

# Recommended Best Practices for Inclusive Education: *High School*



Research over the past 40 years has shown us the ways in which having Down syndrome may impact learning and development. When we understand these differences, we can design more effective interventions and educational strategies to support students with Down syndrome. The practices outlined in this resource are excerpted from *Down Syndrome: Guidelines for Inclusive Education*, a document developed by the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) and Down Syndrome Education International to improve the development and educational outcomes for individuals with Down syndrome. This resource addresses birth through preschool years. Please refer to our other resources for information on other age groups.

## Supports & Environment

High schools should be supported in embracing the opportunity to include students with Down syndrome with typically developing peers. This support must include an understanding of the student's educational, emotional, and social needs. It is essential that staff recognize that the student must be treated in an age-appropriate way despite language and cognitive delays.

Many students with Down syndrome make significant progress in all areas of their development during their teenage years and early adult life, if given the opportunities to do so. They are teenagers when they reach high school and will be aware of and part of the local teenage culture (music, sports, fashion, etc.). Their physical development and the onset of puberty is at the same age as their peers. Like all young people, developing self-esteem and a positive self-identity is influenced by the way others treat them and the opportunities they have to learn, make choices, and take responsibility.

## Collaboration With Families

Parent or guardian support should be highly valued by staff in schools. School teams should use the parents' extensive knowledge base of Down syndrome and of the individual. Schools should make additional opportunities for ongoing communication between school staff and parents. This is essential due to the language and communication deficits of students with Down syndrome. It also ensures that skills taught at home and in the school setting are supported and generalized, leading to greater student success.

Day-to-day communication with parents may include support in the form of the student bringing equipment or materials to school each day, communication regarding homework and assignments, etc. One lead professional should be designated to communicate with parents, providing a single point of contact. This individual should also be the professional charged with managing the student's curriculum, goals, and IEP. In addition to meeting with the special education and lead teacher, parents should be able to request meetings with all teaching staff (in a parent conference) at any time.

Professional development should be provided to key individuals who are able to disseminate information to staff as a student's support team may change from year to year.

## **Schedules & Grouping**

School staff should promote and develop independence in students with Down syndrome in lessons and in navigating the school setting, as well as during non-structured times (breaks and lunches). Students need to spend time with their typically developing peers with minimal to no adult support to enable the development of peer support, friendships, and independence.

Student schedules should be created with flexibility in order to meet individual needs and facilitate a mix of small-group and individual instruction (no more than 10-15% of the total school day) that complements the whole group activities of a typical grade-level schedule. Flexibility around scheduling during the high school years will be essential to meeting the individual learning needs and interests of students with Down syndrome. Schedules should be presented to students in a visual format to promote independence and understanding of each day's events.

Students with Down syndrome should spend most of their time in classes with their typically developing peers who are positive role models of learning and behavior. These inclusive environments are also rich in language and promote increased language and literacy acquisition for all learners. Some time may be spent in needs-based settings, depending on the student's ability in certain disciplines, usually for a portion of reading and math instruction. Groups should be created based on a similarity of need and should not be outside of the student's chronological age and grade level. Additionally, a small percentage of time may be spent in small groups for specific instruction in communication, social skills, and sex and relationship education.

Withdrawal from whole or partial lessons with one-to-one support is generally required to address writing skills, reading skills, specific speech and language work, and learning curriculum vocabulary. One to two lessons per week is likely to be required for focused, individualized work on objectives and developing these core skills. For many students, this can be accomplished during a study hall period and will provide very little disruption to engagement in the general education curriculum.

## **Assessments & IEPs**

IEPs for students with Down syndrome must be clear, informative and show a good knowledge of the individual and their needs. They should include expected outcomes, who will be involved and when goals and targets should be achieved. At this stage, students with Down syndrome should be playing an integral role in creating their IEP.

Schools should also provide a summary that may include a photo of the individual strengths, weaknesses and needs of the student as well as strategies to accommodate expressed student needs for the many teachers, teacher assistants (SAs) and paraprofessionals who work across curriculum areas.

### Related Services

High schools should utilize the support of related service providers in the creation and delivery of educational services to students with Down syndrome. Educational psychologists, special area teachers, speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists are among the professionals that may have input regarding services and accommodations that will be appropriate to increase student success. Speech and language therapy services in high school should, at a minimum, involve quarterly visits to monitor student progress. This should also include consultation to the educational team regarding strategies for support, the implementation of programs to support language development as it relates to curricular needs, social language development, and possibly advising a TA or paraprofessional in supporting social language skills during small group social and instructional activities.

It is important that information and reports from external specialists are available and accessed by staff who work with the student. The lead educator may oversee dissemination of this information to the team.

### Key Teaching Areas

Teaching literacy and numeracy, basic reading and number skills, should continue as most teenagers will be able to make steady progress and some will show marked improvement in these academic skills during teenage years. They can be made meaningful and linked to practical applications that students see as relevant, including using social media.

Behavior and social skills should be addressed as key areas contributing to the development of the student with Down syndrome. Explicitly teaching age-appropriate behavior, social skills, and social communication should be a priority for this age group.

Any behavior issues should be viewed within the context of general teenage development. Strategies should be developed to address negative behaviors, promote the desired replacement behavior, and encourage positive social skills.

The intervention strategies employed should consider the specific profile of speech, language, and communication needs associated with Down syndrome. Strategies must use a visual approach, simple, familiar language, and praise for success. An example of behavior intervention includes an individualized social story. A social story is a short story that depicts a social situation that the student may encounter. These are used to teach communal skills through the use of precise and sequential information about everyday events that a student may find difficult or confusing.

Inclusive, positive attitudes to behavior should be shown by school personnel, and the interpretation of behavior and discipline policies or codes of conduct should take into account the learning profile and any deficits of the student with Down syndrome. Sex and relationship education during the high school years is best delivered in small groups in addition to whole-group instruction. Curriculum must include instruction in different types of relationships, ways of relating within different relationships, and assertiveness, including concepts of consent. This instruction should cover a comprehensive range of skills that would typically be acquired through incidental learning during adolescence. Information about managing relationships and dating, as well as differentiated instruction (greater number of sessions and more in-depth, explicit instruction) of the school's curriculum should be delivered to the student.

## **Independence Skills**

Not all students end up pursuing higher education after high school graduation. Some students choose to go directly into the workforce. It is important for schools to offer courses that teach skills needed in the workforce. However, these sorts of courses should not just be offered to students with disabilities. Independent skills and work experience courses benefit all students. Any work experience or life skills courses, such as cooking, can be done alongside typically developing peers.

Students with Down syndrome should participate in the same curriculum as their peers, and they should not be pulled out of the general education classroom to be taught a life skills or functional living-directed curriculum.

## **Teachers & Staff**

Should issues arise, all members of an educational team (general educators, special educators, service providers, support professionals, and administration) must be prepared to engage, support, or intervene with the student with Down syndrome about both their learning and behavior. This requires everyone to have the same training and be familiar with strategies being used with a particular student to ensure consistency. Special education teachers must plan for and lead differentiation and accommodations so students with Down syndrome can take part in the lesson, not “fill in” activities which are unrelated to the subject topic.

Differentiation must be carried out in accordance with the student’s IEP for each subject by the team responsible for teaching that subject to the individual. The special educator (accommodation or modification specialist) and the general educator (content specialist) must work in conjunction to ensure that the general education curriculum can be accessed in a meaningful way by the student. If TA or paraprofessional support is required, this staff member will work under the direction of the special and general educators. Allocating subject-based TAs or a paraprofessional that is familiar with individualized approaches to the student may facilitate this process.

Teachers should be aware of the speech, language, and communication abilities of students with Down syndrome and accommodate their teaching materials accordingly. Instruction should be accommodated with the related service needs and student learning profile in mind. Doing so will allow students to engage with the greatest level of independence.

Professional development in planning and accommodations should be offered regularly to ensure that special education teachers and other subject teachers working with the student are aware of appropriate strategies and best practices to support individual student needs.

Student records and instructional data, including present levels of performance, must be available in a common accessible location so that all teaching staff can access the information about the current levels of achievement for the student with Down syndrome. Access to up-to-date, comprehensive performance data will help teachers design student-specific instruction.

### Teachers & Staff, continued

Often, committees on special education will recommend additional adult support in the form of a TA or 1:1 aide. This additional layer of support allows for more specialized instruction in social-emotional learning, academic skills and adaptive skills development. All of the aforementioned areas must be planned for, and lessons and interventions must be provided to a paraprofessional for delivery under the direction of the professional staff members.

In addition to implementing this support, TAs and paraprofessionals are able, in addition to implementing these supports, to plan for and deliver instruction independent of professional staff. TAs and paraprofessionals should work collaboratively with teachers as a full team member. They can become skilled at making resources to meet curriculum and learning needs, in consultation with the special education teacher and subject area teachers. Additionally, TAs and paraprofessionals can contribute to the assessment and monitoring of skill development and achievements of students.

Teachers must share planning and content for lessons and homework with TAs and paraprofessionals. These individuals should also be involved in curriculum planning and review.

Limited time can be a huge barrier and must be considered by principals and special education directors. Additional time should be made available for teachers, TAs and paraprofessionals to meet and plan the accommodations and specially designed instruction for the student with Down syndrome. We

### Diplomas & Credentials

In addition to celebrating the achievements of the student, consideration must be given to their achieving accreditation and/or qualifications that will enable them to realize their goals (e.g., achieving diplomas or credentials that are a prerequisite for specific courses, vocational or on-the-job training, or employment opportunities outside of school). Each year, during the student's annual review, consideration must be given to the postsecondary goals of the student, and educational supports and programs should be incorporated to support those goals.

Many students with Down syndrome can complete high school-level cumulative assessments that are a prerequisite for a standard diploma or credential attainment (e.g., New York State Regents Exams or California High School Exit Exam). Accommodated and/or modified assessments need to be provided where appropriate and permitted for individuals with disabilities.



## **Transition Planning**

IDEA mandates transition planning for students begin at age 16 and continue each year thereafter; many states require this work to begin even earlier. Transition planning should be student-centered, focusing on the individual's aspirations, talents, and interests, and it should form the basis for planning into young adulthood, rather than focusing only on the next stage of education. Plans and opportunities should be sought to effectively prepare the young person for post-high school life and employment. As a best practice, transition planning should begin as early as reasonably possible but no later than age 14 to have maximum benefit. It should address course of study, program goals, work-based learning experiences (to be done outside of school), and social skill development that will ensure post-high school success. The IEP team should deliberately seek out the direct input of the student by including them in meetings and incorporating their wishes as a primary component of the plan.

Families should elect to access local agency teams (e.g., ARC, ACCESS-VR, etc.) who provide essential support, respite care, and funding. These agencies can also provide support for transitions after high school for students moving on to college or seeking employment. Students with Down syndrome should have access to the same curricular choices during high school as typically developing peers. Such opportunities may include dual credit courses, vocational training, and work-based learning placements in the community outside of school hours.

For more information on transition planning see "A Transition Guide" from the United States Department of Education: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/postsecondary-transition-guide-august-2020.pdf>)

## **Post-Secondary Education**

While options for inclusive and supportive educational placements at the elementary and secondary levels are becoming more prevalent across the U.S., there remains a need to create inclusive opportunities at the higher education level. In the past, students with Down syndrome who had completed their elementary and secondary studies in inclusive environments may have been closed off to continuing educational courses due to the learning disabilities associated with the Down syndrome diagnosis. To date, there are an increasing number of institutions of higher education (community colleges, private colleges, and universities) that are creating inclusive opportunities for students with various disabilities. For more information on higher education and training see Think College resources at <https://thinkcollege.net/>.

The complete version of *Down Syndrome: Guidelines for Inclusive Education* can be found online:  
[www.ndss.org/inclusive-education-guidelines](http://www.ndss.org/inclusive-education-guidelines)