

The Inclusive Education - "School Leader Interview"

For www.inclusiveeducation.ca

Name:

**John Clendenning, Principal
Hartland Community School
Hartland, New Brunswick**



Email: John.Clendenning@nbed.nb.ca



School Name:

**Hartland Community School
217 Rockland Road,
Hartland, NB
E7P 0A2**

School Motto: "Where Everyone Learns Because Everyone is Important"

Short Bio:

Educator for three decades in schools in what is now School District 14. John has been a teacher, vice-principal, and principal of several schools. He recently led the merger of two schools into one – Hartland Community School in his hometown – famous as the home of the "Longest Covered Bridge in the World". Currently he is principal of Hartland Community School, a K-12 school with approximately 700 students.

The Questions:

1. What do you mean when you say your school is “inclusive”?

All are taught at their own level, all are welcome to attend, notwithstanding any perceived disability. HCS attempts to meet the needs of students within the regular classroom; we do everything possible to support the teacher and student. We provide educational programs that are appropriate and relevant for each student and provide a setting that allows the programs to be delivered for students in age appropriate settings with their peers.

Students with special needs (developmentally, physically, behaviorally, etc.) are included/integrated in the regular classroom with teacher assistant support in most cases. These students work with their classmates on all curriculum outcomes and participate in all class activities that they are able to handle with success. For those curriculum areas which are challenging they work from a special education plan that targets their strengths and needs to allow them success with the curriculum.

In some cases individualized components of a plan are developed where the students work on areas other than curriculum outcomes, i.e. communication, social skills, functional classroom skills, etc. Teachers complete a lesson plan each day that reflects the needs of all the students in the class.

2. What experience do you have with “inclusive education”?

I have experience over a number of years in several schools:

- Collaborating with Student Services Team Members concerning “inclusion”.
- Collaborating with colleagues to develop special education plans, gather resources and communicate with District Office Personnel and other professionals on their behalf.
- Working as a classroom teacher and administrator with students from K-12.

3. Does inclusion make your work difficult?

There are often challenges in attempting to ensure that all students are included – a lot of collaboration must occur with all the professionals who are involved in the child’s education.

There are challenges in developing and ensuring programs for students are appropriately addressed, but that does not necessarily mean inclusion makes work difficult. Sometimes it is difficult to have everyone understand the importance of ensuring students with needs are included in activities with peers, and to have teachers understand the necessity to purposefully plan for students with needs [behavior, those on a Special Education Plan].

4. Does being an “inclusive school” make your school a “better school”?

Yes. Because we are attempting to meet the needs of all students - building compassion and acceptance.

“I believe that our school is better for attempting to be inclusive.”

There is opportunity for everyone to grow –

- 1.) **teachers** - in recognizing all students’ strengths and challenges;
- 2.) **students** - in recognizing and accepting diversity, staff - in gaining empathy for students with disabilities, students who are at risk;
- 3.) **teacher assistants** - in supporting the learning of those who learn differently and those with specific learning disabilities or behavioral difficulties.

5. What unique challenges does being a K-12 school give you? How do you deal with them?

Everyone does not always understand the needs and challenges that are experienced at other grade levels. Communication at staff meetings, grade levels, SST Meetings, is needed and requires on-going effort.

Some of the Challenges:

- adults (teachers) understanding how things operate at each level;
- monitoring the progress of children with significant needs to ensure they are included with peers;
- The challenge of timetabling - with 3 schedules (Elementary; Middle School; and High School)
- ability to offer courses at High School that address needs of “at risk” students;
- keeping students in school;
- providing positive experiences for children at all levels;
- getting and keeping parent support.

6. Is inclusion good for all of your students?

Inclusion does teach us – awareness of others’ challenges, empathy for people who have high needs, opportunities to provide support and be a mentor to others, chances to extend ourselves to help others if we have the skill set to do so. Being included, if you are a child with significant needs, allows you to interact with others your age, to have support from a peer, see a model that is a peer, and practice skills with others your age.

However there are times when you need to do something else with an individual child. Sometimes the behaviors and challenges faced by some students affect the learning environment for others. You have to do something. But we do it individually, and it is in our school.

7. How do you make connections with parents?

We connect with parents at - Pre-Kindergarten meetings, transition meetings, communication through phone contact as well as homework books, parent/teacher meetings and we provide parents with an opportunity to volunteer in some capacity in the school.

We involve parents in planning, revising and delivering programs for their child; consult with and/or request information from them about their child since they are the people who know their child best.

We connect with parents often, and strive to be honest, compassionate and understanding

8. What is the toughest challenge for a principal to make inclusion work?

The biggest challenge is to have staff be as close to “one mind” regarding inclusion as possible.

- having staff appreciate the challenges each child with needs faces;
- the actual work and effort required by each teacher to make inclusion successful;
- getting teachers to acknowledge that they have responsibility for all children assigned to them;
- Monitoring the planning that teachers do and providing support for teachers;
- Scheduling teachers, teacher assistants and students is also a challenge.

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

I assist teachers in planning, gathering resources and contacting other professionals to support them.

The vice –principals and I as well as the Resource & Methods teachers also support teachers:

- in developing SEP's;
- with the preparation of materials needed;
- in liaison with parents;
- we emphasize the importance of good planning and monitoring of individual programs;
- we share what has worked well in the past;
- we help access material that is relevant for individual students;
- We involve professionals from the District and outside agencies when we need their help;
- We utilize a team of teacher assistants to support teachers and students in the classroom – where and when they are needed.

10. Can you share an example of how inclusion was successful for a teacher and/or student in your school?

In the 2008-2009 School Year, a student with William's Syndrome was in a grade 5 class. The student had an SEP and was being accommodated, curriculum was modified and individualized. He was integrated with his classmates when working on his outcomes and integrated for all other aspects of the curriculum. He was part of the "team". He always had a buddy whom he worked with in addition to his TA. His buddy was able to support him when his TA was not assigned to him.

Other examples of successful inclusionary experience:

- a special needs student with limited verbal skills reading book to the class;
- a special needs student with strong computer skills participating in class activities with the SmartBoard;
- a student who was non-verbal student using a switch to direct some activities in gym for peers;

- a student with challenges participated in a demonstration with peers of some specific skills where the child had strength at school-wide assembly.
- Students with special needs taking part in plays and drama activities.

11. What advice would you give a principal just beginning to make his/her school “inclusive”?

My advice is simple:

- Share positive experiences/situations;
- Provide solid information on benefits and challenges
- Work in teams – at grade level, or at high school - subject specific;
- Be up front about expectations –
 - regarding programming,
 - necessity for good organization by the teacher to assure student success,
 - insist that the teacher take responsibility for all children in the class.
- Develop a strong team that shows common beliefs and values around inclusion.

Be persistent! Be patient!