

Ask A School Psychologist: What Is "Inclusive Education"?

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson

"Inclusion", "Inclusive Education", "Full Inclusion"; so many terms, what do they all mean? It is confusing and many parents - 1- are frustrated as many of these terms are being used as synonyms but mean different things to various groups and individuals.

How to move forward?

First, we need to develop a Common Language. An essential component of effective communication is for members of a given community to have a common understanding of the words that are used. In specific areas of our lives, words have a particular meaning: healthcare - stat; entertainment - Oscar; swimming - butterfly that we all readily understand. "Inclusive Education" is a term that has become an international buzz word. And as such, this term has been defined by various groups in meaningfully discrete ways; hence, all the confusion.

What is the definition of "Inclusive Education" in Alberta?

Traditionally, Alberta schools have had two parallel systems of education: regular and special education. Inclusive Education replaces those two systems with a mandate to educate all students. Alberta Education has anchored the Alberta Inclusive Education System on the goal of providing "all students with the most appropriate learning environments and opportunities for them to best achieve their potential." In response to questions regarding the premise of most appropriate learning environment, Alberta Education has responded that the learning needs of the student is the primary consideration and there continues to be a variety of placement options ranging from targeted groupings to modified instruction in classes with same-aged peers.

Families have been assured that there will continue to be choices among school authorities including designated special education schools (ex. Foothills Academy); private schools (ex. Calgary Academy); Public (ex. Calgary Board of Education); and Separate (ex. Calgary Catholic School District). The Alberta Inclusive Education System incorporates choice as a fundamental underpinning.

Alberta Education has described inclusion as every student being included in the overall school environment. In practice, this indicates that all students play a role in the enhancement of their school culture and are valued members of their school community. More specifically, the government has addressed the controversial debate of Full Inclusion in a regular classroom by clarifying that students "will be physically placed in the setting that is best for them at a particular time, based on the input of all parties. Inclusion does not necessarily mean that every student registered in the Alberta school system will be placed in a regular classroom. Physical placement will be flexible and changeable, always with the student's success in mind," (AB Ed, 2010). This explanation reassures parents of students who have experienced success in specialized programs (ex. GATE) and schools (ex. Dr. Oakley) that these educational options are components of an Inclusive Education System.

An Inclusive Education system, what does it mean to me?

Pivotal to the successful implementation of an Inclusive Education System is the collaborative partnerships between homes, schools and communities. These three interconnected groups have a staunch interest in all students reaching their potential and becoming contributing members of the larger Alberta Society. Alberta Education has emphasized that leadership in an Inclusive Education System is shared - schools and families must work together to ensure student success. This means that parents have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children. When your child is having any difficulty at school, contact the school team (teachers, administrators) and set up a meeting.

An Inclusive Education System is a way of thinking and acting that permits all students to feel welcome, valued, confident and successful. Each student in an Inclusive Education System is provided with the opportunity to reach their full learning potential - students should not fall through the cracks. Programming reflects students' unique learning strengths and needs. An Inclusive Education system is based on the foundational belief that all students are integral members of the school environment, regardless of race, gender, age, ability or disability and experience success in their school environment.

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych., has been working in the education field for 24 years as a teacher, administrator and school psychologist. She has also taught university courses in the areas of special education, psychology and program effectiveness. Through Dr. Johnson's work in schools, she has developed a wealth of knowledge about learning, literacy and special education. Dr. Johnson can be contacted through her website, helpingchildren.ca. CCM