

**Statement of Rachel Burton, Policy Specialist, The Arc of the District of Columbia
Regarding the State of Special Education and the Strategy for Inclusion
Before the Committee of the Whole
December 12, 2008**

Good morning Chairman Gray and Councilmembers. Thank you very much for holding this important hearing today regarding the state of special education and the strategy for inclusion. My name is Rachel Burton, and I am the Policy Specialist at The Arc of the District of Columbia (The Arc of DC). The Arc of DC is a 58 year-old nonprofit membership organization that serves individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families through supports and advocacy. Our goal is to ensure that people with disabilities have the opportunity to live, learn, work, and spend their leisure time alongside their neighbors as valued members of the Washington, DC community. We believe that inclusive educational opportunities pave the way for individuals with disabilities to contribute to and have an impact on their communities.

As Ms. Meccariello and others have stated, the District historically has used a segregated model for educating its students with disabilities, and unfortunately, this model has not recognized the ability of students with special needs to learn in environments with their same age peers. And as Ms. Wills-Henry story illustrates, separate special education centers have not allowed students with disabilities to achieve academically nor has it fostered friendships and social interaction of students of all abilities. The District must move toward a system of inclusive education that recognizes all students' abilities and bridges the gap between traditional general education and special education. My testimony will address what an inclusive system might look like and will outline the key elements that need to be in place for successful inclusion here in the District.

Inclusion is different from mainstreaming in that mainstreaming occurs only in specific subjects and activities where a student with a disability is able to keep up with the general education curriculum. Inclusion, on the other hand, occurs in all aspects of the school environment and in all classrooms, as students with and without disabilities learn together. Inclusion stems from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) fundamental requirement of the Least

Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE states that students with disabilities are to be educated with their peers without disabilities and that special classrooms, separate schools, and pullout methods are to be used only when students with disabilities cannot be properly educated in the general education classroom with the use of supplementary aids and services.

While a legal definition of inclusion does not currently exist, The National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion provides a framework for our discussion through their definition of inclusion:

“Providing to all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare [all] students for productive lives as full members of society.”¹

Inclusion is predicated on the beliefs that all students have the ability to learn and that not all students learn the same way. As a result, curriculum needs to be tailored to address the diversity of learning needs of students in the classroom and should not be adapted solely for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Rather, the curriculum should take into consideration the learning styles, language, knowledge, diversity, background, and interests of the students in the classroom—a concept known as differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction was a model that started in the general education classroom that was designed to help students who were gifted and not adequately challenged. Differentiated instruction has since shifted to a model of teaching and learning for all students in the same classroom, regardless of ability. According to the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum, “The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student’s growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process.”² In essence, differentiated instruction allows all students the opportunity to learn by providing more accessible curriculum to students.

The Arc of DC envisions this kind of inclusion—where students of all abilities learn and work together in the same classroom through tailored curriculum addressing the strengths of all

¹ http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu/resourceFiles/resourceFile_18.pdf

² <http://www.cast.org/system/galleries/download/ncac/DifInstruc.pdf>

students. The Arc of DC is excited about District of Columbia Public Schools' (DCPS) move toward differentiated instruction through the Schoolwide Application Model (SAM) that is currently being piloted in eight elementary schools in the District. The Arc of DC recognizes that inclusion cannot happen overnight; it will take time. It is necessary to have all the supports and services in place for students before they enter the general education classroom as well as for training to have occurred for teachers, principals, administrators, and related service providers. It is also vital to educate parents about the benefits of inclusion and address concerns such as the fear of sending a student with a disability to an unsafe school or the hesitancy that a professional—be it a teacher, principal, paraprofessional, or related service provider—is adequately trained to support their child.

Elements for successful inclusion:

- An ideological shift away from special education centers, special education classrooms, and pull out programs.
- An overall commitment by DCPS and Public Charter Schools to making inclusion work.
- Buy in from general education, special education, and the community at large.
- Accessible classrooms and school facilities that incorporate principles of Universal Design (in every school).
- Technology and assistive technology to reach all learners.
- A willingness to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities (such as extended time on testing) so that they are able to achieve their full potential.

Successfully transitioning to inclusion also requires that agencies and organizations work together. The complexities of every student's individual needs necessitates coordination between all child, youth, and, in cases of transition, adult serving organizations. This helps to best support students. For example, a 17 year old student with a disability in a DCPS school might also be in a foster home and have mental health needs. To adequately serve this student, it is vital that DCPS, Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), Department of Mental Health (DMH), and Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) (and potentially other agencies) be in contact with one another to fully support him/her. Communication among and between agencies will aid in providing all supports and services this youth needs and is entitled to and would reduce duplication of service provision in different agencies.

Not only do agencies need to work together to support students, but it is paramount that agencies share data and information with each other as well as with community organizations to be able to gauge where the system is currently and where we would like to go. This would be a way to benchmark success and document shortcomings so that one year from now we can easily judge the District's progress in inclusively educating students with special needs. These recommendations along with the following data points are a result of a needs assessment I have been conducting since joining The Arc of DC in June in which I talked to families, community based organizations, and government officials and staff.

Additional easily comprehensible data will aid in inclusion implementation planning such as:

- A list of all services provided each neighborhood school.
- Professional development opportunities available, the popularity of specific courses, and the number of teachers and principals taking advantage of them.
- The overarching need in the city of specific programs and services to better support the needs of students.
- The number of students with disabilities in each school.
- Student transfer patterns.
- The level of parental involvement of parents of children with special needs.
- The number of students per disability category.
- The number of students with compliant IEPs and transition plans.
- The number of students being evaluated for special education services.

In closing, The Arc of DC believes that inclusive education best supports the needs of all students both academically and socially. The Arc of DC would like to thank the Committee of the Whole for holding this hearing today, and I look forward to your questions. Thank you.