

Champions of Inclusion

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All across the country, individuals are being recognized for successfully promoting inclusion in schools. These persons have helped make it more possible for students who have disabilities to participate in meaningful ways with their peers in a wide range of activities. Although the quality of inclusion does indeed depend on many factors related to whole school change and improvement, it is important to acknowledge the people who really make it happen. The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the salient characteristics of these champions of inclusion.

Champions of inclusion CONNECT with students who have disabilities as individuals who are contributors first.

There are still many who when dealing with a student with a disability focus on the limitations first. These folks start to think or talk about the impairment and the things that the individual cannot do. Sometimes these perceived inabilities are correct and sometimes they are incorrect or falsely magnified. What is significant though is that their first consideration is on deficits.

Champions of inclusion are the classmates who describe Victoria as a good friend who has started skiing and who drives a cool wheelchair. They also are:

- the English teacher who depicts Johnny (who has learning disabilities) as a kid who writes great stories using that special computer program
- the teacher aide who brags about how terrific Chuck (a boy with cognitive delays) has been combining geometric shapes
- the music specialist who relates how fantastic Ashley (who has autism) sings during performances
- the cafeteria worker who shares how helpful Diana (who has emotional disorders) has been cleaning up in the lunch room period
- the special education teacher who points out to the physics teacher how Willy (who has ADHD) can fix all kinds of car problems
- the secretary who comments on how much more clearly Irma (who has speech and language delays) is communicating when she runs an errand to the office
- Maria (a girl with Down Syndrome), who informs everyone that she is a fifth grade super star because of all the books that she has read.

Champions of inclusion COMMUNICATE enthusiasm and act comfortably around students with disabilities.

Many people still feel uncomfortable around students with disabilities. They have had less experience with persons with disabilities, and they are unfamiliar with much of the

accompanying equipment and adaptations. They tend to interact awkwardly with the students who have disabilities and sometimes even avoid encounters altogether.

Champions of inclusion are the classmates who nonchalantly pass a tissue to Keith (who has Cerebral Palsy) so that he can wipe off the drool, which sometimes emerges while he is talking. They also are:

- the nurse who slips into a classroom, whispers to Nancy who is reading, and then changes the food cartridge in her backpack which is hooked up to her feeding tube
- the special education administrator who warmly greets Scott (who has autism) as he brings up the attendance to the office in the morning
- the parent leader who welcomes new parents and tells them how wonderful it has been for her daughter who does not have a disability to learn in an inclusive school
- the vision teacher who with her student Ryan shows off some of the gadgets that he will be using to take notes in Braille
- the history teacher who talks privately with John (who has significant dyslexia) and assures him that his test grade will not be affected by spelling
- the custodian who asks Charlene (who is deaf) to teach him how to sign, “have a good day”
- Judy who extends an offer to her tired friend to hop on the back of her electric wheelchair and get a ride

Champions of inclusion CHALLENGE students with disabilities to work their best toward high standards.

There are still many who do not act like students with disabilities can succeed. They do not expose students who have disabilities to high levels of teaching and learning. They do not promote students’ independence, and they do not hold students to high standards.

Champions of inclusion are the classmates who cheer for Ernesto (who has a mobility impairment) to run his fastest and make it to first base. They also are:

- the speech therapist who labors with Stephanie encouraging her to make a clearer “th” sound
- the language arts teacher who pushes Robert (who has learning disabilities) to read more challenging books with his adaptive equipment
- the parent who despite the recommendations of a pediatrician advocates that her son (who has developmental delays) starts school in the inclusive early childhood program
- the assistant principal who meets with Sean (who has emotional disorders) after returning from a suspension for fighting and points out to him ways he can more appropriately deal with his anger
- the kindergarten teacher who won’t let Cherelle (who has multiple disabilities) play with the blocks until she finishes drawing her circle
- the parent volunteer who calls the mother of Frankie (who has Down Syndrome) and both reviews the school’s home reading contract policy and offers suggestions for fulfilling it

- the special education meeting facilitator who shares ideas as to why and how Tommy (who has mild cognitive delays) can now start riding the regular school bus
- the math teacher who convinces Connor (who has autism) and his mother that he should participate in the AP math class in high school
- James (who has learning disabilities and attention deficits) who works extra hours in school and at home to prepare an excellent science project

Champions of inclusion CREATIVELY adapt and UTILIZE appropriate strategies and materials to help students with disabilities learn and succeed.

There are still some who do not adequately adapt teaching and learning to provide sufficient opportunities for students who have disabilities to perform at their highest levels. Sometimes they may not be aware of the possibilities for differentiating instruction. Usually they do not spend enough time to seek out more information about possible adaptations nor do they successfully solicit necessary supports to implement them.

Champions of inclusion are the classmates who figure out ways for Frankie (who has autism) to participate in the group's skit depicting a scene from the American Revolutionary War. They also are:

- the special education teacher who writes a simplified version of Romeo and Juliet for Juan (who has cognitive delays) so that he can grasp the key points of the play being discussed in the grade 11 literature class
- the behavior consultant who crafts a positive behavior plan for Rakeem (who has emotional disorders) so that he can stay on task more and become more successful
- the speech therapist who organizes a set of picture symbols and voice recordings for Betsaida (who is nonverbal) so that she can communicate her needs more effectively
- the grade 5 teacher who learns how to use a computer with screenreading software so that Timothy (who has significant decoding problems) can follow some of the popular books read by his classmates
- the basketball coach who designates and arranges tasks for Carmen (who has Down Syndrome) so that she can serve as the assistant manager for the team on which many of her friends play
- the occupational therapist who coordinates a school store where students with a variety of fine motor and social needs can practice useful tasks
- the biology teacher who makes a chart for ways that Joshua (who has mild cognitive delays) can take responsibility for some of the activities in the lab
- the teacher aide who identifies unobtrusive signals to keep Wong (who has ADHD) more on task
- the art teacher who keeps a box of varying grips with her so that students with fine motor difficulties can better manipulate drawing and painting implements
- William (who has Aspergers) who shows his class a more efficient way to solve a math problem

Champions of inclusion COLLABORATE with others to maximize students' development.

There are still some who do not prioritize the time to meet with others to explore ways of improving teaching and learning for students with disabilities. They may not be receptive to new ideas. They may not want to commit the extra time. They may not feel comfortable interacting with others. Whatever the reasons, they are probably not exposing students with disabilities to as wide a range of possibilities.

Champions of inclusion are the classmates who meet with Sammy (who has lost some mobility from an accident in his friend's car) to discuss ways of supporting him. They also are:

- the team of grade 7 teachers who strategize with the behavior specialist ideas for connecting better with Marilyn (who has emotional disorders);
- the special education teacher who designs adapted activities for an astronomy unit with the grade 4 teacher who includes students with various disabilities;
- the early childhood teacher who discusses with her part time teacher's aid better ways of engaging with Keisha (who is nonverbal) in play activities;
- the history teacher who agrees to share some of the techniques he uses with students who have cognitive delays with colleagues at an upcoming in-service;
- the computer specialist who devotes extra time demonstrating how to use screen reading software on computers throughout the building;
- the special education administrator who listens to teachers' concerns, spends time becoming familiar with the issues by visiting classrooms, and then sets up follow-up meetings to deal with them;
- the parent leaders who, after meeting with staff leaders to prioritize needs, then coordinate activities to raise funds for more assistive technology;
- Carlos (who is a blind high school student) who volunteers to tutor a struggling grade 2 reader in an after school program using appropriate level print Braille books

Extraordinary to Ordinary

Most of the examples listed above to highlight the salient characteristics of champions of inclusion do not depend upon advanced degrees and training. Although in many instances, special skills are certainly required, in most cases it is the accompanying positive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which are most significant. Indeed it is common for those who have been identified as champions of inclusion to state that what they are being recognized for is really quite ordinary.

Likewise it is important to note that many adults who have disabilities report that their impairments were not as challenging to them in school as were the ways others related to their impairments. For many persons with disabilities, stereotypic beliefs, negative attitudes, and inappropriate behaviors were common experiences, which impeded opportunities for meaningful participation. In order for successful inclusion in schools to

become more the norm than the exception, changes in how people relate to students who have disabilities must also occur.

Champions of inclusion are people who exemplify first and foremost that they can connect, communicate, challenge, and collaborate appropriately when dealing with students who have disabilities. They are certainly also people who have developed and/or creatively implemented specialized skills, but they recognize that this expertise must be accompanied by appropriate beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in order for the skills being utilized to prove most beneficial. Indeed what makes champions of inclusion extraordinary is that they are demonstrating on a regular basis how ordinary it can be for students with disabilities to participate successfully in a wide range of activities with their peers.

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