

# 5 WHAT TO LOOK FOR INDICATORS OF INCLUSION

Ideally you will receive a warm welcome from the moment of first contact with a school, but don't be put off by a lukewarm first response. It is not uncommon for teachers and school leaders to be hesitant about the enrolment of a student with significant disability. Remember that a positive response can signal that the school caters for students with disability - but not necessarily within an inclusive model. Instead, look for other indicators of an inclusive school culture – like valuing individuality and diversity and seeing these as strengths; placing students first; and healthy collaboration with families. While the school leader often does set the culture of the school, principals come and go, so check out the overall school culture rather than making a decision based on one person.

In your first contact with a prospective school, focus on assessing the school culture and the fit of the school with your vision - rather than the support that will be provided.

## INDICATORS PRIOR TO ENROLMENT:

- The leadership is committed to being flexible, and able to take risks, reflect, and solve problems. Do they talk of HOW things might happen, not IF they can happen? Is there a culture of professional learning? Is there an overall sense of a well-functioning school?
- There is an atmosphere of care, openness, and embracing of diversity – the school doesn't feel competitive, individualistic and rigid. Do you sense a genuine interest in your son or daughter as a unique individual – or does it feel like there is a standard way of doing things for “these students”?
- The way families talk about the school shows a sense of collaboration and belonging amongst staff, students and families. Are there opportunities for all children to “shine”- or only an emphasis on things like academics and elite sport?

If in doubt about which school to choose, many families simply choose their local school for the advantages in building relationships with neighbourhood children. Others choose the school they were already planning for their family (like an independent college or Catholic school).

Be careful not to equate extra resources with good inclusion. Resources can be used well or badly. Schools promoted as having specialist staff, resources or track record may not be the most inclusive, and inclusion can be undermined if the proportion of students with disability is higher than the typical expected level.







## INDICATORS IN THE CLASSROOM

- Teachers are passionate about knowing and teaching every student in their class. They appear creative in thinking about multiple ways of engaging students in learning and helping students to demonstrate what they have learnt.
- There is evidence of tools and strategies (e.g. visual schedules) that support and benefit everyone.
- Students with disability belong to the regular class and the regular classroom teacher takes responsibility for their learning.
- There is intentional effort to meet every child's needs without unduly drawing attention to their need for additional support or accommodations.

## INDICATORS THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL

- There is an unquestioned belief that the student with disability is a full member of the school, with the same right to attend for the full day, every day, of the school year.
- The child is seen as a valued contributor to the school – with their own thoughts and feelings, gifts and needs, and an equal right to participate and belong.
- There is a commitment to ensuring the student is supported to achieve academically and make authentic friendships.
- All students have the same opportunity to be in regular classes, in the playground, attend school camps and excursions and participate in extra-curricular activities.
- Students are in the same spaces as others, not in separate special classes.

## TIPS FOR PROFESSIONALS: PARTNERSHIP, COMMUNICATION, AND COLLABORATION:

- See the student first (not labels and stereotypes). Keep focused on individuality, progress and potential and keep sharing the positives.
- Speak positively about the student and their family to other students, school staff and families.
- Value the input of the student, parents and other members of the team
- Stay solution-focused. You don't need all the answers, just a commitment to figuring things out.
- Establish regular communication which works for you and the family. Understand families may want more communication or regular updates.
- Keep focusing on good teaching for all.

*Brengman, L. (2017)*

*The Ten Qualities of an Inclusive Teacher.*

## TIPS:

- Ask about WHAT and HOW support will be provided, rather than IF support will be provided.
- Ask about the goal for support. Avoid support that is not purposeful or needed.
- Make sure you speak about the contribution your child will make – don't be apologetic.
- Ask specifically about any habits of withdrawal or segregation. Beware of "programs" or language suggesting segregated models such as "SEP kids", "the unit students" or any program reserved for students with a label.