

ACSI

Leading

Insights



Special Education and Inclusion



Leading Insights



Special Education and Inclusion



© 2021 by the Association of Christian Schools International

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of ACSI.

Views expressed in this book are those of the contributing authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the position of the Association of Christian Schools International.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Other Scripture references are from *The Holy Bible*, New International Version @1973, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Edited by Swaner, Lynn E.

ACSI Leading Insights: Special Education and Inclusion

ISBN 978-1-58331-516-3

eISBN 978-1-58331-562-0

Catalog#: 6680

e6680

Designer: Lisa Ruppert

Copyeditor: Lora Schrock

Association of Christian Schools International
731 Chapel Hills Drive • Colorado Springs, CO 80920
Care Team: 800.367.0798 • www.acsi.org

CONTENTS

Introduction

Lynn E. Swaner..... 4

Part I: Philosophy and Research

1. A Biblical Case for Inclusion

Thomas L. Boehm..... 8

2. Creating Communities of Belonging

Erik W. Carter, Elizabeth Lucas Dombrowski,
Thomas L. Boehm 21

3. A Review of the Research on Inclusive Christian Education

Kate E. Strater..... 38

Part II: Perspectives on Inclusive Education

4. The Student Perspective

Elizabeth Lucas Dombrowski..... 51

5. The Parent Perspective

Matthew H. Lee..... 57

6. The Head of School Perspective

Interview with Rick Kempton 61

Part III: Shaping Our Practice

7. The Inclusion Journey: From Program to Identity

Elizabeth Lucas Dombrowski, Kate E. Strater..... 70

8. Reimagining Finance and Sustainability: From Limits to Possibilities

Elizabeth Lucas Dombrowski, Matthew H. Lee 85

Recommended Resources..... 96

References 98

About the Authors 109

Introduction

Lynn E. Swaner, *Series Editor*

Because of their biblically based philosophy of education, Christian schools ground their vision and mission in Scripture. This foundation should extend to how Christian schools engage students with disabilities, who are created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), have unique gifts bestowed by God (Eph. 2:10), and are invaluable members of Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12:12-27). and yet, Christian schools across the United States often struggle to even make room for students with disabilities on their campuses: a 2019 nationwide survey of nearly 750 schools, conducted by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), found that only 35 percent offered special education programs or related services (ACSI 2019).

The goal of this inaugural issue of *ACSI Leading Insights*, focused on special education and inclusion in Christian education,¹ is to encourage and equip all Christian schools to grow in their capacity to welcome students with disabilities—and in doing so, move our schools closer to becoming the kind of faith-filled communities where students of all abilities belong and flourish. The path to inclusion is not an easy one, but the experts who serve as chapter authors for this monograph share abundant insight from theology, research, and practice in Christian schools to guide leaders and teachers along the way. Between them, Thomas Boehm of Wheaton College, Erik Carter of Vanderbilt University, Kate Strater of Calvin College, and Elizabeth Lucas Dombrowski of All Belong (a center for inclusive Christian education) identify a number of “from—to” journeys on which schools must embark:

¹ Historically, the term “inclusion” has denoted educational experiences that enable full participation of students with disabilities in schools. While the term has more recently been applied to other populations, the authors in this monograph use the term in its historical sense, as exclusively referencing students with disabilities.

- from a view of inclusion as a lofty but impractical ideal, to understanding it as a *biblical mandate that is achievable in Christian schools*;
- from the exclusion and isolation experienced by many students with disabilities and their families, to genuine *embrace and belonging that reflects the heart of God*;
- from special education as a unidirectional effort to meet the needs of students with disabilities, to inclusion as a reflection of the reality that *students of any and all abilities bless each other and us* when they are present in our schools;
- from a programs-focused approach as a piecemeal way of serving only a small subset of students, to a *schoolwide identity as a site of inclusive education* for all families who desire it; and
- from financial and staffing limitations that hinder many schools, to the *limitless possibilities that arise from sustainable practices and faith-filled planning*.

In addition, this monograph shares crucial voices that need to be heard in the discussion of inclusion in Christian schools—from two alumni of inclusive Christian schools, Alex and Abby, who discuss the impact of inclusion on their lives and faith; Matt Lee, ACSI’s Director of Research, who as a parent of a child with a disability shares hopes and dreams for one day enrolling her in a Christian school; and a long-serving head of school and ACSI Board member, Rick Kempton, who has successfully led two Christian schools along the inclusion journey. Their voices not only serve to bring the discussion around inclusion in Christian schools to life, but also help to broaden our collective imagination for what is possible in our schools.

We conclude this monograph with a selection of help-

ful resources and references that are intended to inspire and support the journey toward inclusion in Christian schools. When it comes to fulfilling our schools' biblically based missions for students with disabilities—and creating gospel-centered communities of faith for all students and families—may we believe and act in accordance with the biblical promise, that our “God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

Part I:

Philosophy and Research

A Biblical Case for Inclusive Christian Schools

Thomas L. Boehm, *Wheaton College*

Introduction

Since 1975, public schools in the United States have been mandated to serve students with disabilities through what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). Christian schools, however, are not under the same legal mandate. How then should Christian schools respond to the needs of students with disabilities especially given private schools' limited financial and personnel resources? While Christian schools may not be under a legal mandate to serve students with disabilities, arguably they are under a higher mandate.

This chapter attempts to explore this mandate within a biblical context by presenting a concise theology of disability, composed of nine “pillars” of scriptural wisdom from Genesis to Revelation that offer a solid rationale and foundation upon which to build capacity to enroll and support students with disabilities. Each pillar is first framed by a brief biblical summary,¹ followed by a concise application statement for inclusive Christian schools that is further developed in the remainder of the section.

¹ These nine pillars are taken from the newly created Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability where we've summarized this biblical theology in collaboration with a diverse range of scholars and practitioners (see <https://www.wheaton.edu/wheaton-center-for-faith-and-disability/about/biblical-theology-of-disability/>). I would specifically like to thank Sandy Hay, Stephanie Hubach, Mark Talbot, Stan Jones, Michael Graves, Aubrey Buster, and David Hudson for their valuable insights and feedback on this initial version of a biblical theology of disability. Where faithful to Scripture, their contributions were instrumental; where errors remain they are the sole responsibility of the author.

Pillar 1: God's Image Bearers—A Glorious Reflection

Genesis 1:26–27 tells us that all people are made in the image of God, as the pinnacle act of His creation. We image God as integrated persons of body and soul/spirit. We each bear God's image individually. We also, however, image God collectively. As image bearers, our glorious task is to reflect God's character into the world—through all our words and deeds—not only individually, but also as families and as communities.

***Application:** Inclusive Christian schools are open to serving students with disabilities because they are fellow image bearers of God.*

All people, including those with disabilities, are created in God's image. Thus, all students, including those with disabilities, uniquely represent God in some way. This creative act of God bestowed a primary identity upon all people as glorious reflections of God. Christians fulfill this primary identity as God's image bearers—in Christ.

We reflect God's image both individually and collectively. Each student with a disability bears God's image and is worthy of consideration for enrollment and ongoing support in our schools. Our schools also bear an image collectively. The choices we ultimately make to include or exclude certain students will bear upon this image. Inclusive school communities are open to serving all students as image bearers and glorious reflections of God.

Pillar 2: God's Image Bearers—A Distorted Reflection

However, since humanity's fall described in Genesis 3, our ability to reflect God accurately has been fractured. As human persons, we still image Him, yet the reflection is now cast in distorted ways. For we have all been alienated from God through rebellion—our hearts have become bent to our own will and our purpose, distortedly focused on our own glory. At the same time, we experience differing elements of brokenness in every aspect of our personhood as a result of being born into—and living our lives in—a world impacted by the effects of the fall. We experience brokenness in our bodies, minds, intellect, emotions, and social relationships. Disability is simply a

more *noticeable* form of the brokenness and difficulty that is *common* to the human condition. It is experienced both functionally (through bodies that do not work as we expect them to) and socially (through relationships that do not respect, support, and affirm as we need them to).

Application: *Inclusive Christian schools guard against reflecting the brokenness of the world by INcluding students with disabilities and EXcluding unbiblical values.*

The first pillar of disability theology calls Christian schools to strive for *inclusionary* practices that enroll and support students with disabilities. The second pillar calls Christian schools to also strive for *exclusionary* practices—but just not toward students. Your particular school distinctives should reflect the beauty of God and the diversity of His people while guarding against reflecting the brokenness of the world. In other words, your school should strive to create an inclusive learning community that is *in* the world but not *of* the world. Christian schools offer families a Christ-centered alternative to most other forms of schooling. While schools should be responsive to the pain and brokenness of the world, they should not reflect nor perpetuate it by excluding students with disabilities. Embracing students with disabilities is a commitment that can help ground biblical values and guard against ungodly ones.

Pillar 3: God's Promise to Remedy the Effects of the Fall

God never leaves us without hope. Even in the garden, after the fall, God proclaimed that a woman would bear a Seed who would crush Satan's head (Gen. 3:15), to overcome all alienation that separates us from God and each other—bringing restoration to the brokenness and difficulty experienced in this age.

Building on Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 53 predicted that when this Seed came he would have no beauty or majesty that we should desire him. He would be despised and rejected, a man of sorrows acquainted

with the deepest grief. The One who would crush Satan's head would himself be crushed in order to redeem us from our sin and to heal our brokenness. He would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.

Application: *Inclusive Christian schools should incubate and promote biblical faith that helps students know and trust God's wisdom and His ways.*

God's plans will not be thwarted. His promises are sure. While disability presents challenges to families and schools, they are not tragedies to be avoided but opportunities to embrace. God's ways are higher than our ability to fully understand. Proverbs 3:5-6 exhorts us to "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." God has a good purpose in mind when He brings students with disabilities to your school. The question is whether you will trust and obey in faith or not?

Just as the Fall has a remedy in God's Righteous One coming to crush all enemies, so too is God trustworthy to provide and equip you for everything to which He has called you and your school. School leaders are seldom fully equipped in advance to do what they are called to pursue. Doing it anyway is a mark of strong leadership. We take steps out in faith and work hard to make them successful, and often discover God has been working in advance to make those steps solid in His ways. Everyone in your school community—students,



School leaders are seldom fully equipped in advance to do what they are called to pursue. Doing it anyway is a mark of strong leadership. We take steps out in faith and work hard to make them successful, and often discover God has been working in advance to make those steps solid in His ways.

staff, and families—all need to learn to trust God with the faith of Abraham who trusted and obeyed even though he did not have a full picture of where he was going. Like Abraham, we need to walk by faith in the good promises and pathways of God, even (and especially) when they are difficult.

Pillar 4: God’s Remedy through the Messiah’s Arrival

The Gospels tell of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension as the initial installment of God’s promise of full restoration in His future return. In the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, we see Jesus as the Messianic Seed who opened the door for complete salvation, including the “crippled, blind, and lame” (Luke 14:12–23). Moreover, all who invite in and embrace these individuals described as having various disabilities are promised a reward in the age to come (Luke 14:14).

***Application:** Inclusive Christian schools exercise their faith by using existing resources and looking for ways God is leading to grow and build the school as a unique expression of Himself.*

The general education curriculum bears witness to various aspects of natural wisdom. God’s Word bears witness to a higher wisdom. The Messiah’s first coming decisively began restoring what was lost in the Fall. While the fullness of this kingdom is still *not yet*, there is still something possible in the *now*. The testimony of Jesus disrupts the natural order of things in service of restoring all people, and all creation, to God’s holy purposes of bearing witness to His goodness and glory. Our curricula may be more or less explicit about studying the Bible, but how we respond to the vulnerable members of our community will instruct and model the wisdom of our curricula.

In our journeys toward becoming more inclusive schools, the best next step is to start with what we’ve already got—existing resources and staff—and identify areas where we want to grow. If we cannot

yet afford new support staff, we can still provide additional training to existing staff. If we cannot yet enroll students with significant disabilities, we can still invest in strengthening individualized supports for instruction and assessment for current students who need them. Small steps can lead to bigger ones. Trusting God means relying on Him to provide in just the right time and in just the right ways for accomplishing everything to which He's called your school.

Pillar 5: God's Goodness and Sovereignty in the Face of Disability

In John 9—the story of Jesus' encounter with the man born blind—we see Jesus' most clear example of how the functional and social aspects of disability are reversed by the coming of God's kingdom. First, he corrects the disciples' misconceptions that the man born blind experienced this disability because of personal sin (misconceptions that had created heartbreaking social barriers for the man born blind). Instead, Jesus declares that “this happened that the works of God might be displayed in his life.” The man's disability was made purposeful in the hands of a good, loving, and sovereign heavenly Father—working in the context of a broken world. Secondly, Jesus restored the man's vision—the function of his sight. This demonstration of God's power was an initial installment toward the full restoration of the brokenness of the fall. We see Jesus holding in tension human brokenness and difficulty with divine value and purpose. As Jesus's disciples, we are called to do the same.

***Application:** Inclusive Christian schools pursue beauty (in all people and creation) amidst the brokenness that is common in this current age (i.e., before Jesus' return and the age to come).*

There is a tension between beauty and brokenness. All people are beautiful in that they represent God and His image in the world. Disability does not tarnish that image. Brokenness also characteriz-

es all people—though, like Adam and Eve in the garden, we try to hide our own brokenness as much as possible. The Gospel, however, allows us to rest in truth that God accepts us in Jesus, despite all our brokenness—and helps us accept others in all their brokenness. This acceptance of others includes students with disabilities. While certain students may challenge the limits of our ability to accept others, it is a holy challenge with important consequences. Having eyes of faith to pursue and see the beauty amidst brokenness makes powerful declarations that God is both sovereign and good. Christian schools have a holy purpose to make these declarations by their culture of accepting and affirming the beauty of all students—even those with intense challenges or significant disabilities.

Pillar 6: God's Economy

In God's economy, human value is not measured by what we can or cannot do, but instead by Whose we are. When Moses hesitated to accept God's commission to deliver his people by citing a self-perceived limitation or disability, God responds by saying, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exod. 4:11–12). God sees no barriers to using those with disabilities to accomplish His purposes. Again, the apostle Paul declares that the seemingly weaker members



Having eyes of faith to pursue and see the beauty amidst brokenness makes powerful declarations that God is both sovereign and good. Christian schools have a holy purpose to make these declarations by their culture of accepting and affirming the beauty of all students—even those with intense challenges or significant disabilities.

of the believing community are indispensable and to be given double honor (1 Cor. 12:20-26). Furthermore, weakness is actually portrayed as a platform to perfect and display God's power (2 Cor. 12:9). Those perceived as weak and less worthy of praise by human standards are not only suitable—but at times they are uniquely gifted—for displaying God's glory and goodness.

***Application:** Inclusive Christian schools embrace and model God's economy by making room for human weakness so God's power can be more visible.*



Those perceived as weak and less worthy of praise by human standards are not only suitable—but at times they are uniquely gifted—for displaying God's glory and goodness.

Schools offer a place for students to gain important knowledge and skills for a successful life. But success can be defined in different ways. A successful life according to the standards of the world are not the same as the standards of God and His kingdom. Consider our schools' mission statements and the priorities they reflect. Is our commitment to strong

academics framed within a larger biblical context? Are athletic opportunities, including ones involving rigorous competition, part of our schools' extracurricular programming? Character matters and God's economy makes room for students to learn that their human strength of mind and body are not the only valued traits. For example, Jesus modeled and taught about the strength required to serve others.

Furthermore, it takes strength to let your own weaknesses and needs be known by others. By acknowledging and embracing personal limitations—in those with and without disabilities—you make room for God to display His presence and power in and through your personal life and your collective school community. Investing your time, treasure, and talent in becoming a more inclusive Christian

school can help everyone in your learning community recognize the inherent limitations of pursuing or boasting in academic prowess or athletic strength alone. Welcoming and walking with students with differing abilities goes a long way toward embodying the economy of God and His kingdom more than the values of secular society. Valuing human weakness to make God's strength more visible is an investment in God's economy.

Pillar 7: God's Law of Love

The apostle Paul also declares in 1 Corinthians 13 that if we give lip service without love to others—including the marginalized—we are nothing but sounding gongs. Furthermore, if we donate goods to feed them without love, we gain nothing. Love equalizes human brokenness. And God himself is love (1 John 4:8).

Love makes demands on how we treat other people. As finite creatures, human beings are all limited in various ways. Additionally, none of us are autonomous and completely self-sufficient. Moreover, what constitutes a “disability” and who has one can vary from culture to culture. When measured against some level of minimal or average performance or standing, we must acknowledge the arbitrariness of such standards. Conceptually, disability is an equalizer by focusing love's demands where they are needed most and reflect God's character best.

Disability equalizes us pragmatically and experientially as well. It is not partial to any race/ethnicity, religion, sex, age, or socioeconomic class. If we have not yet been touched by a disability (whether physical, intellectual, developmental, or neuro-atypical)—or by mental illness—we or one of our loved ones are likely to be impacted eventually.

***Application:** Inclusive Christian schools prioritize loving God and others well so God's love can be more tangible and visible.*

God's economy also requires holy acts of human love. Jesus not only taught about God's love and modeled it through word and deed, Jesus also was—and is—love incarnate. Virtues such as love, however, need to be regularly taught, modeled, and practiced through curricular and extracurricular programming. Furthermore, opportunities for students and staff to interact in holy loving ways will go a long way to honor God and display something of His character. Students need opportunities to learn about and practice loving others who are different. Students with disabilities represent one type of difference that cuts across other dimensions of diversity such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Inclusive Christian schools prioritize this simple (in concept), yet difficult (in practice), requirement to love God and others with our whole heart, mind, and strength.

Pillar 8: God's People Respond

As God's people, what is our role in addressing disability? The church is to manifest God's love to a watching world (Eph. 3:10–11) as we live in countercultural ways that reflect the values of His kingdom. With Jesus as our Head, we constitute His Body. We are called to preserve unity in diversity (including diverse abilities), until we grow into the maturity and stature of Jesus (Eph. 4).

The unity of God's people does not depend upon human talent or intellect. It depends on our union with Jesus. This is a relational oneness in Messiah (who Himself is one with the Father) and with one another (John 17). Furthermore, as God has placed each part in the body just as He wanted (1 Cor. 12:18), so each has a divine purpose and gift that serves the body (1 Pet. 4:10). Indeed, God has “put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other so that if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all

the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:24–26, NIV).

While suffering in this age is unavoidable, God desires for all people to belong and flourish in community. While God does not promise to remove all sources of suffering in this age, He does promise to be with us and never leave us in our suffering. Furthermore, God often pours out His blessings upon His children through the loving words and deeds of others. Therefore, people of all abilities need one another for the unity, diversity, and growth in the perfect love of God, all for the glory of God.

***Application:** As an extension and expression of the body of Christ, inclusive Christian schools cultivate interdependent community among students (and staff) of all abilities to learn and grow together in knowing and following Jesus.*

In American culture, we tend to overvalue independence and undervalue dependency. In contrast, the Bible presents a different recipe for human flourishing. Overvaluing personal achievement, autonomy, and self-reliance can undermine healthy dependence and relational intimacy with others. Rugged individualism may have helped build the United States, but when unchecked, it can also create a corrosive self-oriented and self-indulgent culture rather than foster a culture of honoring and loving others in all their weaknesses and needs. God’s path of flourishing for individuals (with and without disabilities) and communities—including school communities—involves healthy and holy interdependence. This interdependence is described and depicted biblically as a relationally united community, that is committed and submitted to God.

Pillar 9: God’s Ultimate Restoration of All Things in the Age to Come

The Seed predicted in Genesis 3:15 came into the world the

first time to crush the serpent's head and bring salvation to all who put their faith in Him (Rom. 10:11–13). Jesus, this King of the Jews and desire of all nations (Haggai 2:7), will come again to subject the enemy to final judgment. Under Messiah's reign there will be no more mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:3–4). Together we look to His return. The Spirit and the Bride say, Come (Rev. 22:17)!

***Application:** Inclusive Christian schools distinguish between primary outcomes, such as maturing disciples, and secondary outcomes, such as smarter students.*

Schools support students to learn and grow. The metrics of growth for a Christian school, however, must be measured with God's standards that have a different horizon line—a different plumb line. Supporting students to mature in godliness—which includes stewarding intellectual capacity—is a larger and more primary goal than merely helping students become smarter. Being and making disciples who are followers of Jesus who know God and make Him known is our primary mandate in the Great Commission, and we are called to obey the Great Commandment to love God and others in doing so. Inclusive Christian schools recognize that students with disabilities are not problems to avoid nor people with needs too heavy to carry in a learning community with limited resources. Students with disabilities are people created in the image of God and in God's economy are essential members with gifts to share.



Inclusive Christian schools recognize that students with disabilities are not problems to avoid nor people with needs too heavy to carry in a learning community with limited resources. Students with disabilities are people created in the image of God and in God's economy are essential members with gifts to share.

in God's economy are essential members with gifts to share. These gifts become more easily received and recognized when our ultimate goals in God frame and shape the penultimate ones that are prized in secular schools.

Building and Growing Our Schools

Psalm 127:1 declares, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Christian schools should build on the solid foundation of God's Word with Jesus as the precious cornerstone. The nine pillars presented in this chapter offer solid principles from God's Word to help undergird and inspire our next steps toward serving students with disabilities.

ACSI Leading Insights

ACSI's *Leading Insights* series highlights the latest thinking on best practices for Christian school educators in areas of key importance in their schools. Each monograph in the series draws on leading experts, as well as Christian school perspectives and voices, to share fresh ideas for advancing your school's Christ-centered mission in an important area of focus.

This monograph, *Special Education and Inclusion*, features experts in theology, research, and practice related to serving students with disabilities in the Christian school setting, along with the alumni, parent, and head of school perspective on inclusive education. The authors share new insights on how Christian schools can create cultures of belonging and mutual care that reflect God's heart for all children—who are each uniquely made in His image—and in doing so, shine a beacon of hope for families in their communities.

ACSI 
STRONGER TOGETHER
731 Chapel Hills Dr.
Colorado Springs, CO 80920
www.acsi.org

ISBN 978-1-58331-516-3



9

781583

315163