

AN INTRODUCTION TO INCLUSION AT THE O'HEARN

The Patrick O'Hearn School is well known in Boston for being an exemplary inclusion school. Bill Henderson, the school's principal has been recognized repeatedly for his leadership in the field. Teachers at the O'Hearn manage to work with and include in activities a broad range of students with special needs: students with slight learning disabilities, students with physical disabilities, students in wheelchairs, students who can barely talk, barely see, or barely write.

This booklet was developed by teachers and specialists at the O’Hearn based on years of experience implementing an innovative and successful inclusion program. Using the Project for School Innovation’s model of collaborative professional recognition and development, teachers at the school spent the 2000-01 school year exploring their best practice and testing lessons learned by sharing it with other schools. Some of the teachers who helped write this booklet have been working at the O’Hearn since it became a full-inclusion school more than ten years ago. Others have only been at the school for one or two years. All share a commitment to the ideas and practices that make this school welcome to students with all levels of ability and disability.

Why Inclusion?

In the last two decades, the prevalence of handicapism—discrimination against people with disabilities—has been well documented. As a group, disabled Americans fare significantly more poorly than do nondisabled Americans in areas such as education, employment, and standard of living. In recognition of this, disability has become a protected status in our country, emphasized in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Just as the principle of equality demands that we provide equal education to students whether they are black or white, or boy or girl, so too do the same principle and the same laws demand that we provide equal education to students whether or not they are disabled.

In light of our growing recognition of discrimination against the disabled in the past, the reason for including all students in the school environment is increasingly clear: we cannot have classrooms that are “separate but equal” for disabled and nondisabled students.

While all of the practices that go into making the O’Hearn successful would fill many volumes of books, we focus here on five practices that have been critical to the development of a successful inclusion program at the O’Hearn.

INCLUSION AS A WAY OF THINKING

From the top down, we have established inclusion as a “way of thinking” at the O’Hearn. That way of thinking provides an important context for everything we do and sets a tone for inclusion to succeed.

COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK

From the beginning of the school year, teachers, specialists, and therapists work together closely to understand and address the needs of their students.

ASSESSMENT TOOLS

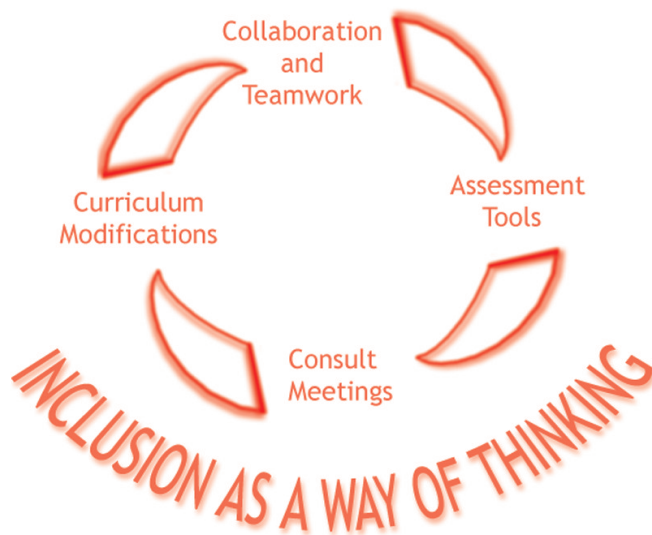
We use a set of assessment practices to provide a common language for teachers and specialists to identify needs and concerns among their students. These help us perform important background work and form a shared understanding of the needs of our students.

CONSULT MEETINGS

Formalized and regular consult meetings bring specialists and classroom teachers together to share ideas and concerns about students.

CURRICULUM MODIFICATIONS

Using ideas that grow out of discussions with specialists, therapists, and other teachers, O'Hearn teachers use a variety of ways of modifying their curricula to make them more welcome for students of all levels of ability.



In the pages that follow, we expand on each of these ideas in turn. If you are interested in inclusion, take a look. Nothing in here is rocket science, but it's not all that easy either. We've tried to give you some illustrations, some examples, and some advice so you can learn from our experience.



TIPS AND IDEAS ON INCLUSION AS A WAY OF THINKING

The Patrick O’Hearn School is well known in Boston for being an exemplary inclusion school. Bill Henderson, the school’s principal has been recognized repeatedly for his leadership in the field. While many people believe that at the O’Hearn School, inclusion means that children with disabilities are included in every classroom, this is not, in fact, the case. At the O’Hearn, inclusion means that we include *every* child of *every* level of ability in every classroom.

You might say that the difference is really just semantic, but we'd suggest otherwise. We work with students who have multiple disabilities. We also work with students who are three grades above reading level and students who have no problem acing any standardized test they see. We work with students who struggle with abstract concepts and have trouble gripping pencils. And we work with students who dance and sing and run. We are committed to including every one of these students in our classrooms and our lessons.

For us, *inclusion* is more than its dictionary definition, more than “including” students. Inclusion is a state of mind, a *way of thinking* on which our entire school is based. That way of thinking says that it is the teacher’s job to teach every student, regardless of where that student starts and where that student will end up. That way of thinking says that all education is “special education” because all students require special attention in some way and at some time. That way of thinking says that the teacher’s responsibility is not to design a lesson plan hoping that it will work for every student in the class; rather, it is to design a lesson plan knowing that it *can’t* work for *every* student in the class, and then to modify it so that every student can learn.


This is, first and foremost, how we are a full inclusion school. We begin with a shared belief, a shared set of expectations for our school: that *ours will be a school where every child is able to learn and participate*. If every staff member did not share this vision of inclusion, we would be unsuccessful. This common ideology achieves two key goals: enabling collaboration that is so important to successful inclusion, and modeling acceptance of others as part of the school’s ideology.

GOAL
 **ENABLES COLLABORATION**


Collaborative discussion and decision-making are critical to a successful inclusion school (as described in more detail on the following pages). The shared inclusion mindset enables this sort of collaboration by giving everyone the same explicit starting point. We are able to reach other points of agreement because we have already agreed on this important set of principles.

GOAL
 **MODELS ACCEPTANCE**

At a successful inclusion school, everyone in the school community—parents, teachers, and students—must be accepting of the various levels of students in the school. When that level of acceptance is explicitly stated by the school

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administration, the administration in effect models the sort of acceptance that it expects at all levels of the community.

How To Build an Inclusion Mindset

One of the most important factors that builds this inclusion way of thinking is the support of the administration, teachers, families, and the community. This extensive network of support requires some time and energy to establish, but the time and energy that go into it more than pay off with the frustration and wasted time we are spared in the classroom. By building these into your school, you can begin to cultivate a philosophy of full inclusion. Below are some of the practices most commonly identified by teachers as playing a vital role in supporting inclusion.

STEP 1 — Teacher Orientation



The inclusion way of thinking is presented to teachers at the beginning of the year before the children arrive at school. The principal and school administration set the tone for the school by providing packets for all staff regarding people with disabilities and the philosophy of inclusion. This ensures that all new faculty are inculcated into the inclusion philosophy and that all old faculty are reminded of its importance from the top down.

STEP 2 — Daily Collaboration



At the O'Hearn, collaboration between classroom teachers and the many therapists and specialists that work with children is ongoing and often informal. Unlike in many schools where therapists and specialists make appearances only to pull out or work with their small group of children and return to the classroom, therapists and specialists at the O'Hearn are seen as a part of every teacher's day. Collaboration occurs before and after school, during lunch, in the hallways, and within the classroom setting. Therapists and specialists work with the classroom teachers so that they can align the curriculum, goals, and expectations of students.

STEP 3 — Supportive Materials



With teachers and therapists in regular contact, therapists are sometimes able to provide support when teachers didn't even realize it was available. When a student's behavioral or learning difficulty is noted, therapists may be able to provide materials to help address that difficulty. For instance,

a student who has difficulty staying connected to lessons in class may need sensory inputs that can be provided with weighted vests or sitting mats. Another student who has difficulty maintaining focus may benefit from holding squeezing balls. All of these are items that are easily available for those who know how to use them and how to get them. Since therapists typically have more access to these materials, good communication between classroom teachers and therapists and support for the purchase of appropriate items is essential.

STEP 4 — Therapy Consult Meetings



Once a month, the teachers from each classroom meet with all of the therapists who work with students in that room. During this 45-minute meeting, we discuss our concerns and observations about the progress of individual children. We set goals, discuss therapeutic options and devise strategies for working with each child. It is during this time that many ideas are exchanged and curriculum or classroom environment modifications are formed. This time is helpful because it gives us a formal chance to talk about children, their needs, and how we can provide services appropriately.

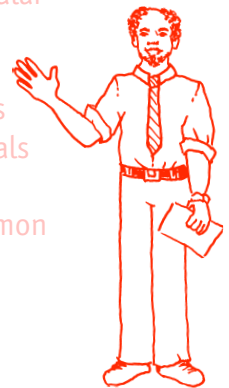
STEP 5 — Common Planning Time



Twice a month, teachers at the O'Hearn have grade level meetings with their principal. During these one-hour meetings, we use school-wide rubrics to look at work and discuss the progress of eight of our students. Since at least one of these eight is inevitably at a different level of ability than the others, this means we also spend time reviewing curriculum adaptations or modifications made to adjust the original curriculum in order to meet the level of the individual students in the class. In this way, we see how other teachers are approaching curriculum topics and how they have modified their curriculum to meet the abilities of their students. These discussions also help teachers to clarify expectations and standards for students of varying abilities.

SETTING THE TONE FOR AN INCLUSION SCHOOL

- * Explicitly discuss inclusion in teacher orientation
- * Schedule regular, formal therapy consult meetings
- * Encourage regular collaboration
- * Give therapists access to materials
- * Schedule common planning time



STEPS 6, 7, 8...



Other Areas of Support

The above are only a few of the most valuable ways that support is provided for inclusion at the O’Hearn. Some other valuable practices, which are not covered in this booklet, include:

- * **Co-teaching.** Every classroom has two co-teachers who are able to help one another and share ideas.
- * **In-Classroom Support.** Additional adults—paraprofessionals, therapists and specialists, parents, or volunteers—often assist in the classroom.
- * **Grants.** Teachers and therapists are able to procure broader resources by writing grants.
- * **Family Support.** By putting a strong emphasis on family involvement, the O’Hearn is able to garner further support both inside and outside school.

HOW DO WE GET THERE FROM HERE?

Some schools are far from having any of these practices in place, or far from having an administration willing to put them in place. While it may be difficult to bring all of them to a school, having none of them—particularly having an administration that is not supportive—is a surefire obstacle to moving ahead with a successful inclusion effort. If your school administration is not ready to be an inclusion school, you must start by changing that mindset.

We believe that there is no principal in public education who would not agree that reaching all children is, at the very least, a *noble* goal. With enough information and exposure, these principals will also understand that it is an *achievable* goal. This may mean providing materials like this booklet that help highlight how to get there. It may also mean getting the school leadership in touch with schools like the O’Hearn or others that have been successful with inclusion. However you get there, this first step is critical.



If key members of your school administration are not ready to adopt an inclusion model, help them to see the benefits by bringing them in contact with inclusion schools and providing them with information that shows that inclusion is possible.