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Making Inclusive Schooling Part of Our Daily Journey

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Making Inclusive Schooling Part of Our Daily Journey

Abstract
Introduction by: Jackie Czamanske, Regional Field Facilitator, NYSED S^3TAIR Project

As a School Improvement Specialist, I’ve facilitated numerous discussions over the years on how a school district may address the various challenges it faces. During these conversations, teams often voice their fears on how including students with disabilities may negatively affect a school’s overall performance. The Rochester City School District’s World of Inquiry School provides a solid illustration on how high expectations and inclusion can lock arms in a large urban environment to achieve a performance-enhanced setting for all students. “Are We There Yet?” gives building administrators and leaders an intimate illustration of one school’s journey to create an inclusive environment. Concrete guidance on structures, culture, collaboration and a developmental implementation model provide navigational tools on how to “Get the world for EVERY student!”

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Reading 3: Are We There Yet? Making Inclusive Schooling Part of Our Daily Journey

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As a School Improvement Specialist, I’ve facilitated numerous discussions over the years on how a school district may address the various challenges it faces. During these conversations, teams often voice their fears on how including students with disabilities may negatively affect a school’s overall performance. The Rochester City School District’s World of Inquiry School provides a solid illustration on how high expectations and inclusion can lock arms in a large urban environment to achieve a performance-enhanced setting for all students. “Are We There Yet?” gives building administrators and leaders an intimate illustration of one school’s journey to create an inclusive environment. Concrete guidance on structures, culture, collaboration and a developmental implementation model provide navigational tools on how to “Get the world for EVERY student!”
Are We There Yet?
Making Inclusive Schooling Part of Our Daily Journey
Marie Cianca and Beth Mascitti-Miller

“School 58, please get the world for us!” This refrain is on every page of a picture book describing World of Inquiry School (WOIS) 58 in the Rochester City School District. To those who enter its doors, World of Inquiry School immediately reveals itself as an exciting learning community – one that embraces people, places and adventures in its journey to explore the larger world for each and every learner. How does a principal develop a school culture that accommodates all learners? How can a principal navigate inclusion and stay on course? This article provides three areas of emphasis to help new or experienced elementary principals create and stay on an inclusive journey.

The current WOIS community exists, in large part, because administrators, teachers and support staff at World of Inquiry School 58 deliberately created the intention to “get the world” for every student enrolled. World of Inquiry School 58 is located in a large urban district and has approximately 370 students enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 7. It was not always one of the highest performing schools in Rochester or in the region. In fact, in 2001, school staff members voiced concerns that caused the principal and teachers to review academic progress and other integral facets of their school community. As they did this, they were distressed to find a steady decline in student achievement, few connections across teachers and grade levels, and significant family stressors based on increasing levels of poverty in the city of Rochester. After researching, talking, and planning collaboratively, the school adopted a comprehensive reform model in 2002 to address some of the major concerns. The new instructional design formed a basis for establishing effective ways to engage students and families using an inquiry based approach. Design principles for inquiry-based learning also helped World of Inquiry School define and create school structures that engaged the entire school community in the success of the school.

As in many large urban school districts, a high percentage of students in Rochester receive special education services. At WOIS, 17% of students receive special education support. In adopting a new instructional design, the principal and teachers had to purposefully plan for delivery models that benefitted all learners. If World of Inquiry School was to “get the world” for all of its students, administrators and teachers needed to seriously consider how to foster the strengths and address the needs of students with special needs.

In re-examining school mission and outcomes beginning in 2002, WOIS discovered that co-teaching was the most effective classroom delivery model for all students. In configuring
classes, the principal was able to staff one co-teaching section at every grade level. Co-teaching teams consisted of a special educator and general educator with a class size guideline of 23 students per section. This allowed all students to be included in general education with support and teamed general educators with special educators who were previously assigned to resource or special classes. As an example, during the 2009-2010 school year, fifty students with special needs were all fully included in general education using the co-teaching model.

With a new instructional design and a more effective model for delivering instruction, WOIS was well on its way to addressing its challenges. However, the change process is complex. There was much to be done to implement and embed the new ideas that were underway. Further, under typical circumstances, it is a daunting task to lead school change, but it is even more challenging to ensure an inclusive school culture. For WOIS and for other schools implementing inclusive change, three areas make the journey a successful one for all stakeholders.

**Clear Structures**

First, there must be clear support structures in place for teachers. This was not in place back in 2001 at WOIS. There was little to no common planning time and no consistent approach to rituals and routines in the classroom or school. During the past several years, the master schedule was developed to include two 90 minute periods of common planning time during the week for each grade level. This was possible by block scheduling special subject areas. In addition, daily morning meetings were held in the classrooms and weekly school-wide community meetings occurred to reinforce and solidify school rituals. At the weekly school-wide meetings, students at each grade level rotate responsibility for delivering several consistent themes performed each week. Grade levels share a reading and weekly greeting based on learning themes, conduct an activity for the whole school, perform a skit on the number of the week and share a fact of the day. At the meeting’s end, there is a “torch-passing” ceremony to anoint the grade level in charge of the next meeting. Intermediate students take leadership by owning and facilitating the meetings. Parents and visitors are always welcomed at the weekly school-wide meetings.

These structures were developed and revised over time and make a critical contribution to an inclusive school setting. This takes perseverance and, if overlooked, the lack of support structures can take a school off course very quickly and diminish the opportunities for students. The impetus to persevere emanates directly from the principal and is key to moving forward.

When building structures of support, the principal should carefully examine several areas.

- Get to know the student body and be aware of the types of learners in the school.
• Know the number of students receiving special education services and their grade levels.
• Consider the classroom environments that would best respond to student needs and talents.
• Examine the programs of students individually and build the school schedule with these considerations in mind. Think about the related services that each student may need. Work with related service personnel when building the master schedule so that each student receives the instructional opportunities that are required and anticipated.
• Keep the goal of inclusivity in mind when purchasing furniture, technology, classroom supplies, library books, and arranging for field experiences or guest speakers.

While becoming familiar with the programmatic elements for each student, developing teams of teachers is also important. Considering student numbers and logistics, it helps to purposefully build in planning time for classroom teachers who are working together and supporting similar students. In the case of World of Inquiry School, special education and general education teachers in co-taught classrooms have daily planning time together. Teachers use their planning time to develop standards based instruction with activities centered on inquiry and student engagement. Planning time is also used for cross-grade level team planning and “specialized crew” meetings where special education teachers and related service providers problem solve situational needs of students that arise.

**Inclusive Culture Building**

When the principal and teachers of WOIS looked at the state of their school in 2001, they found that many students were unaware of or did not have access to the school. Staffing and classroom space was arranged in a way that discouraged placements of students with special needs or students with other learning needs. Establishing an inclusive culture and philosophy became an important part of the school improvement plan and the second area of emphasis in this article. Building an inclusive school culture takes a concerted effort and does not happen automatically. Leading by example sets the tone. The principal shows by example that inclusivity is a school priority and helps establish a common language among teachers to internalize the concept and take it further. Communicating an inclusive vision to parents and families is also key. Often, when building a school culture, parents are not aware of the steps and supports that are foundational to a school’s intended direction. The principal and teachers can use a school-wide newsletter, displays and school website to communicate with parents and families about the school’s values and, specifically about the ideals of inclusive schooling. This allows parents to understand the intended purpose, context and benefits of the vision.

Developing and communicating information to parents on an inclusive school culture also serves to solidify the direction for teachers and support staff. In the process of developing a common language, teachers and support staff form a common understanding of the vision of
inclusive education. Each school’s vision is uniquely tailored but school staff can readily incorporate research and models of success from information in current professional journals and organization websites. When principals, teachers and students know and understand the benefits of inclusive schooling for all students, they are much more likely to understand and support the common journey.

When one enters World of Inquiry School 58 and walks its hallways, it is immediately evident that individuals matter and each person is a valued contributor. Large photographs of each student are framed and hung along school hallways. Family customs and cultures are displayed. “I am” poems are posted for all to see. A personalized environment and relationship building is symbolized throughout the school and is reinforced every morning through morning meetings. This builds upon the concepts and ideals practiced in the weekly school-wide meeting by incorporating the values and instructional expectations of the school. These everyday relationships between and among students and staff at World of Inquiry reinforce a caring, compassionate school culture and help all involved to continue on their journey to “get the world for all.” It is critical for the school principal to build these opportunities, model inclusive values and extend behaviors that demonstrate inclusive practices.

At World of Inquiry School 58, the vision and context for “getting the world” was developed and modeled over several years. Teachers, families and students identified with the culture at WOIS because the journey continues to be collaborative and transparent. In fact, each day, students recite the school’s Model Citizen Pledge where belief in an inclusive culture is stated aloud:

_Model Citizen Crew Pledge_

We, the crew of World of Inquiry School, make this pledge for all Model Citizens.

We should all give service and have compassion for others.

We will celebrate our discoveries and wonderful ideas.

Through reflections, we will learn from our successes and failures.

While collaborating, we will show caring for diverse people and the natural world.

We are all responsible for our own learning.

Our education is our future.
Multi-faceted Collaboration

The third area of emphasis is multi-faceted collaboration and does not occur in isolation but through cross-team collaboration, interdisciplinary planning and systematic feedback from teachers, support staff, families and community. When planning for a more responsive school community, WOIS staff members discovered that parents and community were entitled to more of a voice and more opportunities to be part of the school community in ways that were resourceful and mutually beneficial. One example in this area was an ongoing professional development project that involved parents and community in a major way. With principal and teacher support, several families prepared and implemented a professional development experience for all staff. The collaborative project allowed teachers to work in teams with families from the school to explore different parts of the Rochester community, become familiar with public transportation routes, visit community stores, churches and organizations. This was all facilitated by parents who shared expertise and knowledge about neighborhoods and community resources with staff.

Additional practices that have helped sustain an inclusive environment where success is achieved for all kinds of learners include:

- Summer planning to fine-tune the curriculum and meet the needs of children for the following year;
- One on one reading and math support for students to address their particular needs and also access their strengths;
- A data wall in each classroom that allows students to follow their progress in skill development and concept acquisition;
- Considerations for student groupings that are an ongoing part of lesson planning and are flexed based on current student data and student talents;
- Teaching teams that meet weekly with support staff and administrators to discuss and focus on individual student progress;
- Special education teachers and related service providers that meet together twice monthly to exchange strategies and share expertise in adapting lessons and diversifying lesson delivery;
- Multiple methods for student assessment that are used on a daily and weekly basis to allow students to effectively demonstrate what they know; and
- Students observations that take place during practice tests to help match testing conditions to each child’s needs.

Daily and weekly collaboration at World of Inquiry establishes an atmosphere of open communication and ongoing creativity that fosters student-centered, positive approaches as the foundation of its pedagogy. In addition, parents and community take part in school-wide learning exhibitions twice each year, where grade level inquiry projects in science and social
studies are expertly designed, developed and demonstrated for hundreds who come to see the evidence of student growth.

### 3-S Model

As a principal leads his or her school with *clear structures, inclusive culture building* and *multi-faceted collaboration*, a principal also must consider depth of understanding and implementation within each of these intentional building blocks. One way to deepen the level of implementation is to follow a 3-S model. The term “3-S” describes an implementation method that is at first *simple*, next *substantive*, and finally *sustainable*. So, when implementing any of the suggestions in this article, a principal can benefit by following these three steps. He or she might first introduce it to staff or community in the simplest of ways. Following the introduction of a practice, the principal and other school staff members develop the substance of the practice on a school-wide basis. Lastly, the principal and other school leaders incorporate policies and systems that enable the practice to be sustained. The example below highlights the progression of an idea using the 3-S model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Idea</strong></th>
<th><strong>Simple</strong></th>
<th><strong>Substantive</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sustainable</strong></th>
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| Common Planning Time for Co-teaching Teams | ● Principal develops the master schedule with priority consideration to co-teaching teams.  
● Ensures that there is daily planning time for co-teachers and with other teachers at that grade level. | ● A standards-based tool is developed or adapted for use by co-teachers and grade level teams to assist with collaborative lesson planning.  
● Embedded professional development occurs to gain a common understanding of collaborative planning strategies.  
● Principal and specialists attend common planning meetings on a regularly scheduled basis to provide support and resources. | ● Common planning time becomes part of the school plan.  
● Teachers exchange collaborative units and share best practices.  
● Teachers effectively use various co-teaching models.  
● Teachers are both skilled and meta-cognitively aware of their skills.  
● School leaders support collaboratively planning on many levels. |

The use of the 3-S model helps a school to go beyond a surface level of implementation, and paves the way to a deepened understanding with a scaffolded, step-by-step approach.
Roles and Responsibilities

When embarking on this journey to find the world, it helps staff members at World of Inquiry School #58 to stop frequently and ask, “Are we there yet?” This is an important question to ask several times during the year because, by doing so, inclusive schooling is characterized as a dynamic, ongoing process. All school stakeholders receive an opportunity to continuously reflect on progress towards the journey’s destination.

The asking of this central question also encourages the examination of individual roles. To the principal, what has specifically been put in place recently to support teachers and students? To the teacher, what is the feedback from my students and my colleagues? To all, how have new roles and areas of expertise been incorporated into the daily repertoire? What resources are being used more effectively and why? The journey of inclusive schooling is a challenging but fully satisfying one and the principal makes a substantive difference in facilitating its success.

To new or experienced principals whose school community is poised for inclusion, ask yourself, “When am I getting started on this journey?” and continue to ask “Am I there yet?” Children are waiting for you to show them the world!

Note: World of Inquiry School 58 adopted an Expeditionary Learning (EL) model in 2000 and continues to use this instructional design to this day. Currently, students at WOIS 58 achieve the highest average math and reading scores of any elementary school in Rochester and 100% of its students are proficient in science and social studies. In 2007, World of Inquiry School received the Panasonic National School Change Award. To receive this award, World of Inquiry School provided evidence of:

- A significant change in attitudes, beliefs and values;
- Dramatic changes in instructional practices;
- The existence of systems to promote and embed success;
- A multi-year sharp increase in achievement;
- Changed perceptions inside and outside the school;
- Engaged teachers and students who enjoy school and contribute to its success in significant ways; and
- A school culture that promotes inquiry, research and professional development.

In addition to the change award, WOIS also received the 2008 National Excellence in Urban Education Award, and was recently selected as a National Blue Ribbon School by the Secretary of Education.
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References


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Are We There Yet?

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Extended Learning Opportunities

1. In what ways do the characteristics of this school work to support all learners?

2. Discuss the role of collaboration in an inclusive environment. What can be gained from a collaborative infrastructure? What might be some cautions?

3. Create a diagram illustrating the primary issues a building administrator needs to address when growing an inclusive environment.

4. Considering the 3-S model, create a personal action plan on how inclusive practices would be implemented in your educational setting.

For further resources on Inclusive environments, visit the following:
www.S3TALRproject.org
http://www.vesid.nysed.gov/specialed/techassist/specedQI.htm