

family

A D V O C A C Y

Insights of a primary Principal on good inclusion in practice

Margaret Young is committed to social justice. This commitment has defined her role as Principal of a primary school that enshrines the belief that public education is for all. In this article she offers insights into what promotes good inclusion.

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I am the Principal of a primary school in the Sydney area. Our school has approximately 550 students. I have always believed that public education is for all and that the local school should be a true reflection of the local community and its inhabitants.

I came to my school in 1996 from a special education background and my staff was aware that I had a strong commitment to social justice. This made some of my staff and some members of the community a little uneasy, not because they were not excellent teachers and very compassionate people, but because of a lack of understanding of the needs of students with special learning needs and of what their presence in a school would mean.

I continued to make sure the school community was aware of my commitment to all students and a Learning Support Team was formed at the school. This team worked with staff and parents to assess the needs of students with mild, moderate and high support needs whose parents wished them to be enrolled at our school. The team's first task was to define its role and write a policy and procedures that all staff would be committed to following. This was done in such a way that consensus was reached before a final document was tabled and confirmed as school policy.

Our process for the enrolment of a student with moderate to high support needs is as follows:

- Parents meet with the Principal to discuss the needs of their child in the school setting.
- Reports and all necessary documentation are collected; this is crucial for the funding support process and for the information of the teacher.
- The leader of the Learning Support Team, the Principal and, if appropriate, the receiving teacher, visit the child in his or her current setting.
- These form the basis of an educational appraisal that allows the school to ascertain the educational needs of the child in our school setting.
- We then work out what the school can do to meet these needs and what type of additional support is necessary.
- Application for funding is prepared.
- Transition to school is planned with parents and other agencies involved with the child to ensure that the child has a successful experience.

The receiving teacher is involved in the transition process and works with the parents and other agencies. Once the child is at school, it is necessary to structure the class and the learning experiences to ensure success.

“We have received appropriate funding support from the Department of Education and Training and have been able to use that funding for training and development of staff, for support time in the classroom, for implementation of programs, and for giving the teacher time to modify curricula and work with specialist personnel and parents”.

We make sure we celebrate the success of all of our students by reporting to the whole school community, through awards, concert presentations and assemblies.

This has been a gradual and natural process. From 1996 – 2001 we have enrolled all children in our local area whose parents have requested enrolment. In 2002 we will have 15 students who have low, moderate or high support needs. Over that time the staff have gained in confidence and celebrate the success of our students. I even had one parent come to see me when she heard that we had been approached to enrol a student with high support needs. I expected the worst, but was greeted with, “I just came to tell you that if you don’t enrol that little girl I’ll take my kids out of the school”.

I am proud of my school and my staff. In summary I would say that we are successful because I believe in my school, as a reflection of all in our community, and I believe in the ability of a wonderful staff. We endeavour to understand and meet the needs of families who have a child with a disability. We spent time collecting information so that we know what support services are required and we successfully lobby for that support if it is necessary. We make sure we start with, and build on success. I support staff with time, resources and training.

We obviously have shortcomings as an institution, but by continuing to work with staff and parents we continue to improve our services to **ALL** students. This is what public education is all about.