

The Journey to Inclusion

Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Chris Smeaton, Superintendent for Holy Spirit Catholic School Division and was published on May 9, 2018. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

Recently, my Director of Support Services and I have been meeting with a small group of parents from the system on our continued journey to inclusion. All of these parents have children with diverse learning needs, some more significant than others. This is not a formal committee of the board, but rather an opportunity to engage and provide a learning experience for all in the room. It is not a group of parents pointing fingers and laying blame - they are very solution focused, looking for ways to continually improve our inclusion processes. And so, the conversations revolve around perspectives and perceptions in order to eventually bring about a clearer understanding to all about what is meant by inclusion. We've also had similar conversations with many of our Inclusive Education Liaisons, because they too are instrumental in guiding this journey.

In order to move to a more inclusive education system there must always be an emphasis to shift culture and then align practice. It is recognizing each student's unique gifts and challenges and celebrating every student's successes. Fifty plus years ago, students with special needs rarely saw the inside of a school, let alone a classroom. The first iteration of inclusion began when students with special needs were integrated back into schools. Typically, and for all the right reasons at the time, they were segregated into a separate classroom. Often, our most compassionate educators and those who had background in the old "special education" were placed with these students. We believed that this was the best place for all of the students identified and, while some may have benefited greatly from this setting, we are now beginning to realize that it cannot be the default position for all.

The next iteration (which is becoming more commonplace in Holy Spirit) will be for students with special needs to be placed in regular classrooms with the necessary supports. This means that inclusion decisions must always be made in the best interest of the individual child. While most would suggest that this move only benefits our diverse learners, the fact is that it is better for all of our students and society as a whole. Our children will develop a far greater sense of compassion and understanding surrounded by diversity in their classrooms. The lessons learned from students with special needs will greatly outweigh the lessons provided to them. Developing more inclusive classrooms will result in more inclusive communities, and that in itself should be enough of a driving force to continue the changes.

This is not a "flip the switch" change. It requires strong leadership, tough conversations, capacity building and a shift in thinking and doing. We are talking about the goals and dreams we have for all of our children as they go through the K-12 system and then beyond. All of us want the best for the students in our schools and, regardless of ability, desire that they transition successfully beyond high school in order to experience a full and productive life. Schools may not know every "how" or "what" for full inclusion, but by knowing the "why," they can make great strides.

I continue to look forward to conversations with our parent group. They've approached these meetings, not with an "us-versus-them" mentality, but with a strong commitment to supporting our school division and their own children. In the new year we will be providing further opportunities for parents and staff to engage on the topic of inclusion in our system. It is a journey that is important for all.