

# Preparing your Child for High School

*Bob Jackson (2001)*

## **Beginning School**

Hunt & Goetz (1997). Students with severe disabilities - review of 19 research investigations

- Parent involvement is an essential component of effective inclusive schooling.
- Students with severe disabilities can achieve positive academic and learning outcomes in inclusive settings.
- They can realise acceptance, interactions, and friendships in inclusive settings.
- Students without disabilities experience positive outcomes when children with severe disabilities are their classmates.
- Collaborative efforts among school personnel are essential to successful inclusion.
- Curricular adaptations are a vital component in effective inclusion efforts. (pp25-26)

## **Six months or more before transition to High School:**

Work out what are the most important things for you in relation to your child's education. For example:

- For my child to 'belong'.
- For my child to be safe and secure from being hurt and teased.
- For my child to be happy.
- For my child to grow up with his/her neighbourhood peers.
- For my child to achieve the best academic outcomes possible.
- We want them all but have to priorities.
- Determine what time and energy you can contribute.
- Visit potential schools. If you want inclusion, start with your neighbourhood school.
- Get a feel for the welcome. Inclusion depends on will and skill. Is the will there? In most cases it is – don't confuse with uncertainty. If the will is present, skills are much easier to cater for.
- If you don't feel welcome, would another school be welcoming? Will there be a space for your child?
- If they recommend a segregated Unit or Centre for all or part of the school day ask what the research is to support that as you have heard that the research indicates that this would be detrimental. If they claim it to be positive, ask for a copy of research evidence or a reference so you can look it up.

Remember that now in WA all principals know that full inclusion in high school is an option available to parents and it is the school's responsibility to make it successful.

## **When you have chosen your school:**

Visit the school and perhaps help or at least visit in the classrooms where your child is likely to be going.

Negotiate a transition plan with the school. This should automatically be organised between the primary and high school BUT:

- You must be involved in this as you are the expert on your child.
- Don't assume it will happen or will be done well. Sometimes principals will say they don't know the teachers for the next year and won't know until February so they can't plan a transition. This is unacceptable - most aspects of the transition can be organised without knowing individual teachers.
- Has any needed aide time been organised?
- Will therapy be involved? How - inclusively? Is it organised
- Remember, the better the transition plan, the likely better will be the inclusion. WELL BEGUN, HALF DONE.

### **Things to be considered in a transition plan**

- Which classrooms will be used - are they accessible for your child?
- How can we set up several visits in the six months preceding high school entry to ensure your child is comfortable with the environment and knows how to navigate?
- What process is in place to introduce your child to the school and future classmates to ensure that he is welcomed and understood?
- Is there a buddy system to introduce him/her, help him to navigate, get to each lesson period, have a companion at lunchtime etc.?
- How is he or she going to be introduced to each teacher and class?
- Is any in-service planned for the teachers on curriculum preparation?
- What supports are available for teachers?
- Have the teachers had access to in-service training on appropriate use of an aide if one is involved (that is, not an alternative teacher but an assistant to the teacher, crucially focused on social belonging as well as academic development) ?
- What processes are in place to ensure that class rules are set down early and followed through from day 1 to ensure your child is included in normal class expectations?
- Will there be good links to the family and primary school so information and ideas can be shared?
- Is the school aware of and using the Centre for Inclusive Schooling?
- Is a good communication system in place between you and the school? (Not always a communication book - phone contact with a home teacher or regular get-togethers with a coordinator may be better alternatives in some situations.
- Find out key skills that will be required in the school and classroom. Start teaching those skills if your child has not got them.
- Likely important skills:
  - Following instructions.
  - Working in groups. Sharing, taking turns.
  - Sitting quietly even if bored.
  - Staying in a set area.
  - Moving quietly in corridors etc.
  - Cooperating on a task with another child/children.
  - Academic skills e.g. alphabet, numbers.
  - Maintaining a reasonable noise level.

The more of these types of skills that your child has, the easier the transition is likely to be, but even if the child hasn't got them they are likely to be learned rapidly when at school.

### **Other suggestions**

- Join your school P&F group and or school council. If you are seen from the start as a contributing member of the school community partnerships are easier and more likely.
- Develop links with other families. If you are seen as 'one of the mob', then your child is likely to also be more easily accepted.
- Work in the school canteen - alliances are built here.

### **Before the end of the each school year:**

- If your child's teacher is likely to need assistance in the classroom, then this has to be organised by the principal. Giving lots of warning helps him/her to get this assistance.
- 'Over preparing' a school or teachers can highlight difference of your child. 'Under preparing' can leave your child's teacher feeling put upon. You need to think through the appropriate balance for your child -- you are the expert with your child. Discuss with your Service Provider, Local Area Coordinator etc.
- If at all possible, meet your child's 'next year teachers ' before the end of the previous school year. If there is social contact early, partnerships are easier. Ask what you can do to help prepare.
- Be positive, positive, positive. Teachers are likely to be feeling apprehensive, uncertain if they can cope and have all the societal stereotypes about autism.
- Talk to your child about the school and going there (this will depend on your child - some children want immediacy).

**Prepare a booklet** "Introducing Gertrude". We must get across the fact that 'Gertrude' is a **child first** with an individual personality, a range of strengths and similar needs to other children. In addition she will need some specific attention to some areas due to particular needs, but she is a child first who needs to belong.

### **Introductory Book**

- Some suggestions for an ' introductory book'
- Picture of your child on the front.
- If it works for you, write it in first person as though your child is talking.
- Introduce your child as you might introduce yourself to someone at a social gathering who you have become friendly with. For example:
- Family background, demographic information (facts about your child and where you live etc.).
- Interests, important prior events in your child's life.
- Areas of particular need for assistance.
- Likes, dislikes, things to avoid etc.

## **Preparing your Child for Transition to the Next School Year**

- Find out who the next year's teacher is. If the Principal is supportive he/she will have thought this through and arranged a home teacher already at the school. (Not always possible to know all teachers, but the home teacher can normally be designated before the end of the school year).
- Meet the new teacher(s) and give him/her the 'introductory book'.
- Ask what you can do to help to prepare your child for next year.
- Ask the teacher for advice on how to teach particular skills (teachers love to be asked for advice).
- Arrange for your current teachers, yourself and the new teacher (at least the home teacher) to meet and discuss broad arrangements for next year.
- Teachers and Principals will know less about your child's disability than you in most cases. They will however know the societal stereotypes. Hence you will be seen as a bit threatening.
- Your child may be a cause for them to be uncertain, even scared because of the societal stereotypes.
- However most are willing to be inclusive if they feel that they are being supported and it is not a 'dump' on them.

We have an historical habit of treating children with disabilities differently and in segregated settings. This habit is ingrained and will be seen as 'right ' by many/most.

Teachers and Principals need rewards and acknowledgment (just like us!).

- Acknowledge acceptance of your child.
- Write letters to their boss. That is, to the Principal for a good Teacher, District Superintendent for the Principal.
- Don't nitpick. Choose issues carefully to raise as problems. Go to your priority list.
- Don't sit on issues that are burning you up. You can end up 'exploding' over a 'last straw ' and be seen as erratic and unreasonable. Raise issues in the context of seeking advice from the teacher. "It seems that ..... Is not working too well. What do you suggest we could do as an alternative?"

### **Eight elements of inclusion**

- Presence
- Curricular inclusion
- Social inclusion
- Self-image
- Image in the eyes of others
- Teaching relevance
- Teaching potency
- Expectations.

### **The Eight Deadly Sins of Professionals: So be prepared.**

From Bailey, D.B., & Wolery, M. (1992). Teaching infants and preschoolers with disabilities. (2nd Ed.) NY, Maxwell Macmillan.

1. **Professional Ignorance:** Lack of basic information.
2. **Professional hopelessness:** Defeatist attitude.
3. **Referral ad infinitum:** Repeated referrals for yet another specialised assessment.
4. **Veil of Secrecy:** Withholding 'threatening' information.
5. **Deaf ear syndrome:** Ignoring ideas, requests or suggestions made by parents
6. **Professional omniscience:** Staunch defence of professional opinions and expertise.
7. **Professional omnipotence:** Assuming that professionals have the wisdom to make life-defining decisions for others.
8. **Parents as patients:** Viewing parents as being in need of therapy to 'accept' their child's diagnosis or to alleviate depression.



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