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Each Belongs: 32 Years of Full Inclusion

By Jack Pearpoint and Gary Bunch

Few of us know about the first school system that made inclusion a policy for every child in its care. This remarkable system started including all children three decades ago. Before most of us imagined inclusion. Before some of us were born. It is a remarkable story, worth telling and celebrating.

Over three decades ago, when isolated families, teachers, and human service professionals wanted to “see” inclusion in action, there were very few examples anywhere. Thus, many of us from around the world visited the Roman Catholic School Board in Hamilton, Ontario, and talked with Jim Hansen, Phil DeFrancesco, Betty Browne, and other members of their team. As we toured, we listened in awe and disbelief as Jim, the superintendent, raved with passion and eloquence about a *system* where *all* children were welcome. And he meant “All Children.” Thousands of visitors came. Jim engineered school time so students led people to witness the impossible happening without trumpets and fanfare, almost invisibly. When camera crews came, they often left disappointed. There was nothing “special” to video. The “cute” kids in the special ed rooms weren’t there at all. They were hidden in regular classes, with all the other cute kids. Most people just couldn’t find them without guidance.

That was 30 years ago. Now, there are wonderful examples of inclusion in thousands of schools and communities. Many of the institutions that once hid the potential contributions of people far from our consciousness are closed. But the work is not done. There are still people who want to reactivate those old institutions and create new ones. That is why we must listen to our own stories, our own history, so we can continue to learn and move forward.

It began simply in Hamilton with a man who was driven by a vision – uncompromising, outrageous, relentless, and brilliant. Critics were infuriated because there seemed to be no length that Jim Hansen wouldn’t go to in including a child. They were right. There was only one boundary that could not be crossed: Thursday nights were poker nights. That was sacred. And so were Jim’s principles. He believed it was very simple: Everyone belongs. That translated into the system’s mission statement: Each Belongs. He accepted no excuses where the welfare of children was concerned. He bent rules and dented boundaries with his unwavering commitment to full inclusion for all children. Jim did things for which some people labeled him a tyrant. Others consider him a hero. For example, he chose staff. He picked people and promoted people for their values. If they supported Each Belongs, they could move forward quickly. If they were blockers, they were blocked themselves. It wasn’t a secret. Jim ruffled feathers everywhere, but no one questioned his motives or his integrity.

All this was done early on, before the word “inclusion” appeared on the education horizon. “Integration” was the term of the day. Other leading systems were experimenting with allowing children across the threshold of schools into segregated special rooms and facilities. In Hamilton Roman Catholic, Jim led an assault on segregation. Without a Jim Hansen, we doubt that Hamilton would have been the pioneering program that it has been. Jim is bashful about this and quickly shares the praise with the remarkable team he created. He is right. He could not and did not do it alone – but he was the leader.

There are a thousand stories in this school system. Every school, every principal and teacher, every parent has favorites. The band that included everyone, and sounded just about as good as most other high school bands is one of mine. There were difficult moments when a child with complex needs pushed everyone to the limits. The difference was that there was an “emergency response team.” They didn’t have extra money, but they would support people morally, ethically, professionally, practically – and if that meant the principal put on rubber boots to clean up the mess, that is what happened.

With all this remarkable achievement, one might think that all children would now be included in Ontario schools. Would that it were so. There are two parallel school systems, both funded by the Provincial Ministry of Education. One is “public – nondenominational” and the other is Catholic. Both Boards cover the same territory, with the same per student granting structure. But they have different belief systems. One system operates a separate system for labeled children, and the system Jim shaped welcomes all children. The registration process at the beginning of each year is telling of the difference. In the Hamilton Catholic, if you register as a Catholic, and move your taxes to the Catholic system, your child is welcome. There is no “determination” process to decide *if* your child can come. There is a process of getting to know each child and their family, to determine what supports every child needs to maximize his or her learning. There are constraints. The budget is never adequate. Support for teachers’ aides has been cut back province-wide. But this is not an “admissions” criteria. The questions are simply, what type of supports does this child need to maximize their learning potential, and what can we do to achieve that standard of excellence? Does it all work perfectly? Smoothly? Of course not. But in provincially imposed standardized tests, *all* children in this system do as well or better than those in other comparable systems. Academics don’t suffer. And when we think about the lives that have been altered, the accomplishments are beyond measure.

Some of the early pioneering families in the Hamilton Roman Catholic system are witnessing the rewards of the seeds they planted so long ago. Children who would have been segregated have graduated. Now they live and work in the community. For their former classmates it is “normal” to see them in church, at the gym, in workplaces as employees and colleagues. There is no “pity” factor. They learned years ago that their fellow students were fully human. They got to know them as people, not as labels.

Diversity in Hamilton, Ontario, is more diverse and more inclusive than it used to be because one man had a vision. He seeded it relentlessly, and people came on side. And one by one, he and his colleagues figured out how to welcome every student who arrived at their door into full inclusion in their school system.

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