

# INCLUSION: CREATING SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM COMMUNITIES WHERE EVERYONE BELONGS

Research, Tips, and Tools for Educators and Administrators



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## INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) released a report entitled, *A Case for Inclusive Education*. This report detailed international, national, and provincial principles, policies, and research on the merits of adopting an inclusive education model, particularly for students who have been identified as exceptional, as having special education needs, and/or disabilities. For the purpose of this brief, we will use the term disability (as opposed to exceptionality or special education needs) as it aligns us with the ongoing work being done internationally and the global movement of inclusive education (Underwood, 2013). It is important to note that in addition to the Canadian government having signed and ratified the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*<sup>1</sup> (CRPD, 2006); Ontario has established its own Act dedicated to accessibility, the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA, 2005). The AODA identifies school boards as organizations bound by the act and includes people with both visible and non-visible disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, etc.) as entitled to accommodations.

Affirming the position taken up in *A Case for Inclusive Education* (Parekh, 2013), the Ministry of Education later produced a report entitled, *How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years*. In it, the authors state that:

All children benefit from being in inclusive environments where they are able to participate and collaborate in meaningful ways and form authentic, caring relationships. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) highlight how all children, including those with special needs, are entitled to the same opportunities... (MOE, 2014, p. 25)

All successful education environments are caring spaces. For more than 25 years, the centrality of care, based on the recognition of interdependence of all students and educators, has been identified as a critical part of effective teaching (Noddings, 1992, 2011; Gibbons, 2007). Caring classrooms are ones in which pedagogy and structural decision-making are defined by the individual students and their interactions in the classroom (Wood, 2015). Thus at the heart of inclusion are educators who understand that differences in students are part of what they bring to their social interactions and that interdependence of students is a natural part of the educational process.

In 2013, Underwood also authored a document for the Ministry of Education entitled *Everyone is Welcome: Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care*. In addition to covering critical areas of inclusive programming, such as how to promote equitable and inclusive access to services and supports, program design and implementation, as well as monitoring and assessment, Underwood identified key shifts in perspectives that are important to successful inclusive practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion on the CRPD as well as article 24 on its relationship to education is available in the Notes pages beginning on page 9.

The social model of disability explores the complex relationship between an individual's perceived impairment and the physical, structural, and attitudinal barriers encountered in society (Oliver, 1990). While an individual may have an impairment, barriers in society can disable their full access and participation. Underwood (2013) notes that disability is now understood as “the interaction between the individual and their environment; it is not solely a characteristic of the child” (p. 5). Environmental barriers or lack of support resulting in restrictions of students’ ability to participate is how disability is, in part, currently conceived by many international organizations such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF (2012). “The complex interaction between a health condition or impairment and environmental and personal factors means that each child’s experience of disability is different” (p. 7). In addition, some individual characteristics that are conceived of as disabling in the broader society are thought of as important cultural traits within communities, for example the Deaf community and the Neurodiversity community. Three imperatives that Underwood (2013) highlights as critical to creating successful inclusive learning environments are as follows:

- 1) Understand that teacher attitudes are key in creating a successful inclusive program and “[e]ducators who believe that all children have a right to participation are more likely to find ways to reduce barriers and to understand how each child learns” (p. 5).
- 2) Structure inclusive programming to ensure that equitable and meaningful engagement and participation is happening in the classroom.
- 3) Create space for diverse bodies and abilities – there should not be an expectation of sameness or normalization as a result of intervention or inclusion strategies.

Since the release of *A Case for Inclusive Education*, many educators, administrators, agencies, and parents have put forward the following questions, “*What does inclusion mean, what is it and what is it not?*”

### **What is Inclusive Education?**

- 1) An inclusive classroom is a place where all students experience a sense of belonging and social citizenship (e.g., membership, inclusion, shared power, and value) (Parekh, 2014).
- 2) An inclusive classroom modifies the environment to fit the student, not the student to fit the environment.
- 3) An inclusive classroom is a space where all identities and cultures (including disability culture<sup>2</sup>) are celebrated.
- 4) An inclusive classroom prioritizes the right to participation and focuses on setting a positive climate where social engagement and friendships can be promoted (Underwood, 2013).
- 5) An inclusive classroom rejects deficit thinking and does not segregate or organize students according to ability.

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<sup>2</sup> A more comprehensive discussion on the concept of disability culture is available in the Notes pages beginning on page 9.

## What Inclusive Education is Not...

- 1) Inclusion is not assimilation (Slee, 2008). The goal of inclusion is not to “normalize<sup>3</sup>” students or create sameness within a classroom. Inclusive education celebrates diversity and creates a space where all students with disabilities can feel a sense of pride.
- 2) Inclusive education does not restrict opportunities and spaces where students with disabilities can be together. Students with disabilities should have the opportunity to meet, and to create networks and communities of support.
- 3) Inclusive education is not drawn from a template; there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ formula. Inclusive schools and classrooms are organized and responsive to the demographics of students in attendance (Artiles, Kovleski, & Waitoller, 2011).
- 4) Inclusive education is not static; there is no end point where the inclusive education project is complete. Inclusive education is a continual state of becoming. It is a project that requires continuous review, assessment and revision (Artiles, Kovleski, & Waitoller, 2011).

## How Can Educators and Learning Communities Support Inclusion?

Key research around inclusion and what educators must do to create inclusive opportunities for students is outlined in the following section. In order to link research to strategies supporting inclusion, connections between the research literature and the TDSB’s School Effectiveness Framework are made. For each indicator drawn from the School Effectiveness Framework, related strategies are included at the end of this document.

### To be Inclusive, Educators Must...

#### ➤ *Value difference and celebrate diversity.*

Educators who value difference and celebrate diversity consider multiple identities within their approaches to teaching, curriculum material, and assessment styles. Students should be able to recognize their identities within the material posted around the school and classrooms, the themes pulled from the curriculum, and the differentiated approaches employed by educators.

#### **Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework<sup>4</sup>:**

**Indicator 4.6** Resources for students are relevant, current, accessible, inclusive and monitored for bias.

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<sup>3</sup> Please see Notes pages (p. 9) for further explanation of the concept of normalization.

<sup>4</sup> All ties made to the School Effectiveness Framework were pulled from the TDSB’s District Process Guide: K-12 School Effectiveness Framework. Retrieved from [http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/ward11/docs/District%20Review%20Guide\\_F2%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/ward11/docs/District%20Review%20Guide_F2%20(2).pdf). Observable evidence and key strategies important to each aspect of inclusion are located at the end of this document.

- ***Treat “learning as a relational process in which both students and teachers are engaged in learning from each other and discovering ways to work together”*** (Greenstein, 2013, p. 386).

When teaching is approached as a cooperative and dialogical encounter, both students and teachers reap the benefits. Students are more engaged and take greater ownership of their learning. Similarly, lessons can evolve in a natural progression where teachers guide and support learning.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 1.4:** During learning, timely, ongoing, descriptive feedback about student progress is provided, based on student actions and co-constructed success criteria.

- ***Practice student-centred pedagogy over curriculum-centred pedagogy*** (McDonnell, 1998 as cited in Mitchel, 2010).

In Ontario, there is a set curriculum to which each teacher and school is required to deliver. However, teachers have the autonomy to decide how best to approach each curricular goal. Decisions on best practice should be tailored and responsive to the experiences of the students in the classroom. Drawing upon the capability theory, it is key that educators believe that all students have capabilities and that they employ a range of approaches to ensure that students are supported in realizing their potentials.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 4.4** Learning is deepened through authentic, relevant and meaningful student inquiry.

- ***Ensure accessibility to curriculum*** (Greenstein, 2013).

Teaching responsively ensures that the curriculum material being taught is accessible to all students in the classroom. For some students, inaccessible curriculum can lead to a referral to special education services and heightened incidence of disability identification. As we have seen from the data from the Toronto District School Board, perceptions of who is at greatest risk of being identified as disabled has a notable relationship to racialized, classed, and gendered identities (Brown & Parekh, 2010; 2013). Focusing on enhancing access to curriculum within the classroom in a culturally responsive way (disability culture included), would be an effective strategy in reducing disproportionate representation<sup>5</sup>, particularly across higher incidence exceptionalities (e.g., Learning Disabilities, Mild Intellectual Disabilities, Behaviour Disorders, etc.). It is important to remember that learning is a relational process in which power dynamics are continuously at play. Experiences of privilege, belonging, and worldview can greatly shape student-teacher and student-student interactions in the classroom. The concept of being

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<sup>5</sup> A more comprehensive discussion on the concept of disproportionate representation is available in the Notes pages beginning on page 9.



culturally responsive requires consideration for the complex relationships in the classroom in order to better address issues of disproportionality.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 4.5** Instruction and assessment are differentiated in response to student strengths, needs and prior learning.

- ***Consider the end goal to be participation and meaningful engagement as well as promote mastery of skills*** (Underwood, 2013).

Inclusive educators prioritize student participation and engagement rather than using rote mastery of curricular goals as a measure of success. Access to and participation in curricular activities is often a more meaningful interaction and basis for evaluation and is more likely to achieve gains in skill development as well as other educational successes.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 3.4:** Students to demonstrate a wide range of transferable skills, such as teamwork, advocacy, leadership and global citizenship.

- ***Provide support within the classroom*** (Davis & Hopwood, 2002).

Instead of removing students from the classroom, educators who opt to adapt their classroom structures, routines, instructional styles and teaching praxis to accommodate in-class delivery of support are more likely to create responsive and effective spaces for learning. In addition, all students, not only students identified as having a disability, will benefit from learning within a reflexive and responsive setting where differentiated teaching strategies are employed.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 3.1** The teaching and learning environment is inclusive, promotes the intellectual engagement of all students and reflects individual student strengths, needs, learning preferences and cultural perspectives.

- ***Promote students' sense of belonging*** (Parekh, 2014)

The sense of belonging in school, based on the concepts of social citizenship, has demonstrated to be critically linked to student achievement and post-secondary access (Parekh, 2014). In order for students to experience a sense of belonging in school, a number of key factors need to be present. Students need to feel that their peers and teachers accept them, they need to feel safe (emotionally and physically) within their learning space, and they need to feel as though their contributions in class are important and valued. Creating spaces where these positive and inclusive dynamics are promoted is key to enhancing students' sense of belonging.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 2.5:** Staff, students, parents and school community promote and sustain student well-being and positive student behaviour in a safe, accepting, inclusive and healthy learning environment

- ***Support the self-organization of students with disabilities*** (Greenstein, 2013).

While the goal of an inclusive education model is to promote effective teaching and support for all students within the regular class, there is still a need to create spaces where students who identify with others on the basis of individual traits can self-organize and network together. Key to the creation of congregated spaces for students with disabilities is the autonomy in their self-identification and decision to participate.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 3.3:** Students are partners in dialogue and discussions to inform programs and activities in the classroom and school that represent the diversity, needs and interests of the student population.

- ***Set goals and organize in collaboration with community, parents, educators, local government and non-government agencies*** (Mitchell, 2010).

Educators do not work in isolation. Opportunities for community consultation, parent feedback and partnerships with local agencies can enrich the learning environment and could improve access to resources for students within their home schools.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 6.2:** Students, parents and community members are engaged and welcomed, as respected and valued partners in student learning.

**Indicator 6.3:** The school and community build partnerships to enhance learning opportunities and well-being for students.

- ***Demonstrate strong leadership that supports inclusion*** (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998; Underwood, 2013).

Leadership is key in establishing an inclusive space for all students. For educators who have the opportunity to work in administration, it is important to model inclusion through their management styles and interactions with their staff and students. Promoting an ethos of inclusion requires careful attention be paid to the community, student representation, and structural barriers that impede differentiation, accommodation, and other opportunities for student success.

**Ties to the School Effectiveness Framework:**

**Indicator 2.1** Collaborative instructional leadership builds capacity to strengthen and enhance teaching and learning.

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## NOTES

**Normalization Theory:** Many forms of treatment, intervention, and remediation in education aim to provide students with skills to support their learning and improve their academic achievement. The expectation embedded in many remediation strategies is to normalize students' approaches to their academics as well as students' behaviour and measures of achievement. However, some approaches to intervention seek to eradicate any and all behaviours deemed 'abnormal'. Scholars and disability activists suggest that the goal of 'normalization' excludes diverse bodies, abilities, and learning strategies employed by students identified as disabled. The goal of academic interventions should not be to erase the disability identity of students so that they are unseen within the classroom context, but instead should support student learning in a way that values and appreciates diversity.

**Disability Culture:** Disability culture has grown out of a history of oppression and pressure to conform to the often-unattainable 'norm'. "Disability culture presumes a sense of common identity and interests that unite disabled people and separate them from their nondisabled counterparts...There is further presumption that a disability culture rejects the notion of impairment-difference as a symbol of shame or self-pity and stresses instead solidarity and a positive identification" (Barnes & Mercer, 2001, p. 522). Giving students a space to come together in school and celebrate disability culture is an important piece in recognizing and valuing diversity. Note that there are other cultures that reject the "disability" label, such as the Deaf community, and the Neurodiversity community, because of its historical links to medicalised definitions.

**Disproportionate Representation:** The term 'disproportionate representation' is often used when the demographic characteristics of specific sub-population do not reflect the demographic profile of the population as a whole. In special education, certain exceptionalities have an over-representation of racialized students as compared to the overall student population. For example, within exceptionality groups such as Mild Intellectual Disability and Behaviour disorder, self-identified Black students are almost triply represented as compared to their representation within the whole student population. Similarly, other exceptionalities have an over-representation of students who self-identify as White, such as within the Gifted exceptionality. As a link between racial identity and cognitive ability does not exist (Gould, 1996), the disproportionate representation of racial identity within these identified groups calls for greater investigation and intervention.

**Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD):** The CRPD was adopted by the United Nations in 2006. Canada has both signed and ratified the convention. The convention covers many key areas of political, social, economic, and cultural rights for people with disabilities. Article 24 specifically discusses rights and entitlements associated to education. Following is an excerpt from the CRPD, article 24, retrieved from <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

**Article 24 – Education** - 1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning directed to:

- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:

- a. Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;
- b. Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
- c. Reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements is provided;
- d. Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
- e. Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

- a. Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;
- b. Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;
- c. Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative

and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

5. States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.





# District Process Guide

K-12 School Effectiveness Framework  
Ministry of Education K-12 SEF, 2013 version



Global Learners are connected and challenged beyond the world of the school; their lens for learning, creating and analyzing will be predicated on a world perspective utilizing diverse technologies.

Getting to the Core of School Effectiveness by reflecting on and aligning with the School Self-Assessment (SSA)

[tdsb.on.ca](http://tdsb.on.ca)



## KEY STRATEGIES FROM THE SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS FRAMEWORK

All indicators and evidence/strategies included below were pulled from the TDSB's District Process Guide: K-12 School Effectiveness Framework. Retrieved from [http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/ward11/docs/District%20Review%20Guide\\_F2%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/ward11/docs/District%20Review%20Guide_F2%20(2).pdf)

***Indicator 1.4: During learning, timely, ongoing, descriptive feedback about student progress is provided, based on student actions and co-constructed success criteria***

- Learning Goals and Success Criteria are explicit- students understand the 'why' of a task
- Learning Goals and Success Criteria are co-created and written in student friendly language
- Interviews, conferences and learning conversations with individuals, small groups/pairs are used to clarify understanding of students' learning
- There are multiple opportunities for feedback and follow-up, including self and peer assessment
- Resources, materials and symbols are culturally relevant and responsive

***Indicator 2.1: Collaborative instructional leadership builds capacity to strengthen and enhance teaching and learning.***

- Structures are in place to ensure co-learning and co-planning
- A collaborative learning culture is evident with a collective focus on instruction and student learning, the de-privatization of classrooms, professional dialogue, etc.
- Principal is at the table as a lead learner
- Instruction is guided by student learning needs
- Students confidently engage in the learning process (e.g. use accountable talk, are on task, self-advocate, demonstrate curiosity, perseverance, have ownership for their learning/classroom)

***Indicator 2.5: Staff, students, parents and school community promote and sustain student well-being and positive student behaviour in a safe, accepting, inclusive and healthy learning environment.***

- Safe School Committees develop and update strategies to maintain and improve the school climate (e.g. School climate surveys)
- Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy and TDSB Equity Policy are embedded
- Student leadership positions are filled by students from diverse ethno-cultural groups
- The signage reflects diversity and is inclusive
- [All] staff are welcoming and responsive to student, parent and community needs

***Indicator 3.1: The teaching and learning environment is inclusive, promotes the intellectual engagement of all students and reflects individual student strengths, needs, learning preferences and cultural perspectives.***

- Curriculum materials, digital tools and resources reflect the needs, interests, and demographics of the student population, CRRP
- Students have a voice in the process of identifying what helps their learning and well-being and the learning and well-being of others
- Student input is actively and regularly sought with regard to school climate and curriculum delivery needs
- Instruction is differentiated and learning resources are provided to reflect student strengths and needs
- IEPs are co-constructed with the learners and their families, as appropriate – the IEP manual is consulted as a guide
- All students have the right to a quality educational program tailored to their strengths and needs

***Indicator 3.3: Students are partners in dialogue and discussions to inform programs and activities in the classroom and school that represent the diversity, needs and interests of the student population.***

- Students' ideas, values and beliefs are sought prior to decision making
- Input is balanced in relation to gender, cultural diversity, race and ethnicity
- Students with special needs and/or special education identification are mentored and included in all areas
- Issues of social justice are embedded
- Students feel a strong sense of belonging to the school and community of the student body

***Indicator 3.4: Students demonstrate a wide range of transferable skills, such as teamwork, advocacy, leadership and global citizenship.***

- Students understand that their school life is one that must reflect the Real World – Big Ideas are evident within the classroom and school hallways
- Cooperative Learning is available at the secondary level and is conducive to citizenship development as well as serving the interests of the learners
- Kindness, caring and empathy are evident in small and large groups
- Point of view takes into consideration the missing and silenced voices
- Restorative Practices are part of the school/classroom culture

***Indicator 4.4: Learning is deepened through authentic, relevant and meaningful student inquiry***

- Students are engaged in exploring real world situations/issues and solving authentic problems
- Inquiry is student driven
- Courses/units of study are problematized and developed to promote learning through student inquiry/intentional play-based learning
- Students are active problem solvers
- Learning tasks are co-constructed

***Indicator 4.5: Instruction and assessment are differentiated in response to student strengths, needs and prior learning***

- A wide range of instructional strategies are considered to meet the diverse learning needs of students
- Student work is examined to identify ways to differentiate instruction and assessment
- Based on student data, personalized learning activities are designed, developed and evaluated to address students' diverse learning styles, abilities, working strategies and ethno-cultural backgrounds
- Student groupings are co-constructed where appropriate and are regrouped frequently and flexibly with student input
- Choice is provided based on prior assessment of student learning, interests and /or learning preferences

***Indicator 4.6: Resources for students are relevant, current, accessible, inclusive and monitored for bias.***

- Resources and learning experiences embed Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP)
- Students have an informed understanding of how to recognize and deconstruct bias, prejudice and discrimination
- Resources that reflect diverse backgrounds, languages and cultures are available to support all areas of learning and student needs (e.g. digital tools, resources, graphic novels, manipulatives, dual language books)
- Authentic learning experiences and assessments incorporate contemporary tools and resources to maximize learning in context
- The environment is inclusive of space and caring adults and engineered to support differences.

***Indicator 6.2: Students, parents and community members are engaged and welcomed, as respected and valued partners in student learning.***

- A variety of strategies are used to communicate and engage parents (e.g. informal discussions, newsletters, websites, student agendas, surveys, electronic formats, etc.)
- Communication with parents is consistent and timely
- A positive school climate encourages, values and considers parents and community perspectives
- A process is in place to welcome and support new families
- The cultural and linguistic diversity of the school and community is recognized and respected

***Indicator 6.3: The school and community build partnerships to enhance learning opportunities and well-being for students.***

- Student learning and well-being are intentionally supported through the meaningful involvement of parents, members of the School Council and community partners
- Participation in community activities is supported (e.g. career fairs, social justice, charity events, Skills Canada)
- Parents have opportunities to enhance their own learning and skills in order to support student learning in the school (e.g. learning with assistive technology workshops)
- Partnerships with community organizations support students and their families to have access to programs and services during and outside of school hours (e.g. breakfast programs, tutoring, Community Use of Schools, etc.)
- Students are provided with planned and purposeful learning experiences with community members school and in the community

