

“PART OF THE FABRIC OF HOW WE DO THINGS”

Unexpected Commitment to Including All Students

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This chapter examines the bridge leadership in an unexpected place, which built a deep and wide commitment to the inclusion of all students, with a particular focus on students with disabilities. We focus on high poverty, rural district, Sugar Corner, which has embraced students with disabilities as central, valued, and expected members of the school and community. While good examples of inclusive education exist across the country, rarely is it across entire districts, and rarely does it extend to students with the most significant needs. To compound that, the rural district described here is located in a state that “excludes” the second-highest percentage of students with disabilities in the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2007)¹ and whose neighboring districts have 22%–40% of students with disabilities excluded from general education curriculum and peers. Indeed, it is an unexpected place to find this kind of commitment.

Grounded in the growing body of scholarship demonstrating the key roles school leaders play in creating and maintaining equitable and excellent schools (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2009), this work explores the leadership that both created and maintained this commitment. In complement to this grounding scholarship and the practice in Sugar Corner, Villa, Thousand, Meyers, and Nevin (1996) found that school leaders' own beliefs about inclusive services for students with disabilities were the best predictor of the quality and success of inclusive school reform. In looking at leadership that creates inclusive and equitable schools for marginalized students with a particular focus on students with disabilities, Frattura and Capper (2007), McLeskey and Waldron (2006), and Theoharis (2009) have identified leaders that very closely align with what Merchant and Shoho (2006) describe as bridge leadership.

Most quality leaders in education have some understanding of the importance of social justice and what it should look like in reality; however, only a leader who is willing and able to commit to the toil and reflection necessary to bring that social justice to actualization can be considered a "bridge leader." Merchant and Shoho (2006) characterize these unique individuals as leaders who have an undeniable commitment toward establishing and nurturing legitimate connections for all individuals within and across communities. In the educational arena, a leader's dedication to creating a school culture that is rooted in a sense of belonging and equity for all extends well beyond theory and is, in fact, palpable in one's daily reflective thoughts, conversations, and actions. Bridge leaders apply creativity and conviction as they generate and foster avenues that link people together and extinguish marginalization; their work is born from a lifelong passion for breaking down physical, social, cognitive, and political barriers. Such leaders maintain high standards for themselves and the systems within which they operate. Day by day, bridge leaders are vigilant as they strive to fulfill their purpose.

Humbled by one's own position in and potential impact upon the community, this kind of special leader not only plans and constructs the figurative bridge but literally spearheads the journey across unknown waters as a beacon for others to follow. Although at times a frustrating and isolating charge, bridge leaders know no other way to be; their goal is to instill change that becomes woven into the fabric of the community at-large.

The work of these leaders connects schools to their communities, students with disabilities to their peers without disabilities, school administrators with families and teachers, and on and on. These bridge leaders seek to deeply change the educational realities of students with disabilities. That change challenges organizational and societal norms and can result in community and school transformation.

SUGAR CORNER— A CASE OF INCLUSIVE/BRIDGE LEADERSHIP

Finding a high poverty, rural district in this state, which has made a commitment to including the entire range of students with disabilities, is unexpected compared to other districts around this state and the country. This practice over the past few decades has become "the way school works here" and "the way we do things" and, quite frankly, *expected* by families, teachers, administrators, and students in Sugar Corner. To better understand Sugar Corner, we provide a brief history of their move toward inclusive services for all students.

About 12 years after the passing of PL 94-142, the law that gave students with disabilities the right to a public education, Sugar Corner moved to bring many of its students with the most challenging and significant needs back to the district from special-education schools and programs. It started with a committed director of special education hiring a couple of similarly minded teachers to commit to including students who had not been included before and to figure out how to do it.

Over the next 4 to 5 years, students with disabilities were beginning to be included in general-education classes with their general-education peers. Through the use of hiring, since the late 1980s, of teachers both interested and committed to including all students, Sugar Corner became a district committed to providing students with disabilities a meaningful and powerful education as a full member of the general-education classroom and community.

It was clear at the beginning, and even now, that this was not easy work. Some staff initially resisted, as is the case in every school and district that engages in inclusive reform; and a small number of teachers, about four, left the district to teach elsewhere as a result.

It was also clear that this was not an immediate transformation but took years of planning, evolving, and trial and error to create a culture that was committed to including all students. For example, for some years, some elementary students with mild learning needs were included for most of their instruction, but students with more significant needs were removed from general education for larger parts of the day. This has evolved into more and more, better and better, inclusion and recently a move toward co-teaching. The staff at the elementary school has been co-teaching for many years, and the middle school and high school staffs are becoming more accustomed to this kind of inclusive service.

The original director of special education who began Sugar Corner's inclusive journey is no longer working in the district; the two original teachers hired to make inclusion happen are. One of them is now the director of special education and a strong advocate for keeping this tradition going.

The other is a key leader in the district. However, to cast the commitment to inclusion as the work of a small group of people in Sugar Corner would be a mistake. This is a commitment that has spread from a small number of teachers and leaders to become an integral part of the district community. We argue that Sugar Corner is a strong example of bridge leadership as illustrated through three key ideas we found across the district: (a) a shared understanding of inclusion, bridging ideas and practice; (b) inclusion goes beyond the students—inclusive school culture and norms for staff; and (c) a "we can't imagine any other way" belief system that permeates the district culture.

A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION: BRIDGING IDEAS AND PRACTICE

In working with many schools and districts around the country, it has become immensely clear that most places believe they are inclusive; we would argue that in many cases they are not actually inclusive in practice or in the spirit of students with disabilities. A part of this disconnect exists because of the myriad definitions or understandings for the term *inclusion*. What is happening in Sugar Creek stands in stark contrast to this norm, for in this rare place, we found a shared understanding of inclusion. There were four core principles of inclusive services we found to be held across the diverse stakeholders in Sugar Corner. They were (a) "We mean all of our kids," (b) "We place all students with disabilities in general education classrooms," (c) "Inclusion depends on teams of adults working together," and (d) "Inclusion is not a separate initiative; it is a part of all initiatives."

In explaining the commitment and evolution of inclusion, the director of special education summed up what we have seen and heard in both theory and practice: that "we mean all of our kids." This is evident in that kids with mild and more complicated disabilities are learning and interacting in the general-education classrooms. One teacher commented, "These are our students; inclusion does not mean including only some students; it means we work to make even the most challenging students feel connected and a meaningful part of the [general education] classroom and program." This was particularly compelling because this commitment to "all" moves beyond rhetoric as it is shared across the district, which allows for all students to actually mean all, not some or most, but all.

A second core component of the shared understanding of inclusion is that while inclusion is about much more than just physical location, it is predicated upon the placement of all students with disabilities within general-education classrooms. This shared understanding means it is assumed that students with mild and complicated disabilities will be full-fledged members of classes, with a heterogeneous mix of their peers without dis-

abilities. One of the principals clearly stated this: "We place all students with disabilities in general education." It is just expected—a clear indication that there is a shared commitment to inclusion, as this is a stark contrast to most districts in which there are some students who are included, some who receive pullout instruction, and some who are self-contained. It is just expected at Sugar Corner that students with disabilities are an authentic part of general education.

The third core principle to the shared definition of inclusion is that inclusion is a matter of teachers and paraprofessionals working together. One teacher explained, "Inclusion is possible because we [the teaching team] work and depend on each other." This sentiment was echoed by teachers, paraprofessionals, principals, and district administrators. It is clear that there is a culture and expectation that teams support students, both with and without disabilities, together. While the skill of teams to co-plan and co-teach varies, we find a common understanding that staff members need each other and work together to problem solve and provide services for students with disabilities within the general-education classroom. This means that it is not the sole responsibility of the special educators to include students, nor is the general educator alone to figure out how to include students with complicated learning needs. The special-education director summed up this key principle: "The staff here has embraced the reality that in order to reach all students, inclusion depends on teams of adults working together."

The final shared principle of inclusion at Sugar Corner is that the provision of inclusive services for students with disabilities is *not* a special program or a stand-alone initiative. One of the most powerful examples of bridge leadership in this district is that including students with disabilities has moved from its own initiative in the late 1980s and early 1990s to becoming a lens or guiding philosophy through which other initiatives are implemented. For example, Sugar Corner became a Reading First district. This meant that they blended their inclusive philosophy with Reading First implementation by using special-education and general-education teachers to implement heterogeneous literacy. This was again a stark contrast to many other Reading First schools and districts in that during Reading First implementation moved to more ability groups with students with disabilities receiving literacy either outside the general-education classroom or clustered together within the classroom. The Reading First initiative provided a powerful example of how inclusion has transcended being seen as its own initiative. In the words of the Reading First coach, "Inclusion is not a separate initiative; it is a part of all initiatives. It is part of the fabric of how we do things."

INCLUSION GOES BEYOND THE STUDENTS: INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE AND NORMS FOR STAFF

Typically, the dialogue about inclusion in schools centers around students and issues of access and belonging. Yet Sugar Corner takes this traditional perspective to another, more panoramic, level. The school culture and climate established by the staff serve as models for the students who enter the school doors each day. In order to establish a genuine, and lasting, inclusive school community, Sugar Corner has collaborated over the years to develop a professionalism that is grounded in a trust-laden, democratic approach, a commitment of solidarity to put students first, and a real respect for the value of each individual employee.

Joan, the elementary literacy coach at Sugar Corner, summarized the overarching feeling of democracy when she expressed, "The key people are everybody; anybody can be replaced." No one person holds the power to build a successful inclusive environment; the responsibility and glory belong to a collective all. Of course, to develop and maintain such a "democratic" setting, school leaders must establish structures and systems that allow this kind of collective work to take place. The Superintendent of Schools at Sugar Corner sees his primary roles as facilitator, relationship builder, and communicator; he steers clear of adopting a more authoritative persona. He carries and communicates a genuine trust in his staff as he provides them with the power and resources to make decisions that impact students' lives and learning. Educators feel the presence of a safety net, which encourages them to take risks and try their best without a fear of failure. This freedom to step outside of the box has empowered the staff to enact real change to the benefit of their student body. One administrator captured this unwavering support when she commented that, "The teachers have to live with a decision they make. I'm good with it, as long as they are."

A skeptic could question such blind faith. However, the reality is simple. Every staff member at Sugar Corner is committed, to the core, to do what is best for their students and community. Through the selective hiring process and self-weeding out by those not committed to the common cause of inclusion, the staff who remain at Sugar Corner is solid in its conviction. Equipped with internally and externally derived confidence and a freedom to strive for presumably unattainable goals, the Sugar Corner staff comes together cohesively to make important decisions about curricula, professional development, and learning. The driving force behind all decisions that serve as the beacon for change is how best to serve each and every student.

Systems are in place at the district, building, and team level to offer the structure and opportunity for educators to make informed and cooperative decisions. A district-level steering committee, with representation across multiple content areas, grades, and professional groups, meets regularly

to analyze data, with the goal of informing instruction and guiding professional development. With so many stakeholders at the table, consensus isn't always going to be immediate. Yet everyone present has been empowered to have a voice and to be heard. They decide collectively, so all take ownership of actions, successes, and failures. As staff members stated, "We work together, whatever it takes. We put a couple of heads together and that is just the way we do it. We don't let things become an obstacle. We bring it to the table and are open and honest." Sugar Corner has groomed a unique, open forum, which is not necessarily the norm in other school districts across the country.

The commitment to work together goes well beyond established committees and has formed co-teaching teams. Teachers put a lot of pressure and expectations upon themselves to succeed for their students. They feel genuine support from their co-workers and will seek out time for sharing, empathy, and brainstorming solutions to never-ending challenges. When there is a need to meet, these professionals make the choice to come together. It is not uncommon to see teachers and paraprofessionals voluntarily meeting early in the morning before school or staying well past dark for professional study groups and to plan the differentiated instruction that they feel is crucial for their students' success. The Sugar Corner staff expressed that they are fortunate to be part of a unique culture, which is centered upon one common goal of student inclusion and belonging. By holding steadfast to this collective ideal, the school staff has itself formed a culture that has bonded individuals together in a professionally and personally respectful manner.

When discussing the staff of Sugar Corner, it is essential to the understanding of this community to realize that each and every employee is valued and openly appreciated. This statement can be cliché, but in this district, it is a reality. The administration communicates this sentiment through inclusive and differentiated professional development, meaningful recognition, and everyday interactions. When professional development is planned, the needs of paraprofessionals and other noninstructional staff are always considered equally to the needs of teachers. Workshops that provide stress relief are offered; and on some days, paraprofessionals and staff alternate cooking for each other as a means of expressing gratitude. At every board meeting, the superintendent takes time to recognize different factions of the school community, such as bus drivers and custodial staff; no one group goes unrecognized.

This perspective of inclusion among the staff is so ingrained that it permeates everyday interactions and communications. Walking through the halls of the school, interactions between teachers, administrators, custodians, cafeteria workers, and office staff is routine. There is an unspoken feeling of teamwork and camaraderie that is difficult to express. Adults model

an inclusive community on a daily basis as interactions in the workplace characterized by eye contact, greetings by name, and personal warmth are commonplace and expected. Moreover, when describing the key leaders in the district, the superintendent listed administrators, department coordinators, and custodians in the same breath. It is evident that he equally values the impact of leadership in instruction, building cleanliness, and safety; all are necessary to establish a school community that is welcoming and inclusive for all.

A school culture that is grounded in striving for inclusion for all students has to be centered in a similar professional community, one that embodies and serves as an exemplar. If a staff were to be divided, autocratic, and plagued by conflicting values and agendas, important decisions for student inclusion would never be resolved. Furthermore, a fissure would exist between staff and students, as adults would be trying to sell an attitude or belief that they don't live by in their own personal and professional lives. The only way that authentic inclusion can exist is if it is deeply ingrained in the norm of the school culture as a whole. Through a shared trust, empowerment, and common vision, Sugar Corner's staff is one that carries within its core a deep-seated purpose and appreciation for all members of its special school community, both children and adults alike.

"WE CAN'T IMAGINE ANY OTHER WAY"

Inclusion at Sugar Corner has gradually become a part of the fabric of this school community. As one staff member succinctly expressed, "Inclusion means a way of life; it is a complete mindset. It is a community effort, and these are just our kids." The change began in the late 1980s when Sugar Corner began to bring back their highest-needs special-education students from out-of-district programs. Although the movement started as "back-door inclusion," it has now become the norm at Sugar Corner to look at each student as an individual, not a label or statistic.

The superintendent currently sets the tone and provides the political and financial muster to allow inclusion to thrive. There is no set school policy or established procedures forcing this school district to provide an inclusive setting for all students. It is done because over time, educators have learned that it is the right thing to do. Through his everyday actions and decisions, the superintendent ensures that "Every student is treated and educated equally in every classroom." When looking at the co-teaching and inclusive strategies and resources that are necessary to educate all students, he doesn't ask, "Is this costing us more?" At this juncture in the district's evolution, the staff has now developed a shared commitment to provide whatever services and instruction are necessary to meet the needs

of all of their community's students. There is no price that can be put on a child's emotional, personal, and academic potential. They realize that it is a priceless endeavor, with immeasurable rewards.

Each student at Sugar Corner is valued as an individual and looked at through an able lens. A student teacher remarked how she felt this school culture was so unique as compared to other districts in which she had observed or spent time as a preservice teacher. She shared that team meetings about students at Sugar Corner are characterized by dialogue about each child's potential, not his or her disability. She felt that this holistic, sanguine perspective was rare. In a time when schools are struggling to meet state and federal standards and are strapped with financial constraints, the typical conversation can easily become skewed away from the priority of individual students and toward the minutia that regularly bogs down and binds our country's school systems. This commitment to focus on the child becomes more vivid when one considers the district's approach toward new students.

The elementary principal spoke passionately about the school's unspoken policy toward new students who enroll in their building. "All students who walk in the door have equal access to everything." Although records from previous schools can be helpful, they have learned to look beyond the data. They give the child a fresh start and allow their professional staff the time to identify for themselves the student's special strengths and challenges. The goal is to provide each child with equal access to the curriculum and to create a sense of belonging for every child regardless of any past history, labels, challenges, or program placements.

It is perhaps most evident that inclusion has become the norm when you take a moment to consider the Sugar Corner students' attitudes toward each other. It is not uncommon for students to offer teachers and paraprofessionals advice on how to best assist or interact with a peer with special needs. They look out for each other and have come to understand their differences and appreciate their commonalities. One student with special needs who graduated has recently returned to Sugar Corner to work as a custodian. He came back to an environment that provided him with a strong peer network and gave him a legitimate sense of accomplishment and self-confidence. Too often students who struggle academically or have special needs feel alienated and detached from their school community. The term *home* can be defined as a refuge, a place in which one's affections are centered on a location associated with achieving one's goal (dictionary.com). This one young man's story demonstrates how the inclusive model at Sugar Corner has become, in every sense of the word, a true *home* for its students.

It is only when asked to reflect upon the history of the school's progress that staff and administrators can appreciate the changes over time. Presenting a historical perspective, one administrator expressed that "Inclusion is expected now; I don't have to champion it anymore." A school psychologist

offered, "At this point, inclusion is natural for us. You don't ever hear, 'they shouldn't be here.' It just happens now." It has become an ingrained part of this school culture to think of instruction only through an inclusive lens, as they see each student as just another learner. The literacy coach probably expressed this philosophy best when she echoed the sentiments of all of her colleagues. In Sugar Corner, "A child is a child is a child."

A FINAL WORD

A compelling part of the experience in Sugar Corner is that the work to create and maintain a deeply inclusive district is not the work of one heroic, charismatic leader leading the charge alone. It is a commitment by many in the community, which is spearheaded, supported, and pushed by a number of school leaders. In looking at the historical transformation that has taken place within the Sugar Corner community, it seems clear that a real example of bridge leadership is shining through. Over the years, leadership took on many forms as a few initial believers stayed true to the ultimate prize of inclusion. At first, change may have been championed by leaders in positions of authority who took the first brave steps to bring back their students and created a place where all children could not only belong, but thrive. Thanks to the never-ending commitment and tenacity of these first few, a lasting culture of inclusion was set in motion. And how does this culture of belonging that seeks equity, access, and justice for all continue in the face of challenging economic and political times? The answer is clear: the torch has been passed on. This is a powerful example of bridge leadership in that the work and commitment has been spread from a committed few to the staff and community at-large.

The vision of a school community defined by its unwavering dedication to inclusion has become so intrinsic in the culture of Sugar Corner that there is no longer just a few who venture forth; every single member of this school family is invested in the ideal they have set for their community. It is all they now know. Bridge leadership has been actualized when the intense commitment to extinguish inequity not only becomes the status quo but can be tangibly recognized through legitimate and purposeful change (Merchant & Soho, 2006). The initial effort of select leaders becomes the seed to impaction the many. It seems that Sugar Corner has achieved what most schools and communities merely discuss and plan. They have taken action; and they have done so extensively in both duration and depth, causing what was once a significant, community-altering change to become a way of life. As a result, everyone is valued and enjoys equality in place and importance.

For this community, inclusion is not an edict, a written policy, or only a philosophical concept that is limited to intellectual appreciation; champi-

oned by collective leaders, it is now just their way of being. In its most successful form, bridge leadership permeates the walls and souls of Sugar Corner. It is leadership that has been taken on by the people, for the people.

As measured by the percentage of students with disabilities who are educated outside the general education classroom for 60% or more of the school day. This includes students who are educated in self-contained special-education classrooms, self-contained special-education schools, or are pulled out of general education for the vast majority of the school day.

NOTE

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