

Restoring Quality Inclusive Education in BC's Public Schools

Report on the March 16, 2017 public forum, Vancouver, BC

An inclusive world starts with inclusive schools - Inclusion BC



Introduction

Research tells us all students benefit from inclusive education. But more students with special needs are being failed by BC's public education systems — unwelcome at their local school, excluded from regular classes, subjected to restraints or seclusion, sent home due to a lack of supports, or forced in growing numbers to move to costly private segregated programs.

Our vision of inclusion compels action to reverse this trend, working together towards a world where all students feel welcomed to join friends and neighbours in learning and play at their local schools.

The landmark 2016 Supreme Court decision restoring BC teacher contract provisions is driving provincial re-investment in public schools and special education. On March 16, 2017, Inclusion BC and the Family Support Institute co-hosted a public forum in Vancouver to start discussing the opportunities this presents, with an exploration of best practices and tools to support rebuilding of inclusive education.

Presenters included BC Teachers' Federation researcher (and parent) Sherri Brown, Positive Behaviour Support consultant Don Chapman, Richmond Director of Learning Services Richard Steward, parent Cyndi Gerlach and Arden Duncan Bonokoski from Steps Forward. The panel was live-streamed and was followed by an open discussion with over 60 in-person and virtual attendees.

This report summarizes key themes from the March 16 forum and will inform our ongoing work and advocacy to strengthen inclusive education in BC, including our June 14 Inclusive Education Summit.

Inclusion recognizes differences as important and valued.

- Sherri Brown, BC Teachers Federation

Leadership and school culture

A major theme throughout the forum presentations and discussion was the critical importance of commitment and leadership in shaping a school wide culture of inclusion. Steward discussed Richmond's longstanding commitment to inclusive education, which has been supported over the years by a series of district-wide reviews. Resources are never enough and growing staff shortages have placed huge stresses on students and staff, Steward noted. But in his district, inclusion is a team effort that involves the entire school community and that advocates for all students.

Other participants emphasized the need for stronger leadership from the Education Ministry, district superintendents, executives and school administrators. One noted that a true commitment to inclusive



education will be driven by societal attitudes and values: If society expects it — like we expect hospital care for sick children — it will happen.

Inclusion starts with a commitment to ensuring equity of opportunity, by providing opportunities and removing barriers, Brown said. Equity means a commitment to equal access to educational opportunities, for all students, everywhere in the province. It also requires a presumption of competence. As Duncan Bonokoski noted, perception drives expectations, which drive opportunities and achievement, which in turn reinforce positive perceptions and commitment.

BC schools that adopted Positive Behaviour Support models saw a 40 percent drop in suspensions, less problem behaviour and higher academic achievement.

- Don Chapman

Understanding inclusion

A deeper understanding of inclusion is also needed to drive change. Brown discussed the historical transition from segregation to integration, where many are still stuck (potted plant syndrome) and what's needed to continue the shift toward true inclusion. Inclusion recognizes differences as important and valued, she noted. Duncan Bonokoski contrasted that to the all too common assumptions that special education needs mean a lack of capacity or something to be fixed. In Richmond, the starting point is that everyone has abilities, Steward added. And we want to support all students to develop their abilities, whatever they are.

Brown emphasized that commitment alone is not enough, however. Inclusion requires conscious planning, accommodation and supports to ensure meaningful participation. True inclusion doesn't just happen in the classroom either, but crosses every aspect of school life. And that requires resources, effort, understanding of good practice and strong partnerships.

Several participants noted the importance of communicating that such efforts benefit all students and strengthen the entire school community.

Positive behaviour intervention and support

The importance and benefits of holistic, school-wide frameworks was reinforced in Chapman's presentation on positive behaviour intervention and support (PBIS or PBS). Behaviour, often a core challenge for schools and educators struggling with inclusion, is something that can be taught and learned, Chapman stressed. Children with social-emotional behaviour challenges have trouble learning, so the importance of a school-wide behaviour support framework is hard to overstate.

PBS is practiced in schools around the world, and underlies the district-wide commitment that Steward described in Richmond. In technical terms, it's an evidence-based prevention and intervention framework to promote pro-social student behaviour and academic achievement by building a positive school-wide culture. Essentially, it's about improving the classroom and school climate, integrating academic and behaviour goals, improving supports, decreasing reactive management and maximizing academic achievement. It's an approach that involves all staff, all students and all settings.

The framework is based on three levels of intervention, and starts with the assumption that most students will thrive with universal approaches to support positive behaviour. Some will need some extra individual support and a small number of those will require more intensive individual support.

Results include reduced negative behaviours, improved academic outcomes and on-task student behaviour. Feedback from BC schools that use this model included a 40 percent drop in suspension rates, decreased problem behaviour, increased academic achievement, increased student perception of school safety, decreased at-risk behaviours and a very significant drop in office referrals. A 2011 study of 12 Kamloops schools that adopted PBS showed less risk factors tied to low household income and reduced bullying (down from 25% to 8% reported in Grade 4). One school reported significantly higher FSA (Foundation Skills Assessment) scores in one year (62% to 92%). Reduced school discipline referrals meant more time for instruction, equivalent to 17 six-hour school days per year.

Complex classrooms reflect a more complex and diverse society and require more specialized training for teachers, aides and administrators. - Forum participant.

Partnerships

The PBS approach was one of several examples that highlighted the value of partnerships, teamwork and collaboration in supporting inclusion. Gerlach discussed the important role that parents can play in supporting inclusion when they are welcomed as fellow professionals, and appreciated as experts when it comes to understanding their own children.

While she acknowledged that building relationships takes commitment and effort, Gerlach stressed the value of investing in building respectful relationships, being proactive and welcoming parents to engage in collaborative problem solving instead of being drawn into blame games. Other participants cited the value of enlisting “typical” students and their parents as allies, teaching them the benefits of inclusion for all students and showing how they can play a role in strengthening inclusion while helping students grow up to become confident and compassionate leaders.

Steward also discussed the benefits of building community partnerships, especially for supporting students with very complex needs. Those benefits include reducing redundancy, enhancing supports and smoothing transitions. Examples in Richmond include the Grade 13 transition program, the Explore “job carving” partnership and Richmond’s inclusive Ed committee, which provides a forum for sharing, learning and collaboration among major service providers such as health, education and social services.



Change drivers

Forum panelists and participants also identified key factors that will drive change as we work to rebuild quality inclusive education for the benefit of all students in BC’s public schools. The importance of advocacy was emphasized, both at the societal and the individual level. Parents whose students are struggling without needed supports should understand that schools have a legal, statutory obligation to provide a meaningful inclusive education, noted Brown, who is also the parent of a student with special needs. Don’t be afraid to be “that parent,” she advised, and to call on the full range of community resources as needed (e.g. advocacy groups, paediatrician, treatment team, MLA, school trustees, legal aid, media and social workers).

Welcome parents as fellow professionals. They are the experts when it comes to understanding their own children.

- parent and advocate Cyndi Gerlach

The importance of professionalism was also emphasized. Complex classrooms reflect our increasingly diverse society and require more specialized training for teachers, aides and administrators. Other suggestions included better career paths for education assistants, making teaching a more attractive career opportunity and strengthened standards of practice for all educators.

Also proposed was a need for new funding models, as existing models for funding inclusion have clearly failed. Suggestions included tying the allocation of resources more directly to functional assessment and individual student need, instead of to diagnostic labels.

And finally, linking back to the key theme of political will and commitment to rebuild inclusion, participants stressed the importance of public attitudes and of promoting a better understanding of how inclusive schools benefit all students, and ultimately society.