

Pamela Ball



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See Below for Full Interview.



Name: Pam Ball

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School Name and website:

Robertson School - a Nursery to Grade 6 elementary school located in the North-End of Winnipeg. Student population about 420 students.

Short Bio:

Who am I?

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1. What do you mean when you say your school is “inclusive”?

An inclusive school is one in which all students are respected and honoured for who they are and for what they can contribute to school life and the community. Our school works very hard at being inclusive and I believe that we are

successful. Our school has a number of special education programs, Life Skills and Autism, and students in these programs are bussed to our school. In the past, the students were placed in segregated classrooms with a teacher and educational assistants. When I became principal, it was my goal to have all students in the special education program placed in age-appropriate classrooms. Today, all students, except for a few, are in age appropriate classrooms and their assistants work in the classrooms with them as well as the other students in the room.

2. What experience do you have with “inclusive education”?

My knowledge of inclusive education has grown greatly in the past three years since I have become a principal. When I first arrived at my present school, I was surprised that there were segregated classes for Life Skills and Autism. In the past, I had not had much experience in dealing with children with disabilities.

I do, however, have a dear friend of mine who has a child with Downs Syndrome. My friend and I have had many, many conversations about her son’s education over the years and since inclusion was his educational story, I knew the benefits of inclusive education and I began to work towards this in my school.

3. Does inclusion make your work difficult?

No, it does not make my work more difficult at all! It makes it more rewarding. Instigating inclusion in a school that had had segregated classrooms for many, many years was a challenge at the start. The challenge came in the form of organizational changes, and for some staff, the fear of the unknown. However, many of the staff were on board from the start.

4. Does being an “inclusive school” make your school a “better school”?

Without a doubt, I feel that our school is much better now that it is an inclusive school. Previously, there was a divide with staff and students in the segregated classrooms. They did not necessarily know each other because they were isolated in different rooms and programs. There definitely was a disconnect. Students in the segregated rooms were “those kids” and even if they were included in music and gym classes, it was a “drop in” situation and they were not part of the classroom.

5. What unique challenges do you have to deal with because the special education students are bussed to your school and are not in the catchment area?

Due to the fact that the students are bussed to the school, they do not have the opportunity to arrive at school a bit before school starts to play in the playground with the others. They also are required to leave class half an hour earlier at the end of the day to take the bus home. The parents are not in the area so they do

not have an opportunity to connect with other parents who live in the area. We can't change these matters on our own but we work around them.

6. Is inclusion good for all your students?

Yes, it is definitely good for everyone. The students who are in the special programs are in age-appropriate classrooms and they are working at their level with supports. The educational assistants who work with the students also get the opportunity to work with all of the children in the classroom. The children in the class learn that everyone learns at different rates, everyone is good at something and not everyone is successful all the time. The children learn empathy and learn to assist those that need help. The students are not "afraid" of others who have learning disabilities or who look different. The gains for all are huge. For specific students, there are times when there is a need for a segregated classroom in order to be successful.

7. How do you make connections with parents?

Before we became an inclusive school, parents and staff were given information about inclusion. Parents who already had their children in the special education program were told of the change (their child would be registered in an age-appropriate classroom with support available in the classroom) and they were thrilled. The parents of our new students were told about the school and they too were very happy that their child would be with children of their own age and that they would still get the necessary supports in the classroom. Connecting with parents about school events is the same whether the child is in the special program or not.

Teachers use agendas as communication books each day, letters go home about field trips and a monthly newsletter goes home to parents. We have parent/teacher interviews numerous times throughout the year and since the children in the special education program have individual educational plans, meetings are held so that parents can review these with the staff.

8. What is the toughest challenge for a principal to make inclusion work?

Often teachers who have not had previous experience with inclusion have concerns with the major one being fear of the unknown:

- What are these kids like?
- Am I going to be able to handle them?

- How will I differentiate their instruction?
- Are they going to disrupt my routine?
- How will the other children accept the children with disabilities? How I dealt with the many questions that I anticipated would surface, was to give staff as much information about inclusion, differentiating instruction and universal design as possible, before we embarked on the change. I worked towards ensuring that there was a good progression to a common understanding about inclusive education. You also need to consider how inclusion fits into the

teacher's belief system. Teachers also need time to understand and accept the changes.

9. How do you help teachers manage the challenges of inclusion?

Teachers need time to meet with the support teacher and the educational assistant who is working in their room. They need time to create and review the special programming that needs to take place for the special education student. I build this time into their timetable. Meeting time is a necessity. The teachers realize that the differentiating of instruction that they have been doing in the past for the various levels in their classroom, is just what they will continue to do – but they do need meeting time to determine specific goals and ways to meet those goals for the special education students.

Interestingly enough, in every classroom, there are children who are working much below grade level and with inclusion, groups can be created and the additional adult support in the room can be utilized. Another pair of adult eyes in the classroom is very valuable and with inclusion, since the students have educational assistant support, the classroom has at least 2 adults in the room.

I make sure that in-service for the whole school takes place and I encourage teachers to attend other in-services sessions on their own. I also survey teachers to see if there are any items that need to be addressed.

Grade level meetings as well as team meetings take place each cycle in order to share information and ideas of how to differentiate instruction for all students.

10. Can you share an example of how inclusion was successful for a teacher and /or student in your school?

There are many examples that occur daily. One incident that I can think of takes place between a teacher in his retirement year and a girl in an upper elementary classroom who has Downs Syndrome. He was not embracing the fact that inclusion was going to be taking place in his last year of teaching. He was to have 3 children from the special education program in his classroom and he was not really too happy about it.

As the year went on, he warmed to the situation so much so, that at the end of the year, he stated that one of the students (the young girl with Downs Syndrome) “**made**” his last year teaching!

She had begun the year not speaking and she would shy away from all situations. In June, she was talking and joking with the teacher and she even went on the 3 day overnight camping trip that the class went on to finish the year.

Overall, the times I see students helping children with special needs are too numerous to mention. Another special example was when a child with Autism, virtually non- verbal, said “go” to the educational assistant so that he and another child in the room could be by themselves. This was on his second day in the classroom having just come from a segregated Autism room! That’s success!

11.What advice would you give a principal just beginning to make his/her school inclusive?

The best advice I would give a principal is to “have a goal in mind” and to “stay the course”. Try to have a timeline for yourself and realize that you will need a few years for it to be implemented. There will be a number of naysayers and some that wish to sabotage your plans. However, if you have an inclusive vision for your school you can work to have it become a common vision owned and shared by all. You need to persevere because it is the right thing to do.

I also believe that knowledge is power so I would encourage you to give staff articles to read, in servicing opportunities and videos to view.

12.Do you have a final comment?

When I first came to the school and I saw that it had segregated classes, I was not sure why they were there. I was told that the parents wanted their children in the program so that they could get the supports that they needed. The belief was that the parents were happy with the segregated situation.

However, when given the choice of a segregated room with support or an age-appropriate classroom with support for their child, all parents wanted to have their child in a classroom with other children their age – not in a segregated room.

I believe in inclusion. I believe that it is extremely beneficial for those that have the disabilities and for those that don’t. I know that once students leave school, they are in a world that is inclusive, so why have a segregated situation for their early years. Fear of differences and the unknown can be faced and since we are in the field of education, it is incumbent on us to inform others and help to dispel the fears.