

INCLUSION ALBERTA

A Canadian Story of Inclusive Education Advocacy

FOREWORD

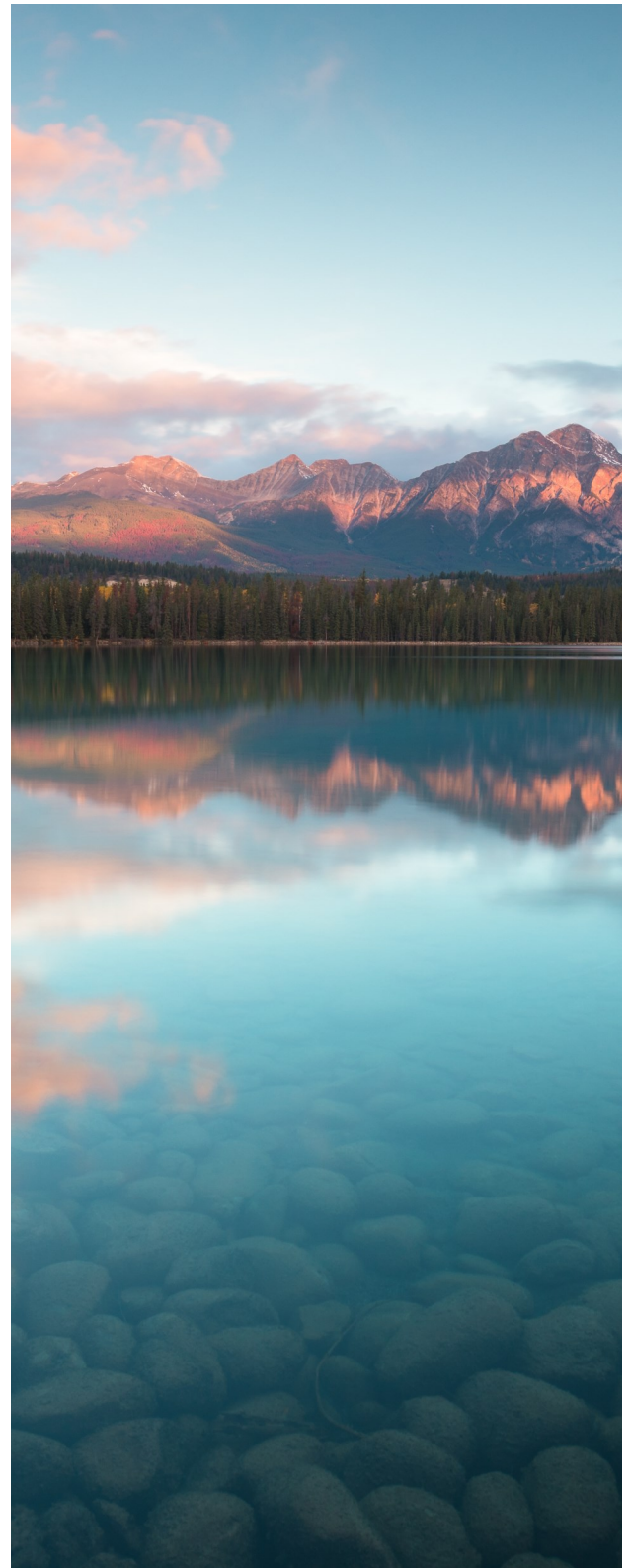
Gordon Porter writes:

This case study tells the story of a family organization in Alberta, one of Canada's largest provinces, located to the east of the Rocky Mountains in Western Canada.

Inclusion Alberta is a family-based federation of more than 40 groups and thousands of members that advocates on behalf of children and adults with developmental disabilities and their families. They work to ensure that children and adults are valued, participating, and fully included members of their communities.

Former Inclusion Alberta Chief Executive Officer Bruce Uditsky shares the history of education for students with intellectual disabilities in the province. He describes the actions IA has taken to support families in obtaining inclusive education at both the individual and systemic levels. He also explains how the work to achieve inclusive schooling is tied to the overall policy goals of the association – an important factor in building a coherent set of policy goals guiding all areas of their work. An interesting feature of this case is the development of inclusive post-secondary inclusion in Alberta, an area in which they have been a global leader.

This case study describes the multiple ways Inclusion Alberta works to challenge the provinces education system to change and ensure equity and inclusion for all children. It is a story of success but also of the continuing challenges that require skilled leadership and sustained effort by members.



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Inclusion Alberta: A Canadian Story of Inclusive Education Advocacy

by Bruce Uditsky, M.Ed., CEO Emeritus Inclusion Alberta, Senior Advisor, Inclusion Canada Associate, Inclusive Education Canada

Introduction

Inclusion Alberta is a Canadian provincial advocacy association that has represented the interests of children and adults with intellectual disabilities for over 60 years. We acknowledge that we are on the traditional territories of the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries.

Alberta is a western prairie province with a population of approximately 4.4 million. Approximately 70% of the population live in two major urban regions but the province also has rural centres and remote communities that are not easily accessible. There are 10 provinces and three territories in Canada with each having sole jurisdiction of legislation governing the provision and practice of education within their boundaries. There is no national legislation governing education in Canada and only one province provides a legislated right to inclusive education.

Inclusion Alberta is one of the 10 provincial and 3 territorial family advocacy associations which together comprise the federation of Inclusion

Canada. While each of us must advocate for the advancement of inclusive education with our provincial governments, we share information and collaborate nationally to advance inclusive education. Inclusion Alberta's story in advancing inclusive education is like others yet has a unique history of successes and challenges.

Inclusion Alberta itself is a federation of approximately 40 member groups and is currently one of the largest and most active Canadian family advocacy organizations representing families and individuals with intellectual disabilities. Inclusion Alberta ...

... describes itself as a politically effective, community engaged, grassroots family advocacy organization which capitalizes on community capacity, inclusion within normative pathways across the lifespan, family engagement and multi-generational family leadership and networking to enable inclusion based on innovation partnerships which can be scaled up and linked strategically to create larger systemic change.

Three of Inclusion Alberta's initiatives have been formally recognized as leading global

innovations: a) inclusive post-secondary education within universities, colleges and technical institutes; b) employment partnerships with Rotary Clubs and Districts to create inclusive employment opportunities; and c) one of the largest and longest standing annual family conferences that compliments its family leadership development series.

Our inclusive education advocacy sits within a theoretical framework that is life-enabling and supports the aspirations of our families and family members. Our inclusive education advocacy is integrated and entwined within our broader work to ensure children and adults with intellectual disabilities participate in the normative pathways of life. While this case study is focused on our inclusive education advocacy, this work takes place as one activity within a larger context.

A Brief History of Education in Alberta for Children with Disabilities

The founding origins of most Inclusion Canada member organizations began over 60 years ago with parents, principally and almost exclusively mothers, who in contrast to the expert opinions of the day that their children with intellectual disabilities could not learn, taught them at home and engaged them in developmental activities. These same mothers also stood against the advice many received at the time to institutionalize their children and so they chose not only to raise their sons and daughters at home with little to no support, and sometimes grandchildren, but to also engage in their learning and development. In effect, one might say, they saw something in their children, perhaps a light of possibility and promise, that neither society nor experts around them could comprehend.

These moms, through love and commitment, found their children could learn and they sought out others who were developing similar awareness. They were able to share their child's successes and counter the experts who denied their potential. It was this effort to connect to other parents over education issues that forged the nucleus of the local community associations that in a short time led to the establishment of provincial associations and Inclusion Canada. They shared a common belief in the human worth and dignity of their sons and daughters, and together they could support and encourage each other and advocate for change.

As parents began to advocate for education, Alberta (and most other provinces) did not have legislation for the public education of children with intellectual disabilities. Local schools told them their children: did not belong; could not learn; would detract from the learning of other students. They also maintained there was no funding for this purpose and further, teachers were not trained for this work. These reasons used to justify denying a child with intellectual disabilities an inclusive education have not fundamentally changed in over six decades. The same words and excuses continue to be heard. The denial of their children's capacity to learn and rejection by educators, schools and communities led these parents to create their own schools: their own special education schools. This makes clear that the foundational roots of segregated special education lie in rejection and not within any pedagogical construct or sense of best educational practice. While it is unclear why these early parent advocates for education chose to establish special schools and did not pursue inclusion in existing public schools, perhaps our current vision of inclusion was simply difficult to see at that time.



These special schools were typically located in donated church or community halls and were led by retired teachers or parents who weren't trained as teachers. Over time they became publicly funded but remained segregated. Ironically, the emergence and establishment of the special education industry with its special schools, classrooms and teachers was inadvertently fostered by the same parent advocacy organizations that fight today to end these practices in pursuit of fully inclusive schooling. Inclusion Alberta provides leadership to a province wide network that advocates that a child with intellectual disabilities must be a valued member of a regular classroom whose education is derived from the same curriculum required for all students while learning alongside non-disabled friends and peers and participating in the life of the school.

In Alberta, the significant turning point occurred in the 1970's and early 80's when an increasing number of family advocacy associations, most members of Inclusion Alberta, began advocating for integration of children within public schools and classrooms. Although inclusion had begun in pre-school and day care settings and not too long after in universities, the public-school education legislation in Alberta did

not provide for a right to education for children with disabilities. That was fundamentally altered when a mother in a small community took legal action to challenge the Alberta legislation on behalf of her daughter Shelley. The law continued to permit publicly funded local school authorities to deny children with disabilities an education in their schools. That parent, Louise Carriere, was successful and the government tabled legislation that would ensure a right to an education for all students. However, this success was blunted by an intense campaign by some in the public, including teacher organizations. They opposed this legislation, arguing that not all children were in fact educable. Many of these same individuals and organizations have maintained their opposition to integration and the current focus on full inclusion.

This continuous thread of resistance to the education of children with disabilities reveals to some degree that the contesting of inclusion today is not about educational practice but a moral and ethical struggle over the inherent human value of children with disabilities. Later with the support of Inclusion Alberta, other mothers, like Marvelyne Yarmoloy and Vanessa Grimm, successfully established additional parental education rights through the courts.

While inclusive education is more readily accessible today and more children are being included because of family advocacy and with the support of allied teachers and educational leaders, the education system in most of Canada is the only societal sector that contains sustained, organized resistance to inclusion. Almost every other sector of our society, from post-secondary institutions to the business community to generic recreation to housing is more open to inclusion; none reflecting or embodying any organized resistance to this ideal.



Inclusion Alberta and its allies prevailed in their public efforts and Alberta established legislation in the 1980's that provided a right to education for all children – not really that long ago. With the change in legislation many private segregated schools gradually closed their doors. However, the advocacy of Inclusion Alberta did not focus exclusively on closing segregated schools since most students transitioned to special education classrooms in regular schools. Our vision of integration into regular classrooms, which later evolved conceptually into inclusive education as we understand it today. For a time, several Integration Action Groups, led by families and supported by Inclusion Alberta and Inclusion Canada, sprung up in communities across Alberta to advocate for integration in regular classrooms and schools.

Inclusion Alberta and its member associations' advocacy has been instrumental in the development of inclusive early childhood learning. Early childhood educators and operators open to the concept, have been supported to learn and adapt, and thus recognize that all children at an early age learn through play. However, establishing ready access to inclusive education has been more challenging particularly in the high school years requiring Inclusion Alberta to develop a multi-pronged and sustained advocacy approach to

advancing inclusive education over the last 40 or so years. A new generation of families have emerged in the Inclusion Alberta network who want their children with disabilities to be included in pre-school, then schooling followed by post-secondary inclusion and to thus go on to live inclusively as adults in their communities.

An Overview of Inclusion Alberta's Inclusive Education Advocacy

Family Leadership Development

To build and sustain the collective family and allied advocacy required for social change, Inclusion Alberta developed more than 20 years ago, a family leadership series of 5 weekends over the course of 8 months where primarily families, inclusive of individuals with intellectual disabilities, siblings and allies come together to learn about the issues.¹ Almost every one of the many hundreds of family members who have participated in the series describe it as one of the most valuable and impactful learning experiences in their pursuit of social justice. The series has enabled us to have a growing body of knowledgeable activist family members and allies from which to draw upon in engaging in political and local community action, including the formation of new local family advocacy organizations.

Family Focused Workshops

Throughout the course of a year Inclusion Alberta, often in partnership with local family advocacy member organizations, offers a variety of workshops tailored to families and delivered both online and in their home communities. Some of these workshops are specific to inclusive

¹ the history of the family led inclusion movement; socio-historical societal devaluation; inclusion within normative pathways; capitalizing on community capacity to enable inclusion and natural supports; visioning and acting on that vision; movement participation and leadership; and, deepening critical thinking.

education covering topics such as: a) why inclusion; b) what the research says; c) adapting instruction and modifying curriculum (universal design); d) facilitating relationships and friendships; e) understanding your rights; f) how funding works; and g) advocacy strategies. These training events provide an opportunity for families to be reenergized and expand their knowledge wherever they are on their journey of inclusive education (i.e., kindergarten to elementary to junior to senior high school). These events have included a mix of parents – many who have successfully had their child included as well as those who continue to face obstacles and must continue to advocate for access and/or quality for their child.

The inclusive education workshops are based on the same concepts and understanding of inclusion across the lifespan as other training sessions. This enables families to understand the place and value of inclusive education. Families and their allies require a deeper understanding that inclusive education is only a partial means to the benefits of being included beyond the school years. Unfortunately, even a quality fully inclusive education does not naturally lead to a fully inclusive life over the decades that follow.

Individual Family Advocacy

If an Alberta family is fortunate to live in a community where teachers and school officials are supportive of inclusion, it may be offered or provided when requested. However, not all Alberta families enjoy the universal right to an inclusive education. In too many cases they find themselves in a



place and time when the teachers, principals and school district may not be supportive of inclusion and respectful of parental choice. The consequence of this 'luck of the draw' reality places a child's sense of belonging and worth at risk.

To address this reality, Inclusion Alberta has advocates across the province that assist families by providing as much personal and sustained advocacy for as long as it takes to secure an inclusive education regardless of where they live or the opposition they might be facing. Inclusion Alberta is viewed as a recognized and credible provincial advocacy organization. Consequently, when families are supported by an IA advocate, we have a very high level of success. Our advocacy includes successfully engaging legal action and appeals to school districts and the Ministry of Education when required.

We've developed an advocacy guide to help families regardless of where they live or the opposition they might be facing. For example, we have shared how education funding works so parents can effectively respond when funding challenges are used as a reason for denying a student an inclusive education. We have found that, over time, when families inform a school that they will be bringing an Inclusion Alberta advocate to the next meeting, this alone can be sufficient motivation for the school to be more

accommodating. While we are pleased this is true, far too many parents remain unaware of Inclusion Alberta's potential support. We also acknowledge that the struggle for inclusion cannot be fully achieved by direct action for every single case, one at a time. Systemic advocacy and legislative change continue to be essential.

Resources, Training and Recognition for Teacher and Educational Leaders

Inclusion Alberta both enjoys and fosters positive and collaborative working relationships with teachers, schools, and school districts across the province. While there are unresolved systemic inclusive educational issues there are nevertheless committed allies who do provide quality inclusive education or are working toward that end.

We have two Inclusive Education Consultants whose function is to work directly with teachers in their classrooms and schools. These consultants are educators, one has a doctorate in education. The current president of Inclusion Alberta is not only a parent but an educator who also has a doctorate and holds a senior school authority leadership position.

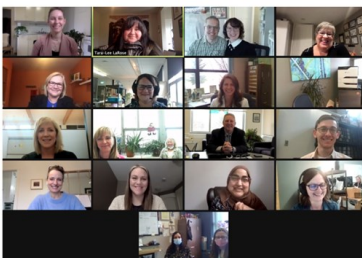
The Inclusive Education Consultants provide in-services tailored to a school or district's needs. They provide individual teachers with

direct assistance in the adaptation of instruction and modification of the curriculum. They model the implementation of strategies; participate as a contributing member of the learning team; search for and provide resources; and offer supportive encouragement and acknowledgement of both successes and challenges.

In addition, Inclusion Alberta has developed an interactive workshop for principals on how to create a welcoming school and build relationships of trust with families. We have a free lending library of teacher-oriented resources on inclusive education whose database is searchable online. At our Annual Family Conference, and in partnership with Inclusion Canada and Alberta's Ministry of Education, we formally and publicly acknowledge schools and teachers who have been nominated by parents and students for a national Inclusive Education Award. On some occasions principals have brought a large contingent of staff and students to the event where they have received this acknowledgement. The schools and individuals honoured are frequently featured in local newspapers and media.

The Annual Family Conference also includes a full day workshop on inclusive education. It is directed toward teachers, educational assistants, educational leaders, and parents. We encourage parents to invite their child's learning team to attend and offer incentives to enable groups of teachers from a school or school district to attend.

On the day following the full-day workshop additional inclusive education plenary and concurrent sessions are provided for teachers and parents. Eminent national and international inclusive education leaders and authors are invited to conduct the sessions. These sessions have provided professional development for thousands of teachers and school leaders.



Learning Services at Edmonton Catholic Schools and St. Mary Elementary School (Edmonton Catholic Schools, Rhonda Lang)

Nominated by parents Monique Carley and Wouter Buyks, parents of grade 3 student Adelyn

Monique Carley: "Congratulations to this remarkable team. You have been, and continue to be, a mighty and courageous group of allies in our pursuit of an inclusive education for our daughter."

St. Mary School receiving the National Inclusive Education Award



Inclusive Post-secondary Education

The focus of this paper is on advancing inclusion in K-12 education in Alberta. However, in Alberta we have learned applicable lessons as we have worked on building an inclusive post-secondary option for young adults with intellectual disabilities. These lessons can be instructive to the advancement of inclusive education overall.

In the mid-to late 80's the author developed the first example of inclusive post-secondary education at a university in Canada. Our partner was the University of Alberta, a major Canadian research and teaching university. Inclusive post-secondary education was conceived as a means of embedding young adults with intellectual disabilities, including those with significant disabilities and challenges, in a normative societal pathway. This approach offers a path to personal development, lifelong learning, relationships, a career and employment. It was developed in response to families wanting more than what was then on offer when their sons and daughters finished high school. One of the author's colleagues who began her career in

this untested venture that began more than 30 years ago, is the current CEO of Inclusion Alberta.

Inclusion Alberta's direct involvement and advocacy has supported inclusion on campuses across Alberta. As a result, there is more fully inclusive post-secondary education in Alberta than any other jurisdiction in the world. We have found that when a parent shares their plan for their child to attend post-secondary, it makes it easier for teachers and officials to understand why they are seeking inclusion in K-12 education.

Access to inclusive post-secondary education continues to expand and nearly every publicly funded post-secondary institution in Alberta now enrolls students with intellectual disabilities.

Inclusive post-secondary education is an example of what is possible when inclusion is not encumbered by the entrenchment of a special education system like that found in K-12 public education. Post-secondary lacks a history of organized resistance to inclusion. Advocates do not need to overcome or dismantle an industry (e.g., special education) or threaten career identities (e.g., special education teachers).

With faculty and administrative support, inclusive post-secondary education has enriched the lives of students with and without intellectual disabilities. It has contributed to the development of career identities and relationships and resulted in unparalleled employment outcomes. The experience demonstrates that funding, class size, teacher training and similar factors are not the real obstacles to inclusion in our province. The struggle to achieve universal access to quality inclusive education is fundamentally a value based and cultural struggle. It is on this plane of cultural change that the furtherance of inclusive schooling must be sought.

Political

Through decades of individual and public advocacy, Inclusion Alberta has established itself as one of the province's key education stakeholders. As a result, the association has always had representation on government advisory committees with respect to students with disabilities. We have used this venue to have the Alberta government stipulate that an inclusive education in the regular classroom of a neighbourhood school must be the first option a school considers as they collaborate in program planning with parents. The provincial Ministry plays little to no role in holding school districts and individual schools accountable and too many principals are unaware of their required obligations to accommodate parental choice. This means parents continue to need to be informed of their rights.

It also makes it important for Inclusion Alberta to meet regularly with the Minister of Education and Ministry officials to discuss on-going issues. Our members are also active during provincial elections and with elected legislators to press for improvements in access and the practice of inclusive education in community schools.



Conclusion

While Inclusion Alberta has yet to achieve universal and ready access to quality inclusive education for every student with intellectual disabilities, we have made progress. Advocacy has enabled us to advance inclusion and, in some cases, prevent regression. As societal support is strengthened, we want to see schools, school systems, and their representative organizations end their resistance to equity and inclusion. Those that do not and remain committed to practices that based on systemic discrimination risk being increasingly marginalized. A strong, vibrant family advocacy organization that supports parents as they negotiate the challenges is essential.

Link: [Inclusion Alberta](#)

The logo for Inclusion Alberta. The word "Inclusion" is written in a purple, sans-serif font. A thick, orange, curved line underlines the "In" and extends slightly to the right. Below "Inclusion", the word "Alberta" is written in the same purple, sans-serif font.