

Partnerships And Practical Applications For Teachers Will Move Inclusion Forward

Award winners says movement needs to pull together and refocus advocacy efforts on inclusion

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Beth French says its time to move from just talking about inclusive education as a theory to actively working with the education system so that the practices are in place to make inclusion work in schools.

French is the executive director of the of the Brockville and District Association for Community Involvement (BDACI), which was recently named the Ontario recipient of the Canadian Association for Community Living's (CACL) Inclusive Education Award.

While the award is encouraging, French says recent statistics from the CACL's national report card on inclusion highlight the reality that more work still needs to be done.

The CACL reported states that two-thirds of school-aged children who have an intellectual disability are segregated in special classes or schools some or all the time, or are not attending school at all.

"There has been some progress made over the years but there are many, many issues before us and this is a time in our movement when we have to come to grips with that," says French.

The two main areas that the BDACI sees as instrumental to helping achieve inclusion in schools is forming partnerships with the school boards and advocating for more research and education techniques to prepare teachers to accommodate all children. French says it's important to work with the school board in a collaborative process. A successful partnership with the Upper Canada school board and the association has helped BDACI create inclusion in several schools in the Brockville area.

In BDACI's experience, having a statement to clarify what inclusion means was also helpful to ensure consistency. BDACI presented the school board with a statement that identified full inclusion as having children who have an intellectual disability included in their age-appropriate classroom with adapted curriculum at their neighbourhood school.

“I think that clarity helps and consistency helps and you have to be prepared to demonstrate that you respect their expertise and want to work with that,” says French, adding that associations can still be strong in their advocacy for inclusion. “Convey that our expectations are high and that we do in fact see as a fundamental for inclusion later in life, inclusive education has to be in place.”

Also important is ensuring teachers are prepared to teach children who have an intellectual disability. Nancy McNamara, BDACI’s president, says it’s hard to make inclusion happen if teachers feel unprepared to do it.

She suggests local associations and Community Living Ontario, advocate for the province to make it mandatory that all teachers receive training on how to accommodate children who an intellectual disability.

McNamara suggests that differentiated learning is one tool that could be helpful to instruct all children. Differentiated learning recognizes that all students do not learn in the same manner and adopts an approach that provides students with different avenues to maximize their growth so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability.

“We had a great presentation on this differentiated instruction which is a perfect example of how you include kids within the same classroom,” says McNamara, who adds that differentiated learning as a practice has not yet expanded to include children who have an intellectual disability — but should be considered in the future.

“I don’t think they are using that system as nearly as well as they could be.”

Does your association have a best practice when it comes to promoting inclusive education in schools?