# Nebraska’s inclusive education model boosts outcomes for students with disabilities



When Bethany Jolliffe began her career as a kindergarten teacher 15 years ago, she observed a prevalent divide in classrooms: general education teachers kept to their designated students, while special education instructors focused on those with disabilities. This separation often manifested in the form of pulled-out sessions, where students with disabilities were taken out of their classrooms and isolated from their peers for significant portions of the day. However, Jolliffe’s approach has shifted dramatically since then, especially in her current role as assistant principal at Westmoor Elementary in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, where an inclusive model for teaching has taken root.

At Westmoor, students of varying abilities learn alongside one another, thanks to a dedicated push towards inclusive education. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals actively engage in co-teaching environments, where they collaboratively support all students. Wendy Kemling-Horner, executive director of student services in Scottsbluff, encapsulated this philosophy, stating, “Kids don’t earn their way into a general ed classroom. That’s where they belong.”

This commitment to inclusion is part of a broader statewide initiative launched by Nebraska in 2022, called “Journey to Inclusion.” In response to concerning educational outcomes and gaps exacerbated by the pandemic, this programme aims to foster inclusive practices across the state, ensuring that students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers in general classrooms for the majority of their day. Over the past few years, Nebraska has invested nearly $1 million in federal COVID relief funds into this initiative, steering the focus from mere classroom presence to active engagement and academic progression.

The state has seen promising early outcomes. Between 2021 and 2024, the percentage of third-grade students with disabilities proficient in math rose from 18% to 29%. Additionally, the graduation rate for special education students improved from 65% to nearly 70% in the same time frame. Such achievements resonate with research that indicates inclusive settings not only foster better academic performance for students with disabilities but also enhance their social skills and peer relationships.

Nebraska's experience stands in stark contrast to how many states approach inclusive education. Across the nation, it is typical for students with disabilities to remain segregated for substantial portions of their day. Data indicates that while around 29% of kindergarten students with disabilities spend less than 80% of their time in general education settings, Nebraska boasts an impressive inclusion rate of 88% for this age group, making it the second-highest in the country.

However, adverse trends persist. Nationally, many states continue to struggle with proper inclusion practices, where students, particularly young ones, are often placed into self-contained classrooms prematurely. Jordan Lukins, a teaching professor at North Carolina State University, highlighted the implications of this, stating, "It’s very problematic when we decide immediately when a student comes into kindergarten that they need to be in a self-contained placement."

The quality of inclusion is paramount, and concerns have arisen regarding resource availability in classrooms and the preparedness of teachers. Reports suggest that despite efforts towards inclusion, the effectiveness of these practices is still variable, with some states witnessing a drop in academic performance even as they tout high inclusion rates. A sobering reminder of these challenges can be seen through recent inquiries by Nebraska lawmakers into the participation of special education students in the state’s 'option enrollment' program, which allows families to select their school districts. Lawmakers are investigating potential discriminatory practices affecting students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Despite the hurdles—such as a shortage of qualified special education teachers and increased educator burnout—Nebraska remains focused on refining its practices through ongoing support and professional development. The state aims to ensure that education is not only accessible but equitable for all students. This commitment is echoed by Amy Rhone, state director of Nebraska's Office of Special Education, who acknowledged, "Every educator is taking more ownership for kids… we have real pockets of excellence across our state that are saying, 'Nope, all kids are our kids.'"

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, Nebraska’s pioneering approach to inclusion serves as a compelling case study for other states grappling with similar issues. The ongoing commitment to ensure that every child, regardless of their needs, has a rightful place in educational settings offers hope and a pathway for better outcomes in the inclusive education landscape.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.nj.com/education/2025/06/this-state-is-rethinking-how-we-teach-kids-with-disabilities-and-seeing-promising-results.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.nj.com/education/2025/06/this-state-is-rethinking-how-we-teach-kids-with-disabilities-and-seeing-promising-results.html), [[4]](https://www.education.ne.gov/press_release/journey-to-inclusion-project/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.kcur.org/2024-12-18/nebraska-education-officials-encourage-inclusion-for-special-education-can-schools-make-it-work), [[5]](https://www.education.ne.gov/sped/journey-to-inclusion/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.nebraskaexaminer.com/2024/11/07/lawmakers-probe-special-education-option-enrollment-among-nebraska-school-districts/), [[6]](https://www.1011now.com/2024/11/08/lawmakers-probe-special-education-option-enrollment-among-nebraska-school-districts/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/inclusion/appendix_table4.aspx)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.nj.com/education/2025/06/this-state-is-rethinking-how-we-teach-kids-with-disabilities-and-seeing-promising-results.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.kcur.org/2024-12-18/nebraska-education-officials-encourage-inclusion-for-special-education-can-schools-make-it-work> - Nebraska education officials are promoting inclusion for special education students, aiming to integrate them into general education classrooms. However, challenges such as a shortage of qualified special education teachers and increased teacher burnout complicate the implementation of this model. The state is exploring strategies to support both educators and students in this transition.
3. <https://www.nebraskaexaminer.com/2024/11/07/lawmakers-probe-special-education-option-enrollment-among-nebraska-school-districts/> - Nebraska lawmakers are investigating how to facilitate the participation of special education students in the state's 'option enrollment' program, which allows families to choose different public school districts. Concerns have been raised about potential discrimination against students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) during the enrollment process.
4. <https://www.education.ne.gov/press_release/journey-to-inclusion-project/> - The Nebraska Department of Education has launched the 'Journey to Inclusion' project to enhance inclusive education for students with disabilities. The initiative focuses on professional development and support for schools to create opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers.
5. <https://www.education.ne.gov/sped/journey-to-inclusion/> - Nebraska's 'Journey to Inclusion' project aims to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities by implementing evidence-based practices and providing grants to districts for continuous improvement. The project emphasizes inclusive education as a framework for equitable programming.
6. <https://www.1011now.com/2024/11/08/lawmakers-probe-special-education-option-enrollment-among-nebraska-school-districts/> - Nebraska lawmakers are examining the participation of special education students in the state's 'option enrollment' program, which allows families to choose different public school districts. The investigation focuses on ensuring equitable access and addressing potential discrimination against students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).
7. <https://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/inclusion/appendix_table4.aspx> - The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides data on the inclusion rates of students with disabilities in regular classrooms across various states. The data highlights the percentage of students with disabilities who spend 40% and 80% or more time inside regular classes, offering insights into inclusion practices in education.