

How to Talk with Teachers About Inclusion — Without Burning Bridges

Inclusion conversations can feel loaded. Teachers may feel defensive. Parents may feel unheard. Both may feel protective. And when a child has significant needs, emotions run even higher.

But here's something important: Most teachers are not trying to deny services. Most parents are not trying to be difficult. Everyone wants the child to succeed.

The challenge is how to talk about placement without turning it into a battle of ideology. Here's how to do that.

1. Start with Shared Goals

Before discussing placement, establish common ground.

Instead of: "This placement isn't working."

Try: "I know we all want my child to make meaningful progress and build independence. That's my goal today."

This shifts the tone from criticism to collaboration. It reminds everyone: we're on the same team.

2. Separate Inclusion from Access

Instead of: "Inclusion is bad."

Try: "I want to understand how my child is accessing instruction in this setting."

This invites explanation rather than defensiveness. Teachers are more open to discussing access than defending inclusion.

3. Use Curiosity Instead of Accusation

Instead of: “This is inappropriate.”

Try: “Can you help me understand how this placement is supporting measurable progress on IEP goals?”

Curiosity lowers walls. Data-centered questions keep the discussion productive.

4. Acknowledge Teacher Reality

Instead of: “You’re not providing appropriate supports for my child.”

Try: “I recognize that differentiating across such a wide range of needs is challenging. I appreciate the effort you’re putting in.”

This does not weaken your advocacy. It builds relational capital. When teachers feel respected, they are more willing to problem-solve.

5. Focus on Data, Not Emotion

It is completely normal to feel protective, frustrated, worried, or angry. But meetings move forward best when centered on evidence: progress monitoring, work samples, behavioral data, independence growth.

Instead of: “My child is not making progress.”

Try: “Can we look at data from the last quarter and evaluate whether growth is consistent?”

Remember: Federal law (IDEA) requires meaningful progress appropriate to your child’s circumstances—not just minimal gains (*Endrew F.*, 2017).

Focusing on data keeps us aligned with that standard.

6. Avoid Absolute Statements

Instead of:

- “This never works.”
- “Inclusion is harmful.”
- “This is illegal.”
- “You’re ignoring my child.”

Try: “I’m concerned that meaningful progress may not be occurring. I’d like us to examine whether this is the least restrictive and appropriate setting for my child.”

This keeps the conversation professional and grounded in law.

7. Recognize the Difference Between Teacher and System

Sometimes placement concerns are systemic: staffing shortages, caseload overload, limited program options, district mandates. The classroom teacher does not control those factors.

Instead of: “I don’t think you’re trying hard enough.”

Try: “If this setting isn’t producing progress, how can we work together to explore other options?”

That keeps the tone forward-focused.

8. Understand Teacher Fears

Teachers sometimes worry that questioning inclusion means we don't value it, that we're accusing them of low expectations, or that it implies discrimination.

Instead of: "I think you are trying to deny my child an appropriate education."

Try: "I absolutely believe in high expectations. I just want to make sure the expectations align with instruction my child can access."

That reduces tension immediately.

9. Know When to Escalate — Calmly

If concerns are dismissed or data is unclear, it is your right to speak up and ask for clarity.

Instead of: "You are wrong and I won't agree to this!"

Try: "I respect the team's perspective. At this time, I'm not convinced this placement is resulting in meaningful progress for my child. I'd like to document that concern and continue reviewing options."

You can be firm without being hostile. Advocacy does not require aggression.

10. Protect the Long-Term Relationship

Your child will likely interact with these educators for months or years. Strong advocacy and strong relationships can coexist.

After the meeting, consider sending a short follow-up email: "Thank you for your time and for the discussion today. I appreciate everyone's effort to support my child."

That simple gesture preserves goodwill—even when you disagree.

11. Request Prior Written Notice When Needed

If the team is moving forward with a placement decision you don't fully support, calmly say: "I'd like to request Prior Written Notice of the team's placement decision and the data used to support it, so we can continue working together on next steps. I would like the PWN to also address what placements are not being considered and the rationale for that decision."

This is your legal right and creates a clear record without escalating tension.

The Balanced Perspective

Inclusion conversations are not about winning. They are about alignment.

The real goal is not inclusion, exclusion, philosophy, or optics. The goal is:

- Meaningful progress
- Growing independence
- Dignity
- Access

When everyone keeps those at the center, discussions become productive instead of polarized.

Final Encouragement for Parents

You can be calm and firm. Data-driven and compassionate. Respectful and unwavering.

You do not have to choose between kindness and clarity. The strongest advocates are often the quietest, most prepared voices in the room.

And when you lead with respect, teachers are far more likely to walk with you—instead of bracing against you.