classrooms with disabled students have consistent or improved academic outcomes (McDonnell et al., 2003). Teachers report multiple positive outcomes for nondisabled classmates related to social or contextual issues, e.g., fewer missed classes, active engagement in lessons, and increased leadership and empathy skills (Carter et al., 2016). Students without disabilities providing supports to students with disabilities experienced positive change in the ways they saw themselves and developed personal qualities such as patience, compassion, outgoingness, kindness, and empathy (Travers & Carter, 2022).

Decades of research recognizes the effectiveness, benefits, and importance of inclusive education for students with complex support needs and their nondisabled classmates.

### **3. Those with lived experience tell us to.**

Educators, family members, disabled students, and self-advocates believe people have the right to be disabled, disability is a natural part of the human condition, and disability should be embraced as an identity with pride. They request that students with complex support needs be included in their local school not only because the laws say so or research shows better outcomes; but also because students with complex support needs have a right to share in, and learn from, the same experiences as others in their neighborhood. Experiencing rich and meaningful lives by learning, working, and playing in the real world is the goal. Membership and belonging are inherent needs within all people.

Learning to value and work with a diversity of people is one of the first steps toward implementing disability-affirming practices. Creating an educational system that achieves high outcomes is built on equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice. Listening to the voices and lived experience of disabled students and adults who reflect the diversity of the human community, and recognizing the assets and gifts each student brings, move educational systems and practices beyond charity and benevolence toward improved outcomes for all. There is a value for differences that is gained when diverse groups of students learn together.

## STUDENT SPECIFIC PRACTICES: MEMBERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION FOR LEARNING

Individual student planning and adaptations are likely to be needed for students with complex support needs. A student-specific planning approach for students with complex support needs was designed, demonstrated, and evaluated by colleagues at the University of New Hampshire (McSheehan et al., 2009; Jorgensen et al., 2010). The methods and tools associated with this model aim to support IEP and school teams as they focus their individual student planning toward increasing the quantity and quality of educational experiences for students with complex support needs.

The theory of action for this approach follows that if a student with complex support needs a) experiences a sense of membership in the general education classroom and b) actively participates in the general curriculum and instruction, they are more likely to achieve learning outcomes that are prioritized for all learners as well as their individualized goals.

In short, full membership and active participation increases learning.

**Figure 1. Membership and Participation for Learning**

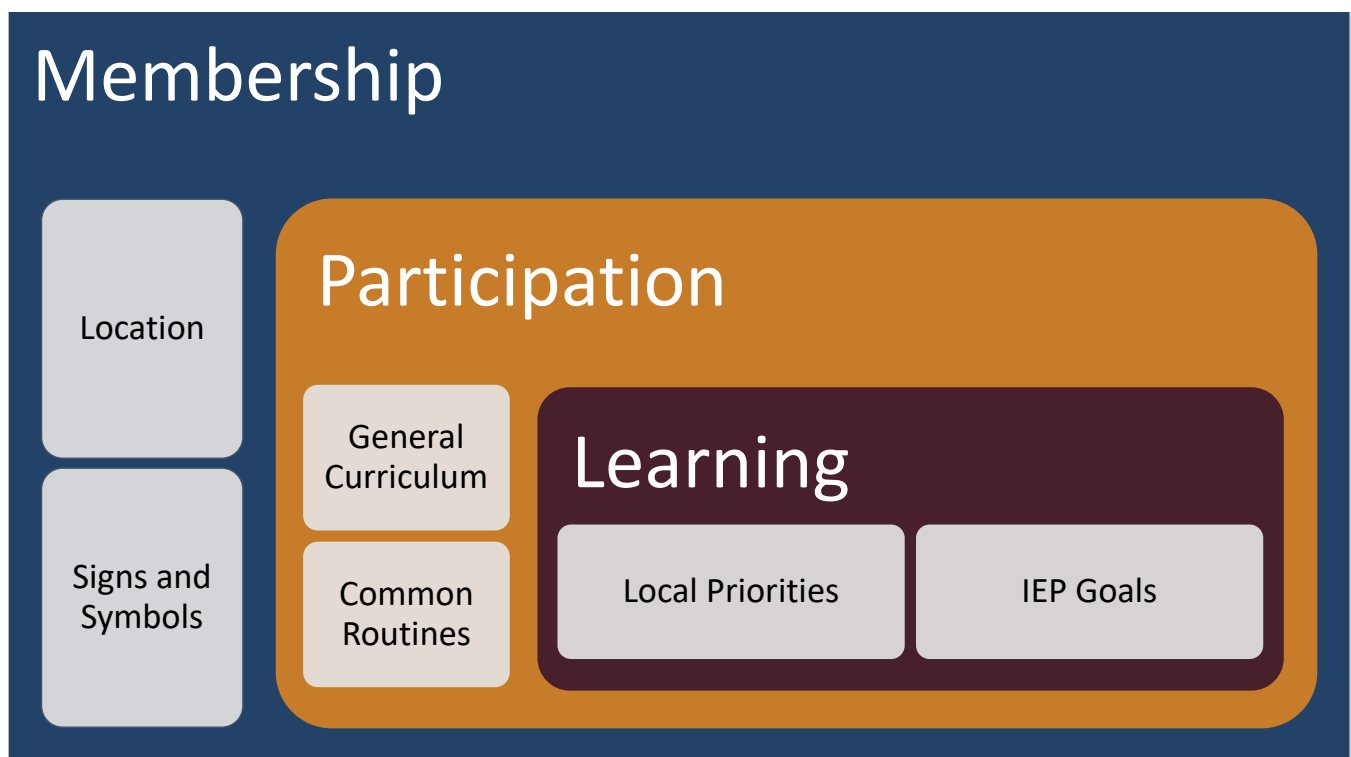


Figure 1 depicts an approach to learning in the context of membership and participation. Learning is situated within *membership* in the general education classroom and *participation* in general education instruction. In this approach, support planning for students' learning must ensure that membership and participation are in place in order to maximize the social opportunities and the academic instruction offered in the general education classroom.

**Membership** in the general education classroom is characterized by students having access to valued social roles and related symbols of belonging. When you walk into a class, what signs let you know that the student belongs? Is their name on the roster? Where do they put their things? When materials are distributed to the class, do they get them? Are students with complex support needs provided with all the same signs and symbols of membership that are provided to other students?

**Participation** in the general education classroom represents the student's active engagement in the social and academic life of the classroom, including in the general curriculum and alongside their nondisabled classmates. Curriculum includes the learning goals, methods/instruction, materials, and assessments. Even though a particular student may not yet be demonstrating academic achievement at the same level as their classmates, participation in the core academic learning *processes* with their classmates is essential to the feeling of belonging and learning. For full participation, a student requires an effective and efficient means of communication. For students with limited or no speech, it is essential to provide augmentative and alternative communication, including linguistically robust language systems. A robust language system would include no fewer than 300+ core words transferrable within a wide range of classes (Zangari, 2014).

**Learning** results from membership and participation. Through membership in the general education classroom and participation in the general curriculum (including instruction led by general educators) alongside nondisabled classmates, students with complex support needs demonstrate both anticipated and unanticipated learning of general curriculum academic content.

## TIPS FOR USING THE INDICATORS

### 1. Adjust supports, not indicators.

Indicators are descriptors, outcomes, or evidence that suggest the student is “included” with their chronologically age-matched, nondisabled classmates in general education classrooms and settings, in the school they would attend if they did not have a disability. Practices and supports are adjusted to achieve the indicators, not the other way around.

### 2. Add relevant indicators.

These Membership and Participation Indicators are intended as a starting place. Teams can add or adjust the indicators to match their local context, while preserving the intent of individual indicators and the commitment to foster equity for disabled students. For example, one team added an indicator about friendship, another added an indicator related to the school’s core values (which inform all their curricula), and another added one about riding the typical bus.

### 3. Have knowledgeable others.

This bank of indicators has evolved through twenty years of input by hundreds of educators across multiple schools, districts, and states. As teams examine and work to put indicators in place, it may be helpful to work with someone with expertise in inclusive education and students with complex support needs.

### 4. Score using “typical” comparisons.

Indicators are scored relative to chronologically age-matched nondisabled classmates in the same general education classes. If it is typical for students to work in pairs once per class or complete an exit ticket before leaving class, those are the comparisons for the student with complex support needs to determine the rating. Indicators are not excluded because it is assumed “This student will never be able to do that.” It is better to have a low indicator score than to create a ceiling of expectations. The indicators are meant to guide the team to create more inclusive educational experiences - not to make disabled students “be just like” their nondisabled classmates.

## SCORING AND PLANNING WITH THE INDICATORS

### STEP 1. Review and confirm the indicators.

Begin by reviewing and selecting the set of indicators to be used for the student or multiple students in a school or district. The indicators of Membership and Participation help teams focus on key aspects of a classroom and school. No two schools are the same. Educators from different schools may have different ways of describing the same activity. Something that serves the same function may be designed and named differently (e.g., a cubby in elementary school becomes a locker in middle school). Not all the indicators listed may apply in your school. You are encouraged to tailor the terminology of indicators to match your culture. You are discouraged from changing the intent of the indicators. If there is a valued aspect of membership or participation in your general education settings that is not captured in the following indicators, please add indicators as needed to fully represent your general education settings.

### STEP 2. Scoring.

The indicators are designed for the context of inclusive education and to inform action-planning for individual students. Originally, we used the indicators as discussion items with IEP teams to generate actions we could take to increase the quantity and quality of inclusive experiences for a student. Over time, teams preferred to score the degree to which indicators were in place. Having the scores helped many teams prioritize their efforts and celebrate their progress over time. The indicators are evaluated relative to chronologically age-matched classmates without disabilities, in the same general education classes and settings. They are not designed for evaluating Membership and Participation in separate, specialized settings.

Because this is for action-planning (not a research project), we find using a general frequency scale (e.g., All, Most, Some, None) gives teams the information they need to identify meaningful next steps. For each indicator, key team members most directly involved with the student in the general education settings should develop consensus and select the score that best represents the current reality. Tally and compute the scores for Membership and Participation at the bottom of each indicator page.

### STEP 3. Action-planning.

Once you have results, identify a few indicators to enhance over a set time period. Some indicators may take very little time to get in place (adding the student's name to the class roster) while others may take longer (communicating/using AAC during small- and large-group content-area instruction). Use the Action Planning Form to identify the indicator(s) you're working on, what supports or practices will be changed, who is responsible, and by when the new approach will be tried. For some items, it will be necessary to try a few different supports and practices before you find the right constellation for this student, in this class, at this time. Remember, the general theory of action is first membership, then participation. Students who are part-time members of their general education classes, or who have a "home base" in a special classroom and visit general education classes for activities and instruction, are likely to display lower levels of participation. You are encouraged to invest first in the student feeling like this is "my class" from the time they arrive in the morning until the time they depart at the end of the day, every day.



# MEMBERSHIP INDICATORS

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Educator Name/Role: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Membership** in the general education classroom is characterized by students having valued social roles and the related signs and symbols of belonging. These membership signs and symbols are the same as their classmates in general education classrooms.

MEMBERSHIP INDICATORS		All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	None of the time	N/A
Attendance is consistent with classmates. The student is on the roster and attends:						
M1	General education class(es)	3	2	1	0	N/A
M2	Core content area classes	3	2	1	0	N/A
M3	Related arts classes	3	2	1	0	N/A
M4	Assemblies, field trips, and other grade or school events	3	2	1	0	N/A
M5	Extracurricular activities, as available	3	2	1	0	N/A
Materials are consistent with the general curriculum, adapted as needed. The student has or receives:						
M6	Desk, seating alongside classmates	3	2	1	0	N/A
M7	Primary texts for each subject area	3	2	1	0	N/A
M8	Supporting handouts and other learning resources	3	2	1	0	N/A
M9	Technology (e.g., laptop, tablet)	3	2	1	0	N/A
Communication and interactions are consistent with classmates. The student:						
M10	Is acknowledged by teacher(s) in the same way as classmates	3	2	1	0	N/A
M11	Is acknowledged by peers in the same way as classmates	3	2	1	0	N/A
M12	Has a robust communication mode/device	3	2	1	0	N/A
Routines are consistent with the class. The student is assigned to:						
M13	Activities, classwork, homework, etc.	3	2	1	0	N/A
M14	Partner and group work	3	2	1	0	N/A
M15	Class jobs or roles	3	2	1	0	N/A
M16	The same location and/or process for turning in assignments	3	2	1	0	N/A
M17	A locker, cubby, or mailbox	3	2	1	0	N/A
						TOTAL = ____ / ____ = ____%

## PARTICIPATION INDICATORS

**Participation** in the general education classroom represents the student’s active engagement with the general education curriculum and social connections with classmates. A student may not yet be demonstrating learning at the same levels but is participating in the learning processes with their classmates.

<b>PARTICIPATION INDICATORS</b>		<b>All of the time</b>	<b>Most of the time</b>	<b>Some of the time</b>	<b>None of the time</b>	<b>N/A</b>
Transitions are consistent with classmates.						
P1	The student transitions between classes with other students, arriving and departing on time.	3	2	1	0	N/A
P2	The student transitions in and out of class(es) (e.g., to use the restroom) in a manner consistent with classmates (e.g., teacher permission, sign in/out).	3	2	1	0	N/A
The student participates in typical locations, at typical times, with grade-level classmates and general education teacher during _____.						
P3	Common classroom and school routines (e.g., Pledge of Allegiance, attendance, jobs, school assemblies, field trips)	3	2	1	0	N/A
P4	Extracurricular activities (e.g., recess, clubs, sports)	3	2	1	0	N/A
P5	Core content, curriculum-based lessons (e.g., reading, math)	3	2	1	0	N/A
P6	Related arts content, curriculum-based lessons (e.g., PE, music)	3	2	1	0	N/A
P7	Completion of curriculum-based assignments and other learning products (e.g., worksheets, essays, posters, assessments)	3	2	1	0	N/A
The student communicates in a way that is consistent with their communication style, with an array of messages and modes (e.g., speech or written output) needed for participation _____.						
P8	When called on by the teacher: sharing information	3	2	1	0	N/A
P9	When at the board: writing answers, drawing figures	3	2	1	0	N/A
P10	During whole-class discussion: brainstorming, calling-out answers, taking notes, socializing	3	2	1	0	N/A
P11	During small-group discussion: commenting, sharing information, taking notes, socializing	3	2	1	0	N/A
P12	During non-academic contexts (e.g., recess, lunch, homeroom/advisory): commenting, sharing information, socializing	3	2	1	0	N/A
TOTAL = _____ / _____ = _____%						

## ACTION PLANNING FORM

For: \_\_\_\_\_

Select one to three indicators for improvement. First, prioritize Membership Indicators and, for students with limited or unreliable speech, provision of robust augmentative communication support.

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Actions, Supports, and Practices to Try</b>	<b>Person(s) Responsible</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Status/Notes</b>

## SITUATE STUDENT SPECIFIC PRACTICES IN SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGES

Effective and sustainable inclusive education is situated in a school-wide or district-wide approach. This includes, at a minimum, the following four arenas:

1. A common framework for teaching and learning that addresses student variability and is responsive to diversity, such as Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) or/and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). See, for example, [Braiding MTSS and UDL](#) by McSheehan & Nelson (2023).
2. Strategic use of resources (like space and staff via a purposeful service-delivery model). See, for example, [Precarious or Purposeful? Proactively Building Inclusive Special Education Service Delivery on Solid Ground](#) by Giangreco & Suter (2015).
3. Collaborative teams using data for learner and systems decision-making. See, for example, this [overview video](#) or this [handout](#) on Team-Initiated Problem Solving (TIPS) by Todd et al. (2014).
4. Culture and climate curated to the values of equity and inclusion. See, for example, [Disability-Affirming Education: Indicators for Classrooms, Schools, and Districts](#) by Schuh & McSheehan (2023).

To fully implement these practices and sustain the changes over time, an implementation team would seek to understand and address context-specific considerations based on the local system, structures, and leadership capacity.

## RESOURCES FOR ACTION PLANNING

**Barrier and Solution Examples.** To assist teams during action planning with mpl, below are examples of barriers and solutions for a sampling of the indicators.

### Membership: Attendance Indicators

Barrier	Solution Examples
Practice	During preparation for school opening, make sure the student is assigned to general education classes.
Knowledge	Unpack myths about students with complex support needs and provide accurate information.
Environment	Ensure the physical and sensory environments are accessible for the student.
Student Need	Visit the general education classroom when it's empty, build rapport between student and teacher.
Policy	Address formal or informal policies or procedures, such as assigning students to their case manager's classroom, which result in the student's name not being on the general rosters.

### Membership: Materials Indicators

Barrier	Solution Examples
Practice	Educators use UDL to design, deliver, and evaluate curriculum and environments. Educators identify and remove barriers in pre-prepared units and lessons. Educators provide individual adaptations, as needed.
Knowledge	Educators presume the student with complex support needs is competent to learn and communicate.
Environment	Flexible seating options are provided for all students.
Student Need	Provide accessible texts and materials. Use multiple media options when appropriate. Adapt reading level of texts, as needed.
Policy	Address formal or informal policies or procedures, such as separate curriculum for students on the alternate assessment, which restrict involvement with the general curriculum.

## Participation: Communication Indicators

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Solution Examples</b>
Practice	Educators presume the student with complex support needs is competent to learn and communicate.
Knowledge	Educators provide linguistically robust communication device with 300+ core vocabulary across a range of word classes (e.g., pronouns, verbs, modifiers, prepositions). Educators and classmates model use of augmentative and alternative communication, all day, every day.
Environment	Multiple means of communication are used across environments by educators and classmates.
Student Need	Encourage students to explore new communication supports without conditions for mastery.
Policy	Address formal or informal policies or procedures, such as using cognitive skills as prerequisite criteria for services or supports, which result in absent or restrictive communication options.

## Common Routines Planning

To get the most out of planning for participation, identify frequently occurring, common routines. By developing a plan for these routines, the team is not constantly re-planning day-by-day, class-by-class. The team can plan for a routine, like whole class instruction or small group discussion, and use that plan across multiple classes or content areas. The charts below provide starting point for two general categories: instructional routines and daily routines.

1. For each routine, describe what it looks like when nondisabled classmates participate in it. In particular, how do you know they are participating? What observable things do they do that let you know they are engaged? For example, classmates might be taking notes, making comments, raising their hand, watching the teacher, or looking at the instructional materials.
  - a. Caution: this is not intended to be a list of behavioral expectations for compliance. It is about setting the target for what the team needs to put in place so the student with complex support needs can show participation in a manner consistent with classmates.
2. For each way that classmates show they are participating in a routine, determine if the student with complex support needs will show that using the same or alternate means. For example, if classmates are “calling out answers” to show they are participating in a whole-class discussion, a student with limited speech may show that using an alternate means, an augmentative communication device pre-programmed with messages that fit the situation.
3. Determine what supports might allow the student to show they are participating.
4. Use the action planning form to make a plan for how the team will get those supports in place.
5. Finally, decide how they will monitor and adjust the supports over time, until the right constellation of supports are in place for each common routine.

Bonus: the completed, common routines charts are helpful to substitute educators!

## Common Instructional Routines

Routine	What it looks like for all students...	Supports for Student to Participate
Beginning/End of Class		
Whole Class Instruction		
Whole Class Discussion		
Partner Work		
Small Group Work		
Independent Work		
Writing		
Assessments		



## Common Daily Routines

Routine	What it looks like for all students...	Supports for Student to Participate
Arrival / Dismissal		
Homeroom		
Advisory		
Lunch		
Recess		
Navigating Hallway		
Locker/Backpack		
Assemblies & Whole-school events		
Bathroom		

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