

The Inclusive Education - “Poster Principal”

For www.inclusiveeducation.ca

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School Name and website: Forest Hills School.

<http://foresthillsschool.nbed.nb.ca>

School Motto:

“We build ... inclusion

We build ... capacity (shared leadership)

We build ... learning communities”

Short Bio:

Educator for 19 years within the public and First Nations School system in New Brunswick. Currently a principal of a large K-8 school in Saint John’s east side (800 students). Resides in Woodman’s Point along the Saint John River with her husband and three children.

The Questions:

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

Forest Hills School is an inclusive school because we operate with the premise that all children belong to us, as their community school. Our mission statement, our policies, our procedures and our structures are all guided by the principle of providing an equitable and accessible environment to everyone. We “go out of our way” to purposefully create the conditions and programs that make all students feel equal in the school community.

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

In the past three years, I have been actively involved in participating in workshops, presenting workshops, and actively promoting the notion of inclusion within my school and provincially. I have resource teacher background and always took for granted that inclusion was a given practice, considering the legislated mandated of our province. It has only been in the last few years that I’ve come to realize that there is much work to be done—both in policy and practice, and also in skills training of teachers.

3. Does inclusion make your work difficult?

The work of inclusion is a challenge when a system is under funded in terms of adequate resources. However, it does not make the job difficult. It is a challenge that provides great rewards. Building community is beneficial to the “abled” and “disabled”. We all grow stronger when we work at taking care of each other.

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

Our school is a “better school” and our commitment to inclusion plays a part in that. We are considerate of differentiating our instruction—which benefits all. We are also considerate of how we build belonging in community. That leads to a more peaceful school which is foundational for children stepping out and taking more risks in their own academic and personal growth.

5. What unique challenges does being a K-8 school give you? How do you deal with them?

The challenge of a K-8 school is the variety of programming and curriculum, as opposed to a single level school. Because there is such a variety of events and initiatives occurring, I have to accept that I cannot be part of it all. That speaks to the importance of working in team, and building capacity with the staff. It is necessary to have trust and leave decision making to capable teachers and other co-administrators.

As for students, there is always a concern with parents about mixing such a large age-range of students. Because we believe in community, we believe that both our younger and older students have much to learn from each other. We can benefit from the concept of “expert-novice” relationships between our students.

6. Is inclusion good for all your students?

Inclusion benefits all, matters to all. We learn how to take care of each other. That builds citizenship in all students. It is not about reducing ourselves to the least common denominator. It is about building community. Strength comes from community. Social capital matters to all of us.

7. How do you make connections with parents?

We expect our homeroom teachers to be our primary connections to parents, communicating frequently. Resource teachers assist with this as well. We have a school website that we are building to address the need of broadcasting. Each grade level has access to their own site where they can communicate with parents as well.

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

The first challenge is addressing the belief system of the people who work at a school. It is necessary to get that conversation going and challenge out-dated and biased notions. The toughest challenge is always about adequate support. No one can stretch like a rubber band without snapping and breaking at some point. Profiling the need for adequate teachers and support is always the priority.

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

Our best response is to provide collaborative support. Our teachers have time to collaborate with colleagues to brainstorm and program. We also have resource teachers who are proactive in meeting with teachers and developing creative solutions. They actively co-teach as well.

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

*Until June 2008, there had been a district operated isolated classroom where many autistic students received their schooling. In September 2008, one of these students was successfully and fully integrated in to our grade 5 program. He spent first term in the French portion of the Intensive French program. He went from being in an isolated classroom to being fully included in our school. He had a TA who spoke no French and it was **NO BIG DEAL**. She could still provide support. This student who had appeared non-verbal beforehand, was not only verbal in class, but spoke French as well.*

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

My advice would be to hold tightly to the notion that inclusion is a value that works for all students. It leads to better teaching and better citizenship skill building. Secondly, I would suggest that taking the time to speak about the issue with staff, and identify a collective mission with the staff is paramount. Lastly, it would be to remember that down the road, all practices, procedures, policies within the school should reflect the school's dedication to inclusion.