

The Inclusive Education - “Poster Principal of the Month”

Iris Trask and Gordon Porter – Q&A

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Short Bio: Iris Trask, Principal of Golden Secondary School, Rocky Mountain School District #6, Golden, B.C. Iris began teaching in 1984, and has worked at both elementary and secondary levels as a classroom teacher (English, Drama, Music), Learning Assistance Teacher, Resource Teacher, Vice-Principal and Principal. With her Special Education training and experience, she strongly believes that inclusive education positively affects all students and helps to create a more tolerant and accepting community of learners.

Questions:

1. What makes your school “inclusive”?

We have students with special needs involved in as many aspects of the school community as possible. They are integrated within the academic and social life of the school.

Our school mission statement includes all learners. Our school staff and our students share a clear understanding and expectation that all students can learn alongside their peers. This includes classroom teachers, special education assistants, resource teacher, learning assistance teacher, school counselor and our youth care worker.

2. What do you do as the PRINCIPAL to make inclusion work in your school?

I am fortunate to have a teaching block as Resource Teacher, so I am an integral part of the Student Services Department. I am also a member of our School Based Team that meets regularly to discuss students who are struggling and develop support plans to set the students up for success. When I prepare the budget for the year, I ensure that I plan carefully for students who require the support of special education assistants, specialized equipment and special considerations. In every decision that we make at our school, I work to ensure that it is in the best interests of all students.

3. What helped prepare you to be an effective principal of an “inclusive school”?

My own experiences and the district commitment to inclusion have prepared me to lead an inclusive school. I ‘walk the talk’ of our school mission and our District’s guiding principles, which both have a focus on inclusion. I also have a number of years experience working with students with special needs. I also have a Bachelor of Education with a Major in Special Education and in addition to my academic work, I have attended numerous professional development workshops. You have to keep learning to meet new challenges.

4. Is inclusion good for your students?

Absolutely!

We have a student in our school who is blind and who is quadriplegic as a result of a brain tumour. He is fully integrated into academic classes. This student craves intellectual stimulation and through the efforts of the teacher and with the support of a Special Education Assistant and various pieces of technological equipment, he is able to be involved in classroom discussions, activities, group work, assignments and tests. The quality of his life has been greatly enhanced by being included. He is successfully working toward his graduation requirements and he enjoys interacting with his peers both at school and in his home.

5. What do parents think about inclusion?

Parents want the best possible education for their children within a safe, caring environment. When appropriate supports are in place for students with special needs, all students benefit from the enriched learning environment. For example we have a Special Education Assistant assigned to a Grade 10 Math Class because two specific students are there. However the assistant frequently has time to assist other students in the classroom with their work. This benefits everyone. I think parents appreciate our effort to help all students succeed. We listen to their concerns and make every effort to put plans in place to support all of their children.

6. How do you help teachers manage the challenges of inclusion?

We have a very strong Student Services Team that works closely with teachers to support them in their classes. Teachers can refer students to the school-based Team. This may result in more supports being put in place. An educational or behavioural assessment of a particular student may be done to gain further information, or additional strategies may be developed to deal with specific situations. Our staff members talk openly and freely at department meetings, staff meetings and impromptu meetings about challenges and concerns. Teachers know they can express their concerns and frustrations as well as receive support.

7. Some say inclusive education can work in elementary schools with young children BUT it is not feasible in secondary schools. What do you do to make inclusion in a secondary school work?

Inclusion must work in secondary schools because it needs to be a reflection of the greater community where adults work and socialize together. Each student needs their program set up looking at their individual needs. We have students who are full participants in classrooms with support. Other students select some courses with peers but may also spend some time working on individual skills in the resource room.

We currently have one student who is an important part of our school community. He plays several important role in the school on a daily basis where he helps people with tasks and interacts positively with both students and staff. We are still working on looking for opportunities to have him spend time in classrooms. We are confident we are enriching his life now and we will continue to work on his program. Every student is unique and every program needs to be individualized. Secondary schools can work in this way just like elementary schools.

8. What is the toughest thing about leading an inclusive school?

Resources! People and money to buy what you need. Financial resources are always a challenge. With sufficient supports in terms of human resources and supplies, inclusion can be a reality for every student.

9. What would you say to parents/teachers who aren't certain if it will work?

Come in and visit our school and see inclusion in action. I am positive that you will change your mind when you see what is happening – all of our students are successfully learning in classes with their peers.

10. Do you have a final comment?

Yes, I would like to share this point: as schools develop a deeper understanding of how students learn and process information, the job of educating all students will become easier. There is nothing more rewarding than seeing a student struggle with an idea or concept and then see the moment that a connection is made and understanding occurs!

GP: Thank you Iris – all the best as you provide inclusive education in your school.