

EPS's Westmount Junior High School receives National Inclusive Education Award

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This year Edmonton Public Schools' Westmount Junior High School, Edmonton's the oldest junior high school, ended its longstanding cultural practice of segregating students with intellectual disabilities. This commitment to inclusion helps to ensure that every child at Westmount is welcomed and has access to a rich and meaningful education in the same classrooms as their non-disabled peers. This has also helped to earn the school earned the **National Inclusive Education Award**.

Westmount was one of three Alberta schools to receive the award (along with St. Paul Education Regional Division's Ecole Mallaig Community School and Edmonton Catholic School's St. Jerome Catholic Science Academy School), presented in April at this year's Inclusion Alberta Family Conference in Edmonton. The award is provided jointly by the Canadian Association for Community Living and Inclusion Alberta to honour a school or school district whose commitment to inclusive education is exemplary and deserving of recognition.

Andrea Plunkett, whose 14-year old son Josh began grade 7 at Westmount this year, nominated the school for the award. Andrea says that the school has shown incredible respect and commitment to Josh's needs, and has provided the communication and support needed to make a positive impact on not only Josh, but his entire family and in turn the community at large.

"For the first time since our arrival in Canada eight years ago, we have met a team that has demonstrated an openness and commitment to collaborate with us as parents, with our advocacy team at Inclusion Alberta, and other professionals in order to set our son up for success," says Andrea.

The start of the school year was a bumpy one for Josh, a student with developmental disabilities. He had some behavioural challenges towards the end of his grade 6 year, and his parents wondered if Josh would be adequately prepared for the environment of junior high: a new school, new teachers, new peers...everything would be new. Before the start of the school year, the family met with Westmount's new Principal, Mr. Rick Stanley, to discuss how to create a smooth transition for Josh. They gave the school an idea of who Josh was as a person, his learning style and some suggestions on how he could be supported within the school. Andrea says that's when it was explained to her that the school segregated students based on intellectual ability.

“We didn’t want him to be in that special education classroom,” Andrea says. “We wanted him to have as much of a normal environment as possible without labels.” However, Westmount Junior High also has an honours program.

It was decided that Josh would enter the honours program, as he would have access to French language arts, which he is very passionate about learning and which is not offered in the special education class. Josh would meet his new aide and they would wait to see how he settled into his new environment.

It did not go well. Josh had two physical behavioural incidents within the first two days of school. His parents decided that the best thing at that point was to keep him home while they regrouped.

“He was just out of place,” recalls Andrea.

After admitting that Josh was not well prepared enough to enter the new school, and that the school was not well-prepared enough for Josh, they came together and with the help of Inclusion Alberta advocates, came up with a new plan to include Josh.

Inclusion Alberta supported the Plunkett family in preparing an “All About Josh” document, which included possible behavioural triggers for Josh and how to either eliminate or reduce them. Or, if in fact he did become agitated, how the school could better respond to him. The school also provided a full-time aide properly trained for Josh’s needs, as requested by the family. The aide met with Josh and they got to know each other ahead of time.

“Fortunately, Josh was just in an impeccable mood that day so we were able to say ‘This is Josh, if you see any changes from this state, you know that he’s getting anxious and here are some of the things that can be done,’” recalls Andrea. She says the aide came to understand who her son really was “as opposed to who he was on paper.”

Inclusion Alberta’s Education Consultant, Aqeela Khalid, was brought in to give teachers ideas on how to engage Josh and reduce anxiety, such as providing visual support so that he can predict his environment and what is going to come next. The result of this much better communication and support, says Andrea, was a very smooth transition for her son Josh the second time around. The goal was to minimize Josh’s negative behaviours by the end of the year by engaging him in learning, and this was accomplished within the first two weeks of re-entering the school.

As a first time principal, Rick Stanley said it was important to him to keep an open mind about what education should look like. The success of including Josh and other students was one of the reasons Rick says he decided to abolish the

segregated class structure of grades 7 and 8 halfway through the school year in January.

“We’re very inclusive, where all kinds of kids come together,” says Rick. “What it does is it creates a collaborative environment and positive efforts and that’s a channel of energies that’s going to supporting kids’ needs.”

Rick also credits Assistant Principal Dale Carton, whom he says has taken much of the lead on creating an inclusive environment at the school, for ensuring any modified teaching or supports needs are implemented and that support and communication is paramount with families.

Andrea says Josh has settled into his new school routine, and his behavioural challenges in and out of school are down to a minimum. Before, getting him up and out the door to school in the morning was an uphill battle. But now, says Andrea, it’s a lot easier for him to get him going.

“We are not as cautious at home, or when out in the community,” explains Andrea. “When he was having challenges, his behaviour affected every aspect of his life. Now he is growing, and his personality is emerging very nicely.”

Now that Josh’s behavioural challenges have been calmed, the family is looking forward to gradually getting him involved in every aspect of school life from clubs and extracurricular activities to developing peer relationships.

“We want him to recognize that he is able to contribute something, that we value him as a person,” says Andrea of her son. “And that he has the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way.”

Principal Stanley says that winning the National Inclusive Education Award reinforces that he made the right decision to desegregate and become a fully inclusive school.

“I want [parents of children with developmental disabilities] to clearly understand that at no time are we ever going to support segregation,” says Rick. “At no time are we ever going to marginalize or isolate your child. Your child is going to have a very normal community experience that is as organic and authentic as that of any other child in our building.”

While Rick acknowledges that all children learn on different academic levels, “It’s a teacher’s job to differentiate so that we are maximizing opportunity. And that might look different for every child. But it won’t look different by being segregated.”