Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Parent Perspective Tool 2: The School must Believe in your Child’s Capacity for Success

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

This tool is the second in a series of three related tools written by Michaela Banks from her perspective as a parent.

Finding a school that is willing to learn from the student and family and believes that each child has capacity for success is essential. This tool is written for parents/carers to assist their selection of a school and support helpful conversations with school staff (leaders, educators, teacher aides, office staff, and other site staff) about engaging their child.

## Ideas

For most children, their future is an unknown place of dreams and opportunity, but historically the futures for children living with disability has been more prescribed and with lower expectations. In an inclusive world we need to encourage all students to dream of endless opportunities and it is at school, the foundation of learning, where we build this potential.

The starting point of providing academic support is “presuming competence” and having “high expectations” of all students.  This means approaching every child as wanting to be fully included, wanting acceptance and appreciation, wanting to learn, wanting to be heard, wanting to contribute – these things are innate to every child but sometimes barriers, such  as communication or learning delay, may make it harder for teachers to see this.

Teachers who presume competence place the burden on themselves to come up with more creative, innovative ways for students to learn.  The question is no longer WHO can be included or who can learn, but HOW can we remove educational barriers to achieve inclusive education for every child.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Having a growth mindset[[2]](#footnote-2) is popular in schools and must be applied to all students, including those with disabilities. A school that believes in a child’s capacity for success will be eager for information from the child and their family, open to learning and problem solving and will continue to find ways to evolve how they teach.

Some students living with disability may find it difficult, for an array of reasons, to show what they have learnt in a manner that suits a school’s standardized assessment tools. If a school doesn't believe in a student, who is initially unable to show their learning in a manner that suits these standardized methods, the school might assume that they’re unable to learn. The risk to the student of being discounted as a valuable learner is significant.

## Actions

It is important to establish, before enrolling at a school, if the school’s values and framework align with your family and your vision of learning for your child. Prior to selecting a school, you are likely to have a minimum of three opportunities to determine whether this is the case:

1. Phone call to the school enquiring about enrolment:

* You may or may not choose to mention that your child has a disability.
  + How did the person on the other end make you feel?
  + Did you feel welcomed?
  + Did you have any reservations?
* Reservations at this point may not totally discount the school but are important to keep in mind.

1. General tour of the school with other parents:

* Again, you may or may not choose to mention that your child has a disability and choose to get a feel for the school as an anonymous parent, keeping in mind the following observations:
  + Did the school mention additional support or a contact person supporting students who have a disability within the general classroom?
  + Did the school discuss values that align with your family’s values?
  + Does the school have a holistic approach to learning beyond testing and results?

1. Individual meeting with principal or deputy principal:

* If you are seriously considering enrolling your child, it is essential to have a one-on-one meeting with the principal or deputy principal, if they will be your primary point of contact.
* A positive attitude toward inclusion at school and learning from the family starts with leadership, therefore meeting with the school leader will tell you a lot about the school’s values and framework.
* Take a partner or trusted friend with you to this meeting and take your child along too, so that they are included in the decision right from the start.
* When talking with the principal, keep the following in mind:
  + Are they talking honestly and positively about having your child and family as part of their school community?
  + Do they believe in open, honest communication between the school and families?
  + Do they speak to your child directly and seek to know more about them?
  + Are they solutions-based and looking for opportunities to include your child rather than reasons to exclude?

Parents may use the following example as the basis for a conversation with the school leadership and teaching staff about the school’s values and pedagogical framework.

# *Example Student 1:*

Student 1 lives with a physical and communication disability. Student 1 is in reception and one afternoon towards the end of term 1 the teacher is testing their letter recognition using a small laminated alphabet whilst sitting on the floor. The student points to a few correctly, a few incorrectly and very quickly loses interest, throws the laminated alphabet across the classroom and refuses to engage any further.

The teacher has a choice of beliefs here; to believe that this student is not able to learn in an inclusive setting or to believe in the child’s capacity for success. If the teacher believes in the child’s capacity, they then also choose to continue teaching the student, to learn from the student and their family and revisit the task later with more appropriate tools. This teacher and school choose to foster an inclusive, growth mindset.

Over the next few months the teacher adopts the following strategies:

* They notice at what times during the day the student is most attentive and focused
* They take note of how the student is physically positioned when they’re having good academic success
* They liaise with the student’s family and Occupational Therapist to discuss appropriate tools for the task
* They continue to teach the student with the expectation that the student will be successful and is learning

A few months later, the assessment is revisited. This time, the teacher is sitting next to the student at their desk. The student is comfortably seated in a supportive chair, it’s the first lesson of the day and in front of the student is a keyboard with large, clear letters with extra space between each key. The test is repeated and the student, with the right tools in the right place, at the right time and with a school that believes in their capacity for success, achieves 9 out of 10.

The example can be used as a prompt for reflection and conversation with your child’s teacher about ways they can engage and support your child to succeed at school and later in life.

## More Information

Exemplars of Practice that demonstrate the Education Standards in practice across various education settings: early learning, schools, vocational education and higher education https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/exemplars-practice

Websites containing valuable information about why inclusion is important and ideas on how to identify inclusion:

https://www.thinkinclusive.us/inclusive-education-resources/

https://includeusfromthestart.com/

http://www.startingwithjulius.org.au/category/swj-included/

A procedure for integrating academic, communication and motor programs for students with significant disabilities https://www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/files/2018/09/RedYellowGreenDirections.pdf

## Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Michaela Banks and edited by JFA Purple Orange.

You can read Michaela’s blog about her son, Harry who experienced a severe traumatic brain injury at 11 months old and her family’s journey <https://givetheboyachance.wordpress.com/about/>



1. All Means All (no date). For parents. Retrieved from <http://allmeansall.org.au/for-parents/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dweck, C.S. (2006). Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. New York: Random House [↑](#footnote-ref-2)