

Saskatchewan Principal Reg Leidl Inclusion Matters!



Ron Leidl is principal of the P. J. Gillen School in the town of Esterhazy, Saskatchewan. It is a small elementary school in a farming and potash mining community in the south-east of the province. Inclusion in small, rural schools is a pattern we can find throughout Canada. It makes sense and it works. Perhaps the sense of community makes a difference. Reg has been a teacher for nearly 30 years and has been a school leader for 18 years. He has degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and Minot State University in North Dakota.

“School Leader Interview” Reg Leidl



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P. J. Gillen School is located in the town of Esterhazy, a farming and potash mining community in south-eastern Saskatchewan, in western Canada.



- K to 5 school
- 237 students
- 15.5 staff professional
- 4 support staff

Short Bio of Reg Leidl

- 29 years teaching
- 18 years in-school administrator
- B.Ed University of Saskatchewan 1982
- B.A. Sociology U of S 1985
- M. Sc. Elem Ed 1993 Minot State University

What does it mean to say your school is “inclusive”?

Inclusion is a belief system or culture that has evolved at the school over a lengthy period of time. Every child has the right and opportunity to learn with their peers in a safe, nurturing, and caring learning environment.

What experience do you have that has prepared you to provide “inclusive education” in your school?

I was fortunate throughout my career to be surrounded by fellow teachers who were mentors and role models for the inclusionary model of instruction. As a physical educator I learned very quickly in the teaching profession that focusing on the affective domain was critical to the instruction of children.

How important is “The Team” in making inclusion work in the school?

The Team Approach is absolutely critical for an inclusive school. Going it alone at any level is very difficult. To truly affect change it takes the support, dedication and hard work of a number of caring and diligent teachers and support staff. The Student Support Teacher is important and is a very rewarding position but it is also the most difficult. The Team Approach allows for better decision-making and shared workload responsibility. Teachers feel they do not have to go it alone and the emotional and professional support benefits everyone. Defined roles within the Team also help to distribute responsibilities and team planning fits in well with Professional Learning Communities. As the school principal at P.J. Gillen my role is to be supportive of students, staff and parents by leading from behind.

Do you think school improvement and being an “inclusive school” are linked? Can you be specific how?

Being an inclusive school provides a solid foundation for school improvement initiatives. Inclusion is beneficial for all students not just those experiencing difficulty. Inclusive schools involve all educational stake holders in their planning approach to lesson delivery. As students do better in the classroom all other areas of school improve. Ordinary magic in the classroom is the key to school improvement at any level.

What unique challenge has inclusion presented recently? How have you dealt with them?

Working within an inclusionary environment is never easy. It isn't clean. Problems happen, challenges are up front every day. Attitude is critical. Staff and parents have to see every situation as an opportunity not a problem. Creativity has to be the norm. Every situation is unique. There is no set plan that works for every child or situation.

What actions or policies of your school division have helped you move ahead with inclusion in your school? As principal it is absolutely critical that the staff is clear on the expectations of what inclusion means. Being unclear or wavering does not help or foster any school initiatives.

I.e. As Principal I will not support the retention of any child in any situation. What I will guarantee is that we will do everything possible to ensure that children do not end up in such a situation.

It is essential to be proactive rather than reactive. Administratively the next step is to ensure that teachers and support staff have the support and resources to make inclusion a reality. Inclusion without support is an accident waiting to happen.

Inclusion can only be effective if it is supported at all levels. That said-being resourceful and creative in providing support is extremely helpful. Throwing money, time and resources at inclusion will not ensure its success. An attitude of truly caring and supporting every child is the key.

What strategies do you find help make inclusion work in your school?

- Hire like minded professional staff who believe in inclusion
- Professional development for all staff is absolutely critical
- Set out clear expectations administratively that inclusion is best for all children and that it will happen
- Ensure that all stakeholders understand that inclusion is the best yet it requires hard work at all levels
- Attitude is everything
- Our school has recently begun using co-teaching as a way of addressing student needs. The concept is to use two teachers in the classroom to focus on student learning needs. Two teachers lend itself to excellent planning, lower pupil/teacher ratio and more support to enhance student learning. Classrooms become inclusive and lesson delivery becomes a shared duty.

What is the toughest challenge in terms of assuring that teachers and parents are working together?

- Be proactive rather than reactive.
- Bring parents in early in the planning process and communicate, communicate, communicate!
- Being transparent and open to all stakeholder ideas is a must.
- Focus on thoughtful planning and effective and immediate action.
- Be creative so that roadblocks to student learning are diminished.

Any final words?

We are proud of the progress we have made to make our school inclusive. It has been a 15 year journey and members of the staff of the P.J. Gillen School have learned a lot along the way. We are happy to be included in the growing network of educators in Canada working to make inclusion a reality.



In May 2010, School Principal Reg Leidl of the P.J. Gillen School in Esterhazy, SK shared their experiences with inclusive education with participants at a pre-conference seminar in Regina sponsored by the Canadian Down Syndrome Society and Inclusive Education Canada.