



GENERATION SPIRIT⁺

TEAM PLAYBOOK



WELCOME TO THE TEAM

Your school's new inclusive spirit team brings together students with and without disabilities who come to the team on equal footing.

This team creates an inclusive environment by committing to courage, compassion, and connection:

Courage | It can be uncomfortable to speak up and propose a new idea or a new way of doing things. On this team, students who put their ideas on the line, challenge the conventional way of doing things, and work to improve school culture THRIVE. Courage also means valuing inclusive opportunities more than valuing the status quo. Courageous leaders are willing to get out of their comfort zone to go for the bigger win.

Compassion | Compassion isn't a relationship between the "wounded" and the "healer" or a "hero" and a "victim." It's a relationship between equals. We can be fully present with and appreciate one another when we recognize and celebrate our shared humanity.

Connection | This team values connection over perfection. Skill building naturally happens on inclusive teams, but perfection is never the goal. Connection is the goal.

WHAT IS INCLUSION?

When talking about inclusion, it's sometimes most helpful to talk about what inclusion is not. Inclusion is not a place. Inclusion isn't an activity. It isn't a program. Inclusion is a mindset. It involves recognizing the inherent worth in every individual.

People with an inclusive mindset don't tolerate differences -- they value differences. People on an inclusive team make sure everyone feels like they belong. People with an inclusive mindset reject an "us v. them" mentality. Instead of trying to determine who is in and who is out, they say, "Everybody's in."

There's a common misconception surrounding disability inclusion. Many people assume that people with disabilities want to (or need to) be included in activities exclusively for and with other people with disabilities. Unfortunately, teams designed only for students with disabilities typically practice infrequently, wear t-shirts rather than official uniforms,

and never give students the opportunity to practice, perform, or participate side-by-side with their peers.

People who design and support segregated programs sometimes make the outdated “separate-but-equal” argument. Of course, we know from history that “separate-but-equal” rarely results in true equality. The better path involves bringing people together by making activities more accessible.

In other words, inclusion means that students with and without disabilities are participating in activities *together*.

WHO ARE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?

In terms of sheer numbers, about 54 million Americans -- that’s one out of every five -- have a disability. Some disabilities are visible and evident. Others are invisible. A disability, loosely defined, is a physical or mental condition that can impact a person's movements, senses, or activities.

People with disabilities are – above all – people who, in addition to their disability, have skills, talents, interests, preferences, desires, and needs just like everyone else.

People with disabilities occupy countless roles. Some of those roles are relational, like parents, siblings, husbands, wives, co-workers, neighbors, bosses, and friends. People with disabilities also occupy numerous roles in their communities and are included in every career you can imagine. In fact, individuals with disabilities comprise our nation’s largest minority group, which also happens to be the most diverse. Everyone is represented: all genders, ages, religions, political parties, races, and socio-economic levels.

Disability rights advocate Kathie Snow summed it up perfectly when she said: “[T]his largest minority group is the only one that anyone can join at any time: at birth, in the split second of an accident, through illness, or during the aging process.” Some people are born with a disability. Other people become disabled from something that happens during the course of their lifetime. In fact, almost half of people over 60 are living with some form of disability.

Like ethnicity, height, and eye color, disability is simply one of many natural characteristics of being human. And, like race, gender, and sexual orientation, disability is a characteristic that people identify with in varying degrees. Some people with a disability identify strongly with their disability. They believe that their disability is an important part of who they are. Other people identify less with their disability and more strongly with other characteristics. The degree to which people identify with their disability varies as much as the people themselves do. Again, people with disabilities are, first and foremost, people.

INCLUSIVE, INTENSIVE, IMMERSIVE

It's time for schools nationwide to create more meaningful opportunities for students with and without disabilities to learn and grow together. "Meaningful" requires an ongoing commitment. "Meaningful" requires an investment of time.

Understanding the true meaning of inclusion requires putting ourselves in another person's shoes. Too often, spirit teams that involve students with disabilities practice infrequently, wear shorts and t-shirts rather than uniforms, and never receive the experience most students live for – the opportunity to lead their communities.

The underlying assumption, of course, is that students with disabilities require less than students without disabilities in order to feel fulfilled and happy.

Students with and without disabilities share the same need for a genuine team—one that involves a long-term commitment, a drive to skill-build through sustained effort, and a willingness to work collaboratively with teammates over a period of time. The Generation Spirit approach encourages an inclusive, intensive, and immersive experience for all participants.

Inclusive | All team members come to the team on equal footing. At its most basic level, this means that all team members, regardless of ability, are respected and appreciated for their contribution to a diverse team. Students with and without disabilities learn from one another and collaboratively seek solutions to challenges.

More specifically, students without disabilities are never cast in the role of mentors, helpers, or volunteers. Teams reject the assumption that students with disabilities need

more help or mentoring than students without disabilities or that students without a disability are better positioned to help than students with a disability.

This doesn't mean that teammates should ignore disability. Generally speaking, teammates should consider teammates' disabilities to make sure that the team and the school actively remove accessibility barriers. For example, when a teammate uses a wheelchair and is performing at a new venue, team leadership should ensure that the venue is wheelchair accessible. Removing barriers to access is different than making assumptions about a teammate's ability level based solely on their disability.

Intensive | Skill-building and the formation of genuine friendships take time. By meeting and/or practicing weekly and performing throughout the school year, students enjoy a concentrated experience in a group setting for up to eight months of the year. By consistently investing time in practices, activities, and performances, team members create opportunities for growth in self-confidence, communication, and understanding.

Immersive | Because team members are treated as equals and given time and opportunity to grow, participants become highly engaged and identified with their team. Immersion also means that the team becomes fully integrated into a school's sports programming. As inclusive teams perform -- front and center -- they shine a spotlight on the richness that comes from inclusion, ultimately shifting the school's culture to one that values diversity and acceptance.

THE PARTNER SYSTEM

For a team that runs smoothly and efficiently, consider adopting a partner system. This simply means that two to three students are assigned to one another for a period of time to help promote friendship, skill-building, support, and accountability.

Partners stick together. While the entire team practices and performs together, typically partners greet one another first and stand together at practices/performances. And, if one partner needs to step out into the hall or sit down during a game, the other partner joins.

In terms of selecting partner pairs, teams use their best judgment and remain flexible as the needs of particular students or the needs of the team as a whole change. It may be

that a student with a disability is partnered with a student without a disability. It may be that two students with disabilities are partnered or two students without disabilities are partnered. They may pair a freshman with a senior or pair a student new to the team with a veteran student on the team. Partners might naturally gravitate to one another because of shared interests or a relationship outside of the team. Your team may decide to change partners every season or to keep the same partners throughout the year.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AMBASSADORS

As you approach your upcoming season, consider identifying and supporting other school teams that are traditionally underrepresented by spirit teams. For example, do cheer and dance teams typically show up to volleyball games? If not, your team can show the volleyball players some love! Teams that traditionally do not experience a spirit squad presence are thrilled when someone finally shows up for them.

When planning your school spirit strategy, think outside the box. Maybe the school has a robotics team or a debate team. Seek out opportunities to support students and groups that could use a spirit boost. Stay on the lookout for opportunities to support underrepresented teams and clubs. Go the extra mile and develop a relationship with an underrepresented team by decorating the students' lockers or putting signs up around the school. Carry your inclusive mindset into all of your decision-making.

WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

Words can be extremely powerful and have lasting impact. That's because language reflects our understanding, our perceptions, and our values.

How we talk to and about individuals with disabilities matters. By taking care with our language, we can help to promote equality and inclusion for people with disabilities. The converse is also true. Outdated language usually reflects outdated ideas, and old descriptors can reinforce negative stereotypes.

The accepted language in the disabilities rights space is constantly evolving and not everyone agrees. That said, here are some guiding principles for talking with and about

people with disabilities endorsed currently by disabilities rights advocates and the United States Department of Education:

Avoid implying that people with disabilities are tragic figures | Terms like “afflicted with,” “suffers from,” “victim of,” “prisoner of,” “burdened with,” and “disadvantaged” inaccurately and inappropriately assume that individuals with disabilities are sick, miserable, in constant pain, somehow less-than, or have a problem. Instead, simply say a person has a disability or medical condition. And, don’t assume that having a disability means having a poor quality of life. On the same note, a person who uses a wheelchair should not be referred to as “wheelchair bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.” Those who use wheelchairs find them freeing because they allow for mobility.

Avoid descriptors like “extraordinary” or “heroic” | People with and without disabilities want the same things: to be accepted, included, respected, and valued. Everyday accomplishments do not become exceptional or heroic just because they are achieved by a person with a disability. Avoid referring to individuals as “brave” “courageous” or “inspirational” merely because they are living with a disability.

Avoid the term “special needs” | As applied to individuals with disabilities, the term “special needs” is still widely used. A growing number of disability rights advocates are taking aim at the term, explaining that “special” has become a euphemism for “separate” or “segregated.” And, while the term pretends to have positive connotations, it generally generates pity. A person’s needs aren’t “special” to him – they’re ordinary. After all, don’t we all have needs specific to our particular strengths and weaknesses?

Ask yourself whether, in context, the disability is relevant | Finally, in some situations, discussion of a particular disability may have relevance; in others, it won’t. This is analogous to asking whether a person’s race is relevant to the situation or discussion. Consider whether the disability is relevant (and therefore needs to be mentioned) when referring to an individual.

Students often ask what they should do when a friend/family member/teacher uses outdated language to describe individuals with disabilities. First, it is important to understand that your inclusive spirit team is already positively shifting school and community culture. When people outside of the team see inclusion in action, it changes their understanding of ability. You should not feel responsible for correcting the outdated language of others. Having said that, the best way to teach others is to lead by example and model the correct language.

For those ready to take the next step and actively educate others about language, try starting these conversations by sharing your own experience. For example, if a family member refers to someone as “wheelchair-bound,” a helpful response could be: “I used to say ‘wheelchair-bound’ too, until I realized that using a wheelchair is freeing (not binding) because it provides greater mobility. Now, I simply say ‘uses a wheelchair.’” The overall goal here is to gently educate.