

George Aiken



An experienced principal from Prince Edward Island. His school is the Kensington Intermediate Senior High in Kensington PEI. George has some sound ideas on what makes a school a good school and what a principal needs to do to make it inclusive.

Check out the interview below.

Name: George Aiken For www.inclusiveeducation.ca Date: September 2008
Email: gbaiken@edu.pe.ca
School Name and website: Kensington Intermediate Senior High School www.edu.pe.ca/kish
Short Bio: George began teaching at this school in 1970; 1973 – 1976 he was the Mathematics department head; 1977 - 2002 George was the school vice principal; became school principal in 2003. Education: B.Sc. (chemistry and mathematics), B.Ed. (secondary), Med (Educational Administration, Diploma in Public Administration - George Aiken

The Questions for George Aiken: 1. What makes your school “inclusive”?

We do a lot of things every day and every week to make our school inclusive. It takes a lot of teamwork. To accommodate heterogeneous, all inclusive classes, we have established grade level teams: grade 7, grade 8/9, grade 10, and grade 11/12. These teams meet monthly to update programs, discuss referrals, and to monitor previous referrals. At these meetings, decisions are reached on attendance at homework club, adapting, modifying, making referrals to the Resource Teacher or to the School Based Team. These teams meet from September to May and afford us early detection of students in difficulty. This enables early intervention and thus a greater probability of success. We begin transition

meetings with our feeder school in grade six and have annual grade transition meetings until grade twelve.

2. What do you do as the Principal to make inclusion work in your school?

My approach is simple. I believe students won't fail if we don't allow them to fail!

This means that teachers and the administration need to be knowledgeable enough to recognize learning blocks. Then I need to provide time and resources to our teachers to develop the classroom instruction strategies. As the Principal I

also need to give the moral support that recognizes the teacher's added workload that a student centered approach brings.

3. What helped prepare you to be an effective principal of an "inclusive school"?

In my thirty eight years at this school, I have always carried a teaching assignment along with administrative duties. Teaching students keeps a principal connected to the reality in the classroom.

Early on in my career, I learned that one of the first symptoms of a student having a problem or a coming difficulty is elevated absenteeism. This is inevitably followed by low and failing grades. Students must experience success. A critical point is reached when the students' opportunity to experience success is lost.

4. Is inclusion good for your students?

The alternative - is inherently unfair to all students. Either through being denied the opportunity to experience and grow from the mainstream classroom experience; or - being denied the enriching experience of working with and understanding people with disabilities.

5. What do parents think about inclusion?

Sometimes we give the impression that we run our classes on the "wagon train model" - where we pretend that all students cover the same amount of trail every day. In an inclusive classroom, we respond to each student with an appropriate level of challenge and require appropriate effort from

the student. Sometimes when we get into class composition discussions we have a PR issue here because many parents have never experienced an inclusive classroom. That means we have to work a little harder to explain what we are doing.

6. How do teachers manage the challenges of inclusion?

The key factor is planning and this requires time. Time is needed to talk with other subject teachers, resource teachers or student services. Teachers need to teach to different levels and at first this approach – a "multi-level approach" - to a lesson, an assignment or test - is time consuming. But if teachers are given training and assistance in developing the skills they need and have access to the appropriate technology, it gets better.

7. Some say inclusive education can work in elementary schools with young children **BUT it is not feasible in secondary**

schools. What do you do to make inclusion in a secondary school work?

There are some who say that the high school is very little changed from what it was 50 years ago. It is subject centered, mark oriented, and desks arrayed in rows. This would imply that making any change at this level is going to be a long term ordeal.

I think inclusion works in high schools for some of the following reasons:

- The great strides we have made in using technology;*
 - The knowledge we have about the brain and about learning;*
 - The choices students can make about the courses they take at this level – courses that they find of interest;*
- The realization that our communities cannot sustain a high drop- out rate. Kids need to be successful in school.*

If our high schools are good schools they can be inclusive and serve all our children.

8. What is the toughest thing about leading an inclusive school?

You never get to the finish line! The more we know, the more we see that needs attention. Inclusion is a marathon, not a sprint. As a principal this

means that after several years, activities to renew our goals and our programs – how we do our work - must be planned and supported.

9. What would you say to parents/teachers who aren't certain if it will work?

I would point to the successes we have had. In our school, a Grade 7 – 12 school – it is what students do after school – their post-secondary success.

10. Do you have a final comment?

We end each year with graduation. Every class has students who have triumphed in spite of physical, behavioural, or educational disability.

Watching these students walk across the stage and successfully complete school more than repays me - and our teachers – for the extra meeting time and the prep time it takes.

We have students with significant challenges – I am thinking of one student with autism - who have successfully completed post-secondary programs at our community college. At the same time we have bright scholars who have dropped out along the way.

We must never lose sight of the ideal that inclusive strategies address the needs of every student.