Inclusion: The ASH Story

By Richard Spradling

When I became head of the American School of The Hague (ASH) in 2005, I followed an entry process based on a tip from my dear friend and colleague the late Bob Sills, who had himself picked it up at the Harvard Graduate School of Education from Professor Barry Jentz. During my first six months or more at ASH, I conducted an extensive series of interviews with nearly all of the stakeholders of the school community—teachers, support staff, custodians, parents, students, client organizations, local government officials—you name the group and I met with them. The goal was to build a deep understanding of the new school I was joining.

One of the themes I heard over and over again (even more than "why did they choose you for this job??) was: Is it clear who our clientele is? I came to think of this theme as "whom do we serve"? There were subsets to the theme, I discovered: Are we American or International? Do we provide English support or expect applicants to have a reasonably good command of the language for admission? Should we serve even younger children with a developmental curriculum? And, perhaps most concerning was the question, Do we serve students with learning difficulties or remain more selective ("college preparatory" is the somewhat smug euphemism) and deny admission to applicants who present more than very mild learning support issues?

This last question came in part because, like almost all international schools, we already had unintentionally admitted students with learning disabilities, often because these learning issues didn't manifest themselves until some years after the student had been accepted at a young age, or perhaps because the learning issues were masked by language difficulties for applicants for whom English was not the first language, or even because parents had withheld vital information during the application process because they feared we would not accept their child. As history often demonstrates, it was a specific incident or case that changed the storyline, in this instance ASH's perception of students with learning needs. Some years later, when I was studying how the International School of Brussels had become probably the most inclusive international school in the world, I was told that it all began with a board member with a student who had profound learning issues. As is frequently the case, the road to a significant change doesn't begin with a grand philosophical epiphany, some awakening thunderclap of revelation. No, big changes usually begin with a small action or event, that only later is recognized as the catalyst for change.

And so it was with ASH. During my first year, the school had applications from one particular family with two children. (I started to mention the family's nationality and employer, but, actually, that shouldn't make a darn bit of difference, should it?) The elder child was going into our high school and easily met our entrance requirements. The younger child was a boy of Elementary School age who was in a wheelchair and presented several physical and cognitive developmental delays. If ever an event moved our thinking from the abstract to the concrete, the enrollment application of this lovely young man was ASH's crystallizing moment. After considerable discussion and much soul-searching, we decided we could not accept the young man into our school, that we simply did not have the program to support his needs. So the family enrolled the daughter at ASH and the son in a special school in our area. This painful decision on our part moved us to rethink our present and our future, to seek a clearer answer to that question of "whom do we serve"?

ASH Special Education students in Home Economics.

At the annual retreat of ASH Board of Trustees the following August (the beginning of my second year as head of ASH), I told the board that I would be spending the coming year investigating this theme with the staff and community. During that year (2006-2007), the staff and leadership team brainstormed all of these false dichotomies and concluded that we wanted to be both American and International, to support both English language competency and English-language acquisition, and that we wanted to expand our services to children younger than four-year-olds (eventually adding preschool and child-care programs for students from a few months old upward).

Most critical, our discussion revealed a widespread (thought not unanimous) interest from staff and parents in supporting the needs of a much wider range of learning difficulties in principle, though there were concerns about ASH's readiness to provide appropriate support. It seemed clear that our school community had the will to become much more inclusive, but that it wasn't sure it had the capacity and competency to do so. Some teachers felt they didn't have the necessary skills and techniques to support students with special learning needs, while others were concerned other students or parents might complain that they were not giving enough attention to their "normal" child. A few expressed concern that the school would "throw open the doors" and their classrooms would be flooded by students with extreme behavioral issues that would overwhelm the teacher. We felt it was vital to openly address these very real and legitimate fears and show our willingness to help teachers grow to be more inclusive. Otherwise, there is a very real risk of squandering good will and giv-

ing the appearance of "the administration doesn't know what happens in classrooms." Groups of teachers and administrators visited or spoke with the few other international schools where we heard about more inclusive programs to see what they were doing and how they got there. At the end of that year of investigation (spring 2007), we shared the results of our study with the entire school community in various meetings and communications.

I stated our conclusion clearly: ASH had the desire and belief that it could and should serve a much greater range of students with special needs, that ASH could be *both* university preparatory *and* inclusive of students with special needs. Importantly, we believed the benefits would extend far beyond these students to the entire school community. Equally important, however, was the honest and transparent acknowledgement that we needed to learn a lot more about specifics such as inclusion models (1:1, clustering, co-teaching), program changes (new courses, even a new diploma), physical resources (rooms, furniture, equipment), personnel (more learning support teachers, educational psychologist, learning therapists), professional development, admissions procedures, and—of course—costs and funding.

At the end of that school year (May 2007), we presented the Board of Trustees with our findings: our concept that learning support was just another kind of diversity for our school, and our belief that our community wanted to be more inclusive but needed support to build our ability to serve a wider student population. We stated the simple request we heard from parent applicants: "ASH is this amazing school for two of our family's children, and we just want our third child to enjoy this great learning and social environment." That didn't seem to much to ask. Our presentation to the Board included an initial four-year timeline for how ASH could move from its current narrow definition of student admission to a goal of substantially greater inclusion in several years' time, without major changes in our tuition and fee structure. The Trustees, exhibiting the strategic vision that has marked our governance structure the past decade, gave us the go-ahead to implement the four-year plan, with periodic reviews and progress reports to secure continued support. I should note that the ASH Board never discussed specifics of personnel, or policies, or even costs. For the most part, they gave our Leadership Team authority to work out these details within the acceptable tuition range of successive budget approvals year after year.

Middle School Special Ed student Dave helps G1 students with IT, the American School of The Hague (ASH).

We shared the Trustees' support for this vision with staff, students, and parents, indicated that we were committed to making this vision a reality, and then never looked back.

In the nine years since that board voiced its support for inclusion to the school community, we undertook the following series of steps (roughly in order) to become an inclusive international school:

- Provided frequent, regular, and targeted professional development for teachers and instructional support staff,
- developed a job description for a coordinator of learning support,
- hired a Coordinator of Learning Support with a strong background in the field from the United States but also with international school experience to guide us going forward [and I cannot stress the importance of this role and the person holding the position; we were fortunate to have a very capable and respected educator guide our efforts],
- began regular collaboration with other international schools sharing our vision through the Next Frontier: Inclusion movement,
- made initial trials of various learning support approaches (1:1 assistants, 1:1 teachers, clustering, etc.),
- clarified the needs of those students with special needs that we could serve and those we could *not* (students who would behaviorally disrupt the learning of other students),
- developed improved admissions procedures to assess applications from students with learning needs, grouping students into three levels of need (mild, moderate, and intensive),
- determined a general understanding of our school's learning support capacity, which we set at roughly 12-13% of the total student population, aligned with currently accepted estimates of the proportion of students with special learning needs in the general population,
- led by the LS Coordinator, developed a longer, multi-year Learning Support Vision (extending the initial four-year timeline),
- hired additional learning support teachers in elementary, middle, and high school,
- developed a new ASH General Diploma (a fourth alternative, adding to our ASH Academic Diploma, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate options) and secured approval of this new diploma by the Board of Trustees,
- created and recruited the position of Educational Psychologist as a member of staff,

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- extended speech and language support throughout the school,
- expanded our learning support strategies to try more clustering, push-in, and co-teaching,
- began admitting one or two students with intensive learning needs in our lower Elementary School with 1:1 support,
- recruited learning support teachers with strong special education training and experience,
- created (in Middle School) our first self-contained special education class for students with profound cognitive delays,
- integrated the Middle School Special Education (MSSE) students in regular classrooms and activities as much as possible,
- initiated a High School Special Education self-contained class, including a life-skills curriculum and activities allowing appropriate integration into academic and specialist classes and extra-curricular activities,
- hired an Occupational Therapist (OT) to provide services on campus, and
- began an Elementary School Special Education class to complete the continuum of special education services across all three academic divisions.

That brings us to where ASH is now, but it is important to know that there is *no one right path* to becoming more inclusive, or even how inclusive a school should be. You move forward in fits and starts, trial and error, ebb and flow, in part because our student populations change so much every year that you have to adjust to the students that you get, not have a fixed, unchangeable approach that creates a new set of excluded students because you weren't able to keep modifying and improving your approaches. And in part because the field of learning support evolves and new ideas arise.

As an example, an important key was helping classroom teachers improve skills in documenting learning support students. Our Learning Support Coordinator worked closely with our Student Support Teams to help nudge departments out of the rut of enumerating or complaining about problems with certain students, and to focus instead on developing specific teaching strategies that might be more effective. The Coordinator showed teachers how to document the problems, choose a couple of techniques to try for a fixed period of time, and then to document the success or failure of those approaches. This approach helped in parent communication as well, so that parents (especially those who might be in denial about their child's needs) could see that teachers were actively seeking improvements, providing consistency across all subjects and grade levels, and allowing detailed record-keeping of the learning strategies that worked, or didn't. Above all else, this created an atmosphere that was solution-focused rather than problem-focused in a clear and systematic manner.

High School Special Education students teaching Early Childhood students at the American School of The Hague.

Don't look to any school as having all the answers; none of us do. Even with the most robust of learning support programs, there will still be misjudgments. One student we took in Middle School turned out to have such increasingly disruptive behavioral issues that we did not feel he could be successful in our High School; indeed, behavioral disorders are the most difficult to assess as to severity and to accommodate. We are debating how best to serve another group of students with special learning needs—the highly gifted. We have been learning more about this small group of students (1-2% of the population), their needs, how to identify them, and how we can better serve their need for challenge and stimulation from like peers. And we are far from having uniform implementation of differentiation and accommodation by all classroom teachers.

We have learned that not every teacher shares the vision of inclusion. Co-teaching, expectations of differentiation, and supporting identified accommodations for students are hard. A few teachers have chosen to leave our school if their own vision isn't aligned with ours, a choice we respect. We don't hire teachers who only want to be International Baccalaureate Diploma Program Higher Level specialists; we hire teachers who can be equally comfortable (and even more committed) to supporting students with learning needs. This has changed our recruiting practices somewhat. But more interesting is that ASH now attracts great teachers who want to work in an inclusive environment, who want to share their passion for teaching and subject matter with as many students as possible. Equally important, our school is now able to attract great teachers who themselves may have children with special learning needs who previously would have had to return to their home countries or refrain from applying to us because there would have been no learning support for their child.

We have had no family withdrawals or transfers based on our decision to become an inclusive school (at least none

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a series of student incidents and a breakdown in the old disciplinary system. With the help of Martin and Tsila, we designed a process for involving the whole community in recreating our approach to discipline. Over about three months, we worked as a large group and in small task forces, culminating in a day of sharing our findings. More than a third of the staff chose to give up Saturdays for this work. Principal Jonathan Long then distilled the findings into a new system, appointing two new coordinating positions within the school in response to staff thoughts and suggestions.

Martin and Tsila returned in July 2015, this time to support school leaders in designing and holding the space for the staff retreat. Leadership of sessions passed around the team. We have some now-familiar traditions: an initial large, circle gathering and check in with each other; regular Open Space time for new staff initiatives to emerge; as well as a careful closing of each retreat with an opportunity to reflect on all we have learned and experienced.

We are growing significantly in two primary ways: a shift in the internal conversation towards increased transparency and authenticity; and a growing awareness of the shared responsibility at all levels for enacting the school's vision. In a beautiful sense, the change has come organically and subtly, without great proclamations or fanfare. We are seeing a corresponding increase in student initiative, with proposals for a Sustainability Committee, a TEDx conference, and a student task force to research and analyze the structure of our education program and curriculum in comparison to peer schools, to name a few examples. Much of this momentum connects directly to the emergence of a sharper community identity forged around a clear vision for education—a development of profound value for committed educators. ■

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that stated that reason), even though there are always a few parents who don't think a school can do justice to both learning support and rigorous academics. It certainly helps that we have remained highly focused on our programs with external examinations (like AP and IB) and that we do measure ourselves with external assessments such as the ISA, MAP, and SAT. Rather than our test results having dropped as a result of expansion of learning support, our average scores on these examinations have remained in the highest levels of all international schools. It's a shame that such comparisons have to be made, but we believe that it is useful to periodically show that inclusion is not a zero-sum game.

On the contrary, we have found that being more inclusive is win-win (and I get precious few of those in my role as head of school). Demand for places at our school has never been higher, with waiting lists in many grades. Our client organizations (corporate, diplomatic, NGO, and governmental organizations alike) are pleased that their option of employees to send to The Hague is greater than before, giving them greater flexibility in personnel assignments. Word of mouth (any school's best advertising) about ASH is positive with both prospective parents and prospective teachers. Most critically, the impact of the integration of our students, regardless of their learning needs, on our community's ethos is immeasurably rewarding. I specifically do not want to describe these rewarding student encounters as special events, like trained creatures attracting attention. Our expansion of the student population has simply increased the exposure of *all* students to greater diversity, just as we all find outside of school. And that exposure has given all of our students opportunities to demonstrate our core values of respect, integrity, empathy, communication, and responsibility. Our increased inclusiveness provides almost daily occasions to exhibit and live these traits. This was expressed with maturity and eloquence by our student graduation speaker a couple of years ago. Jaco, the commencement speaker, spoke of how his view of life had been transformed by Habib, a student with severe learning and physical difficulties who maintained a positive and upbeat attitude despite all the obstacles placed in his path. Jaco's description of his brotherhood with Habib moved the audience, with many a tear shed. I could not have been more proud, nor could I have found stronger evidence of how inclusion provides opportunities for all of us to grow.

Personally, I think inclusion as a feature of international schools is an idea whose time has already come. With a relatively few exceptions, I believe that international schools accept the premise that they should be more inclusive; they just need some guidance and direction on how to become so. We hope our experience, which itself stands on the shoulders of other schools who undertook this path before us, will provide a leg up (if you will excuse a slightly mixed metaphor) to schools that have the will and are seeking that collegial assistance. We are in this all together. ■

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