INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES
Adopted by Convention Delegates April 2023

WHEREAS, Research studies show that access to inclusive education increases educational outcomes, employment, and independent living for students with cognitive disabilities, such as intellectual disability, Down syndrome, and autism, consistent with the purpose of the California Education system to enable each child to develop to their full potential; and

WHEREAS, Federal and State law already mandates that all students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate, and yet most California children with Intellectual Disability (an eligibility category under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) spend most of their day in a segregated classroom or a separate school, and very few students in California with an Intellectual Disability spend most of their day in a regular classroom, due to barriers such as teachers and administrators' biases, lack of preparation and training, and lack of resources and capacity, such as supports for communication and behavior, within the inclusive setting; and

WHEREAS, The historical separation of two systems of education, general education and special education, often creates structural barriers to the inclusion of students with extensive support needs in the classroom where they would be educated if they were not disabled; and

WHEREAS, Existing Federal Law (Every Student Succeeds Act 2015) requires schools to align alternate academic achievement standards for students with cognitive disabilities to the same state content standards for all students, but few students taking the California Alternate Assessment are proficient in these standards, and teachers need materials that can easily be modified using the core content connectors, which are alternate achievement standards aligned with the state content standards; and

WHEREAS, Graduation rates for students with disabilities are much lower, and students with significant cognitive disabilities are often awarded a Certificate of Completion that has no defined achievement standards and does not open opportunities in post-secondary education, training, and employment, and

WHEREAS, Relying on the Due Process system (an administrative path that allows parents/guardians/caregivers and districts to appeal Individualized Education Program (IEP) decisions) to enforce fair placement decisions under IDEA, is costly and difficult for families, unfair to students who lack privilege, and is reflected in racial and ethnic disparities in access to inclusive education; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, To encourage PTA units, councils, and districts to promote awareness among parents, school personnel, and communities that every child can learn, and of the urgent need to increase access to inclusive education for students with

cognitive disabilities, such as intellectual disability, Down syndrome and autism, by providing education on the importance of access to general education settings, to extracurricular activities such as sports and arts, and to supports and services needed to make progress in the general education curriculum and personal achievement; and be it further

RESOLVED, That California State PTA, its units, councils, and districts encourage all partners in the educational system – teachers (both general and special education), parents/caregivers, administrators, and members of the community – to adopt and provide training on evidence-based practices, especially in instruction, behavior intervention, technology and communication support, that overcome the barriers to access and making progress in the general education curriculum and environments for students with cognitive disabilities; and be it further

RESOLVED, That California State PTA, its units, councils, and districts advocate for policy changes at local and state levels to end the barriers to access to general education environments and curriculum including policy in teacher preparation and credentialing, funding, accountability, and school planning and program design, to promote greater coordination between general education and special education, as a service, within one system; and be it further

RESOLVED, That California State PTA, its units, councils, and districts encourage all partners in the educational system to extend their high expectations for all students, to students with cognitive disabilities who need a modified curriculum to succeed, promoting the use of alternate achievement standards aligned with the state content standards; such as, preparation for meaningful employment and college programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities, and be it further

RESOLVED, That California State PTA, its units, councils, and districts encourage all partners in the educational system to recognize personal achievement at each individual's capacity, and to support efforts to provide an alternate pathway for students with significant cognitive disabilities identified for alternate assessment, to a high school diploma, recognized by employers and post-secondary institutions, consistent with federal law, while maintaining high standards for other students with disabilities; and be it further

RESOLVED, That California State PTA, its units, councils, and districts shall promote the principles of authentic family engagement as part of the administration of special education in order to foster genuine partnerships in education for students with cognitive disabilities, including representation in advisory committees.

###

BACKGROUND SUMMARY

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), (1975, reauthorized in 2004) entrenched the right of children with disabilities to public education. Despite a clear legal presumption that, except in very limited circumstances, students should be educated in the classroom they would be in if not disabled, for the most part, special education was established in public schools as a separate place, rather than as a service within general education. This is particularly true for students with intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome and Autism, despite compelling research in favor of inclusive education.

The spirit of IDEA was to support placement in a regular classroom as an outcome of successful special education. In recent data, California is the fourth worst state at including children with Intellectual Disabilities (ID). Less than 8% of children with ID in Californian public schools spend 80% of their day in a regular classroom. Most students with ID, 63.05%, are in a regular classroom less than 40% of their day (which can be as little as zero). A further 8% are educated in a separate school provided by their school district.

In Vermont, 55.21% of children with ID spend 80% of their day in a regular classroom. To match Vermont, California would need a 650% increase, affecting 23,077 California children with ID.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) allows schools to use an alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, only if the alternate achievement standards are aligned with the state content standards, students are able to access and make progress in general education, and they have an opportunity to earn a regular high school diploma; all of which many students placed on the California Alternate Assessment lack.

Recent state initiatives offering technical assistance to schools and studies, such as the Work Group on an Alternate Pathway to a Diploma, indicate California's support for inclusive education but move the needle very slowly.

Parents/Caregivers/Guardians can use their rights under IDEA to access inclusive placements on an ad hoc basis. Without a system of support, inclusion one child at a time is often stressful for students, parents, and school professionals. As families often need to hire legal assistance, the system is unfair to low-income students. We should not need an attorney to access Kindergarten! We need systemic change to make inclusion for children with cognitive disabilities the norm in our schools.