

A magnifying glass with a dark purple frame and a grey handle is positioned in the top right corner. The lens of the magnifying glass is focused on the text 'Case Study 1'.

Case Study 1

Creating a Culture of Inclusion

I am the principal of a BC school that enrolls students in English and French-language programs. I strongly believe in the importance of schools being inclusive for all students.

Last year I received a letter from the Parent Advisory Committee. In this letter the committee asked to meet and explore ways to improve inclusion at the school level, which I felt was a good focus. Our school took many steps to work on this, and had some positive results.

It all began with meeting the Parent Committee. The parents questioned why many students with special needs were scheduled predominantly in Resource classes, and not represented in any core subject classes and very few elective courses. The parents also noted that these students spent most of their lunch and break times with other students with special needs instead of with similar age peers.

Once this concern was brought to my attention I dedicated time and effort into learning more about inclusive cultures in schools. I reviewed the new District Policy on inclusion, looked at the Ministry's policy on Diversity and Special Education and explored many online resources. Then I calculated the percentage of students with special needs that were scheduled in non-resource courses. I started making observations at break times in different environments such as the cafeteria and library, and noted the number of students with special needs that were among the general population.

The next step I took was meeting with the school's Resource Department to share my observations. The Resource teachers identified staffing as a main concern, as it was easier to supervise the students during breaks when they were together. Similarly, it was easier to group students into specific elective blocks when support staff were available to help. It was also easier for staff to adapt activities in some elective courses. The Resource teachers voiced concern about the planning required to support students to meet the goals in their IEPs if they were in different core courses.

The next step was to share this information with the staff. There was a large discussion on how to address the barriers and improve opportunities for inclusion for all students. We identified four themes.

1. professional development on inclusion for teaching and non-teaching staff
2. school events that promote inclusion
3. opportunities for student leadership and peer support
4. funding support

For each of these themes, we came up with solutions to try. The first theme involved more professional development opportunities for teachers, education assistants, and family members. As a group we decided to allocate a non-Instructional day to learn about Inclusion. This day would allow us to discuss key areas to work on that would support inclusion in our school.

To work on the theme of school events that promote inclusion we decided to have a school-wide presentation by a paralympic athlete, who inspired students with her story about overcoming her limitations. Following the presentation, classroom teachers had discussions with their students about diversity and developed a set of guiding principles that would ensure all students would feel welcome and safe.

For the third theme of building opportunities for student leadership and peer support, the career education teacher at the school started a buddy program that paired senior high school students with a buddy with special needs as part of a required work experience. These senior buddies started to take the students to the common areas for breaks, and help all students feel welcome in social spaces.

Although increasing funding was not something that could be changed at the school level, Resource teachers arranged their schedules so that they could support teachers in classrooms for some blocks during the day.

Resource teachers also became more involved with course selection to ensure the strengths and interests of each student with a designation were taken into consideration with a good educational program planned for the school year. Resource teachers started clearly identifying the physical, social, and learning goals for students in each class. This information provided direction for teachers in designing daily lessons and evaluating the progress of the student. It also gave education assistants clarity around their role to support the child.

The staff agreed to use and model strength-based language by referring to any student as: "a student with a disability" or "a student with special needs" versus "a special needs student" or "an autistic student." This conscious choice reinforced the message that the student is an individual first, and is not defined by their disability.

The outcomes of this project have been positive for everybody in our school. After implementing these strategies, I collected information about the number of students that were in new courses and scanned some of the public areas to see if students with special needs were being included in social situations. I noticed an increase in the amount of students that were being included in classes and social areas.

When meeting with the staff, they felt that the Buddy Program was a positive experience and the language of the staff was more positive. The staff recommended that these professional development opportunities continue, and that some more education assistants be added so that students could be included in even more blocks in the future. The other recommendation was to work on finding and training more French-speaking educational assistants.

Finally, I met with the PAC to share the results and responses from the teachers. The PAC was pleased with the efforts we made to make inclusion a priority in our school. The feedback we received helps us shape where we go next to continue making everybody welcome in our inclusive school.

