



“The smallest meaningful unit of inclusion is the school.”
– Melody Musgrove (2015)

In the Spring of 2019, SET-BC – the Ministry of Education Provincial Outreach Program (Special Education Technology) – launched a new project called the Inclusive Schools Initiative. The focus of this initiative is to explore the question, ‘What would a truly inclusive school look like?’

SET▶BC

Inclusive Schools Initiative

by Darren Mitzel
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On this journey, SET-BC sought to strategically partner with districts and schools in a multi-year initiative to collaboratively investigate ideas around inclusion at the school-wide level, with the goal of more deeply developing the scope and impact of inclusion in B.C.

The purpose of the initiative is to support school teams who are seeking to pursue the development of skills and strategies that will enable their schools to be as inclusive as possible of all learners. We recognize that all schools will be at different stages in their inclusion journey, and seek to meet schools where they are at in the process of becoming fully inclusive.

There were six successful schools chosen across the province for this initiative: A.D. Rundle Middle School in Chilliwack (SD33), R.L. Angus Elementary in Fort Nelson (SD81), Signal Hill Elementary in Pemberton (SD48), North Glenmore Elementary in Kelowna (SDS23), Gold River Secondary School on Vancouver Island (SD84) and Lake Trail Middle School in Comox Valley (SD71).

The Principal at Lake Trail Middle School, **Gerald Fussell**, has taken this project to his staff with full enthusiasm and support. Through an initial Design Sprint with SET-BC staff, the project is well on its way in prototyping and testing the many aspects of inclusion and Universal Design for Learning supported by the SET-BC team in year one.

1. Prior to this project, what was the inclusive status of your school?

Gerald: Beginning in 2016, our school community took a deep dive into our work. We used the Spirals of Inquiry as a framework for this exploration, and participated in broad-based consultation for the scanning process. We identified inclusion – in the broadest sense – as one of the areas most needing improvement. One-third of our students had Indigenous heritage; however, you wouldn't know that when you entered our school. Reading levels in each class ranged from Grades 2 through 12, and numeracy wasn't far off. In the Ministry's Student Learning Surveys, many of the key indicators showed that our students were not connected to their learning.

So, we began to address these discrepancies in our planning that Spring, and over the next year-and-a-half we made great strides investing in professional development, collaboration, and improved school structures. One of our teachers, Jana Baker, identified as part of her master's work that inclusion was still a challenge for many of our students, and that we needed to improve the work we were doing. That reflective report became the impetus for our application for the SET BC Inclusive Schools Initiative. We had a staff that believed in the work, were working hard and who were very open to extra support.



Gerald Fussell
Principal, Lake Trail Middle School

2. What were your goals for your school in applying for the SET-BC Inclusive Schools Initiative?

My primary goal in applying for the SET-BC Inclusive Schools Initiative was to provide more supports for the work our teachers and education assistants were doing in order to meet the very diverse needs of our students. We wanted to address the barriers to meaningful access for our students. And, we wanted to both embed sustainable inclusive practices and to have our staff engage in cycles of reflective inquiry around inclusion.



3. What are some of the challenges in trying to build a fully inclusive school environment?

One of the biggest challenges to building a fully inclusive school environment is figuring out where to start, and how much to take on. I think we are very good at identifying deficiencies, but we often struggle to agree on paths of remediation, and to resource them appropriately.

John Eckert's work identifies seven constructs that are necessary for developing the kind of collective leadership necessary for this kind of work. The first is having a shared vision and strategy. Our staff had a shared vision – in the macro sense – and then relied on collective work to identify strategies to achieve that vision. Our administration team was very supportive of teacher leadership, and really saw our role as providing logistics and resources to support the work our teachers were doing. Teachers need to have the capacity to do this work and we were very fortunate to have a very strong staff with many leaders. We also have a staff that is passionate about improvement and who work together on professional learning.

The fourth area is work design and structure. This is an area that we were able to support with the way our school was set up, and with support from the SET-BC team. However, we struggled in one of the key areas, and that was developing our skills in collaboration. Our staff get along very well, but we struggle in spots to have the deep, meaty conversations necessary to move learning forward collectively. We can often decide on the challenges, but have different perspectives about what the solutions are. While everyone's hearts are in the right place, prioritizing collective strategies based on data can be challenging. We believe our staff have collective and individual efficacy, and are all focused on improvement. Consequently, we have the pieces in place to become a fully inclusive learning environment, but we need the time, framework, and collective agency to achieve this.



Insect Challenge: Pop-Corner Project

Objective: To create a caterpillar that can move and jump.

Materials: 1. A piece of white paper, 2. A piece of string, 3. A piece of paper, 4. A piece of paper, 5. A piece of paper, 6. A piece of paper, 7. A piece of paper, 8. A piece of paper, 9. A piece of paper, 10. A piece of paper.

Procedure: 1. Cut a piece of white paper into a long, thin strip. 2. Cut a piece of string into a long, thin strip. 3. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 4. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 5. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 6. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 7. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 8. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 9. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip. 10. Cut a piece of paper into a long, thin strip.

Diagram: A diagram of a caterpillar with a long, thin body and a small head. The body is made of a long, thin strip of paper, and the head is made of a small piece of paper. The caterpillar is shown in a jumping position.

4. What were some of the ideas that you prototyped and tested with SET-BC support?

One of the most powerful activities we did as a staff was to work in our teams on class profiles. Much like when we were learning to work with Ross Greene's ALSUP (Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems), as we focused on structures to clearly understand what was getting in the way of student success, we found that there were things we had missed. Many reading this will find this obvious, but sometimes one needs to make the time to go through the process in order to fully appreciate the value and power of it. I think we were in that camp. From this work, we were able to identify some UDL strategies to use, and we focused in on some tools to increase engagement for our students. We also clarified some of our thinking around executive skills, which became even more focused during this Spring's COVID-19 learning.

5. Where are you hoping this project will lead your school?

We are hoping that this work will lead our school to be fully inclusive. Regardless of where we end up, we are significantly further ahead than we were when we started. I can't remember who said it originally, but I believe we can achieve anything we focus on in education. This is our focus, and it is filtering through many of the lenses we use. For example, we are actively trying to find ways to increase how inclusive we are with our whole staff. We have heightened awareness of the different ways students and parents might not feel included. We are increasing our understanding of the many blind-spots we have, and the involuntary assumptions we make. We move into a new school in September 2021 and we want the building, actions, and beliefs to be authentically inclusive.

For more information on Gerald's story at Lake Trail Middle or the other five Inclusive School sites, check out setbc.org/inclusive-schools-initiative-blog.

SET-BC is creating a Playbook or step-by-step process for any schools interested in embarking on their own Inclusive Initiative. All six sites will be supported for another school year and their successes and challenges will be further added to this SET-BC Inclusive Playbook:

bit.ly/ISIPplaybook

