On Tuesday, April 14, the California monitors at The Grace School are Dylan and Jada. Anatomy handler the library. The teacher giving the morning announcements tells the 68 students of Providence's The Grace School to "Remember to BARC" before handing the microphone to a student I assume is not Dylan, Jada, or Anthony. A cay says, "The K in BARC stands for Roses. Respect yourself and others. Give everybody personal space. Let them have private time. Include everybody in play.

The essence of personal space, private time, and inclusion are higher at The Grace School than at other elementary schools in Providence. One-third of its students have severe disabilities, spanning the areas of speech and language, vision and hearing, behavior, and motor control. The inclusion model of the school places students inside the same classrooms as the other two-thirds of students who are not identified as having special needs. Psychologists, therapists, and co-teachers assist in the classroom, making sure every student receives the support they need.

The inclusion philosophy of The Grace School extends beyond ability and disability. Morning Street, the umbrella non-profit that runs The Grace School, and other special education initiatives, those as Eddy Street, focus specifically on creating a diverse demographic of students. Seventy-five percent of Grace School students receive partial or full scholarships to cover the $9,000 cost of annual tuition; scholarships come primarily through donations and federal aid.

Morning Street's $22,779,400 budget not only helps low-income students attend the school on a scholarship, it also purchased facilities strikingly well-designed, accessible, and expensive. A 20-minute tour of the school reveals an indoor pool with the necessary infrastructure to allow every student to safely enter and exit the water, and a gym with bikes specially designed to accommodate physical handicaps. The wide ramps throughout the school and color-coded spaces mean isolation, where you have to wheel your wheelchair; green means flat, where you can rest. The library has compact areas that pull forward onto the laps of children who can't reach a keyboard. There are SmartBoards, audiobooks, and iPads. There are no stairs.

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"It was small," says Fieni Berhanu, former New York Teaching Fellow and Special Educator at Madison C.J. Walker High School in the Bronx. "It was one floor of a school and we had 680 kids. And we had one bathroom. With four stalls. And it was 83 percent girls. So you can just imagine a certain level of overcrowding, it would take five minutes to walk 25 feet cause there were so many kids in the hallway. And trash. Trash was ubiquitous."

Though C.J. Walker High School is an unremarkable public school, according to Berhanu, its proportion of students with special needs is five times the national average. At 40 percent special education (SPED) students, the states of personal space, crowding, and private time are arguably even higher at C.J. Walker than they are at The Grace School. C.J. Walker, however, has drastically fewer resources. Berhanu explains, "There was a lot less about what the teachers did structurally impossible to do your job correctly. And that was a big part of being a teacher there. It wasn't just the school was crowded, we didn't have enough books. Some kids needed literacy help but there wasn't a room to do it in or there weren't supplies to do it in. I mean, on a day-to-day basis everything just didn't work."

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Mainstreaming, or including students with special needs in general education classrooms, is a recent development in the United States. According to a report by the National Council on Disability, only one in five students with special needs was able to attend public school until as late as 1970. The minority of SPED students included in public schools were placed in separated, under-educated classes that exacerbated learning difficulties and increased stigma against the non-normatively abled. Most states had laws in place that actively excluded such students from enrolling.

The first steps to admit students with special needs to public schools began in the late 1950s and early 60s, as a result of deinstitutionalization and the Disability Rights Movement. Brown v Board of Education proposed new definitions of equality and equity that expanded the project of public education. The Disability Rights Movement used the same rhetoric of broader inclusion and requisite resources to advocate for the inclusion of students with disabilities. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first made federal funds available to help districts serve students with disabilities as a way to incentivize inclusion.

In the early 1970s, the gap between legislation and implementation was large. In 1971, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) sued the state of Pennsylvania for denying access to public education to 282 mentally handicapped children in the state. PARC won the case in federal court; the decision declared that all students with special needs were entitled to a "free appropriate education" in the "least restrictive environment possible" until age 21, an enormous victory. Because the PARC case was a defense of inclusion versus exclusion, the phrase "least restrictive environment" means the least isolated learning environment. Full inclusion of SPED students in mainstream classrooms was the goal. Students with disabilities, however, require extra accommodations to render general education classrooms non-exclusionary. The PARC decision not only mandated that students previously excluded from schools, or from mainstream classrooms within schools, had to be included; it also stated that such students were legally entitled to whatever accommodations rendered those classrooms "least restrictive" for learning.

The following year, seven handicapped students sued the District of Columbia for expelling them from schools because of the severity of their disabilities. In the case of Mills v The Board of Education of the District of Columbia, the DC Board of Education argued that the students had been excluded because the district did not have the money to cover the costs of accommodations. The federal court ruled that lack of money did not justify excluding students with disabilities, who were entitled to equal treatment at any cost under the 14th amendment.

The PARC and Mills decisions represent the largest federal investment in meeting individual needs of a specific group of students in the history of US education. The cases began a process of inverting thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions of federal dollars to serve students with special needs. With a legal mandate to educate students with special needs for free, and massive amounts of federal funds made newly available, the percentage of students identified as SPED rose significantly in the last three decades of the twentieth century. This rise was due in part to a greater awareness and attention to special education, as well as a decreasing stigma against having special needs. However, as historian Adam Nelson points out in "Equity and Special Education," many school districts also realized they could maximize state aid by maximizing the number of students they placed in special education, and identified
students accordingly. In the four years between 1977 and 1981, the percentage of students identified as having learning disabilities rose by 83 percent nationally.

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According to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a person qualifies as having a disability if they have a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities." Under the Rehabilitation Act, "major life activities" include eating, sleeping, standing, and learning, as well as the ability to read, concentrate, think, or communicate.

In the education world, the term "special needs" encompasses three disability categories: physical, mental, and emotional. Physical impairments, such as deafness or visual impairment, usually require specific, materials-based interventions. A student who is blind, for example, requires reading materials in Braille. Mental disabilities, categorized broadly as "generalized learning disabilities," encompass a wide array of diagnoses. Generalized learning disabilities refer to students with significantly low IQ scores, or difficulty learning through a specific area of the brain, i.e. dyslexia (inability to read), dyscalculia (calculating). The third category, emotional disabilities, constitutes the least defined area of disability, and involves things like "oppositional defiant disorder," where students exhibit patterns of argumentative or angry behavior.

Beyond specific areas of categorization, all students have different abilities. Students with excellent hand-eye coordination, fine-tuned motor control, or an ability to sit still are often more successful in the classroom than students who don't have those skills. A student who loves math may have a harder time with reading. Most students get frustrated with authority from time to time. The diagnostic debate looms large: what separates a student with trouble focusing from a student with ADHD? What is the difference between preferring science to having dyslexia? Although the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders has guidelines for identification for special education categories, to a certain degree where the line is exactly drawn is arbitrary.

The term "special" education comes from "specialized" education—education that caters to the unique needs of a specific student. In the language and literature of special education, "specialization" is referred to as the process of "differentiation"—tailoring curriculum and pedagogy to meet the unique needs of each individual student. Though differentiation has specific applications when working with a student with special needs, it is largely recognized as a good teaching practice for all effective educators.

Amy Rego is one such effective educator. As a resource teacher at the K-6 Highlander Charter School in South Providence, she describes her job as "a specialist who collaborates with classroom teachers for different ways to help students learn." Rego received a teaching degree as a Special Educator from Salve Regina before completing the Providence Alliance for Catholic Teachers Program at Providence College. Though she is trained as a specialist educator, she presented her work to the Independent as useful for working with any student. "Just like with everything, the way that people interpret information is different, so when we're looking at curriculum and common core standards, it's our job to think of all the different ways and representations we can use to help students learn and grow." Similarly, Chief Operating Officer of Meeting Street, Amanda McMillen told the Independent, "One of the really amazing things that I think comes particularly from having a special education background is that those teachers have a training and almost a natural bent to meet a child exactly where they are. It benefits all students."

Though differentiation and specialization are, in Rigo's words, "best practice for all students," there are important differences between students who have been identified as having special needs and students who have not. It would be dangerous to confuse a student with cerebral palsy, for example, with a student who is able-bodied. However, many students have significant learning needs that do not fall under the category of special needs. For example, the experiences of students who are homeless, or students who are refugees, profoundly impact these students' ability to succeed in school. The largest difference between a student with an identified learning disability and a student whose family is temporarily living in a shelter may only be that one is guaranteed an intervention regardless of its cost, and the other is not.

Despite the profound legislative, judicial, and monetary investment the United States has made in educating students with special needs since 1960, the current educational landscape is not a simple binary of identified SPED students receiving the resources they need and non-identified, non-special education students not. Even within the realm of the 12 percent of SPED students nationally, there is a divide between schools that are structurally able to comply with the law and schools that are not. Highlander Charter School, for example, caps its classes at 18 students. Only 11 percent of the students in the school are SPED. Such students and their teachers have the support of people like Amy Rego, who spends her days discussing how to best meet their individual needs. Ms. Rego said the Independent, "students at Highlander" are getting exactly what they need. They are in their least restrictive environments, and are given tools to succeed within the regular education classroom." She adds, "I definitely think it's unique."

Highlander Charter, like The Grace School, operates outside of the traditional system of public education. Both schools are housed in beautiful, newly renovated buildings, serve a specific and small demographic of students, and leverage private and public funding to comply with a federal mandate to provide a free, appropriate education to students with special needs in their least restrictive environment. CF Walker High, on the other hand, is a regular public school. It does not have new facilities, shared planning time, nor the ability to select its students. It does not have the privilege of complying with federal law. Brehearn explains, "Understanding communities and under-resourced schools can't follow the mandate of the law. A lot of the kids should have stayed in a less restrictive environment but we didn't have enough rooms in the school to do it. We just didn't even have enough manpower, nor even to do the kind of documentation that is necessary to comply with the law. So the law just becomes a punitive action when you don't have enough resources to meet the needs of kids who have, who really have, a lot of needs."

SARA WINNICK B15's least restrictive learning environment is Brown.