

# Making Connections

## Poverty, Policy, and Practice



**This guide contains a step by step process and associated activities to promote social inclusion in school communities**

## Enhancing Commitment To Social Inclusion



The material in this guide is presented to enhance commitment to the ongoing development of socially inclusive school communities.

School community vision and values documents often include statements such as:

*“We are committed to ensuring that our school community will cater effectively and equally for all families and students regardless of their social and economic circumstances; their religious beliefs; their background; gender; or their physical abilities.”*

*“We are committed to ensuring that all students will have maximum opportunity to realize their individual potential, and to achieve success in their learning.”*

The Meeting Point project has developed this guide to assist school communities in this commitment to ensuring access and success for each of their students – the prime focus of social inclusion within education.

In presenting this guide an invitation is extended to explore or revisit the ways in which policies and practices in school communities contribute to achieving the goal of social inclusion, with a particular focus on the economic dimensions; in other words, the ways in which school communities might best respond to the social and economic circumstances of families.

The material also refers implicitly to the ways in which practices and even policies in school communities might inadvertently work against achieving this goal.

## Moving From Policies To Practices



Socially inclusive school communities understand that policies aimed at building social inclusion are important. They also understand that socially inclusive practices are even more important. The role of staff members is pivotal in the linking of policy and practice, a reality that should form the basis of ongoing professional learning within the school community.

Consequently, such school communities understand that the ways in which the Principal and leaders set priorities, the focus of the classroom teacher and the attitudes of the office and administrative staff must all reflect a *collective commitment* to social inclusion, for the school community to claim authenticity.

In simple terms, such school communities understand that this amounts to “practising what you preach”. It is one thing to say the school community promotes social inclusion, but the reality of how a student and family are treated will either enable or hinder this process.

In committing to a goal such as, “*the authentic inclusion of all students and their families regardless of their social and economic circumstances*”, then this goal will be reflected in the ways in which the school community makes efforts to be aware of the social and economic realities of its families, organizes all activities, collects fees and determines policies on affordability of programs.

## Step 1: Knowing Your Community



A simple data gathering exercise can be helpful for engaging the school community.

A school community aiming to be inclusive establishes first a clear understanding of who constitutes its population. **Activity 1 (Who Is In Our School Community?)** helps explore the diverse composition of the school community. The headings on this sheet are not meant to be exhaustive, and local knowledge may suggest the need for additional headings or indicators. For example, the distance families live from school community, and methods of transport, are factors that can negatively impact on low-income families.

From this data an understanding can be developed of the financial constraints and pressures facing some families, and also the extent to which such pressures exist within the total school community. The results from such data gathering can sometimes lead to surprises and new insights for all. This in turn may challenge practice and policy.

If it becomes clear, for example, that there is a significant number of families living in poverty, planned curriculum activities (such as excursions and swimming programs), and even extra-curricula activities (such as casual dress days) may need to be reviewed, reduced in cost and frequency, or subsidized in some way.

It is suggested that a broad cross-section of the school community be involved in the data-gathering, and that the involvement of local community agencies may enrich the exercise, as their workers can often contribute additional insights about the community. Again, the role of all staff members is vital in such data gathering, including personnel such as office workers who are frequently the first point of contact with families who may be experiencing financial hardship or other wellbeing needs.

## *Step 2: Establishing Shared Understandings*



It is critical that everyone acts out of common understandings when it comes to operating in an inclusive way. Unhelpful and distressing situations can occur when it is assumed that non-participation is out of choice or lack of interest. Such situations can be avoided by prior discussion to develop shared understandings about barriers to inclusion.

Every program or activity within a school community impacts in some way on all members. To establish inclusive policies and to ensure inclusive practice, all members of the school community need to be involved.

It is counter-productive, for example, for one member or one group from the school community to plan activities involving cost to families, assuming that those who can't pay will be subsidized by the Principal or Bursar, when no such arrangement exists.

Data gathering in Activity 1 could inform discussion where staff meet to gather insights. **Activity 2 (Poverty Assumptions)** further supports this exploration as it is an opportunity for them to meet together to discuss and share their values, beliefs and insights about the needs of low income families.

From this process an agreed and supported statement can develop, detailing the shared understanding of inclusion within the school community.

## Step 3: Reviewing The Costs Of Schooling



Having developed a common understanding of the composition, needs and realities of families, and developed a shared understanding of inclusion, the school community can now establish a review process. It is useful to synchronize this process within the school improvement review cycle.

It can also be useful to gather together a picture of just exactly how much it costs to attend the school. School communities that have been successful in operating inclusively have found such a picture to sometimes reveal surprising insights, which in turn have led to reforming or re-directing priorities and practices within the program.

**Activity 3 (Reviewing The Costs of Schooling)** assist in this process. It helps to provide a more accurate picture of how much families are expected to pay, for each year of schooling and the total amount across all years of schooling

Some obvious questions immediately emerge from this data: *Is there anything listed here that is an unnecessary expense for any family, regardless of income? Are we overdoing certain activities? What steps can we take to support families who may not be able to participate in the programs listed? How can we ensure total participation in our programs?*

## ***Step 4: Planning Ongoing Practices***



The process of reviewing the costs of schooling may enable a school community to change some of its practices or put in place new initiatives.

At this point it might be helpful for members of the school community to explore the framework provided by **Activity 4 (The Social Inclusion at School Checklist)**. This helps ensure that school activities and procedures are sensitive to the circumstances of low-income families and enable all students to participate fully in school life. It also contains suggestions of how school communities may conduct regular audits of policies and practices.

Such audits need not involve the whole community, but as part of the school improvement and review cycle may become part of the work of a leadership team or a Student Wellbeing Core Team.

Exploring connections with local community agencies may also assist in the auditing and planning of ongoing programs and practices.

### ***In Summary***

The overall aim is that a school community can feel confident that, when it comes to serving the needs of low-income families, their policies are congruent with their practices. A school community, in other words, that has made the connection between poverty, policy and practice.

**Developed from material written by Carmel and Gerard Stafford  
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