

Inclusive Practice Award 2011

The Governor's Council on Disabilities & Special Education has established an annual award to be given at the Annual Statewide Special Education Conference each February. This award recognizes outstanding educators who work to ensure students with disabilities have the opportunity for an inclusive education with their peers as part of the general education curriculum. Nominations are made by parents, students and educators. Nominees for the Inclusive Practice Award are individuals or teams who demonstrate of the following:

- Involving parents as equal partners in their child's education
- Encouraging student's self-determination
- Emphasizing inclusive practices amongst peers and others
- Providing leadership in sharing the values of inclusion
- Designing support services that enable access to the regular curriculum
- Modifying programs or curricula as needed

The 2011 winner of the Inclusive Practice Award is the team at Sterling Elementary School in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District. The team includes: Connie Best, Connie Ferguson, Gail Frasher, Carolyn Hitzler, Amy Hogue, Nancy Kimball, Barbara McNinch, Brenda Moody, Bethany Nyboer, Trina Uvaas, and Susie Ward. The Team at Sterling Elementary decided that all Sterling area children could be served at the local elementary school. In the past, students with intensive needs were bused to a neighboring community to attend an intensive needs program. The Sterling Elementary Team worked diligently to cultivate the belief that all Sterling children should be able to learn together at their community school.

This passionate belief evoked feelings of protection, a strong sense of community, and a desire to expand the school program to serve the needs of all children in our community. Now Sterling Elementary families of students with special needs know that their children are wanted, loved, and supported at Sterling Elementary School.

Data on individual students reveals that the Team's effort to promote student independence has been hugely successful. This is evidenced by the number of students who entered Sterling's program requiring full time 1 to 1 assistance in a self-contained setting, but who now experience success in a main-streamed environment as part of their daily schedule.

The development of self advocacy skills on the part of Sterling students has required explicit instruction, just-in-time coaching, and consistent responses on the part the adults on the Team. This work has allowed students new freedom to experience the school setting with fewer limitations and greater success in steadily increasing measures, which has promoted an inclusive environment that promotes each student's self-determination.

The Council would like to recognize the other 2011 Inclusive Practice Nominees. Please read their information below:

Rick and Jennie Asiala from Kiana School, Kiana

Mr. Asiala is a teacher and Ms. Asiala is an aide at Kiana School in Kiana, Alaska. They moved to Alaska for the 2009-10 school year. Mr. and Ms. Asiala act as role models in providing whatever degree of support a student needs to maintain in the regular classroom, even if it means having the option of leaving the classroom to ‘regroup’ and re-entering when ready. Mr. and Ms. Asiala provide support to the classroom teachers and act as a ‘buffer’ in areas where the student needs it. They also have the skills and ability to provide varying levels of support and read cues from the student. Communication with families is key in the way this team operates. They maintain open communication via phone, fax, and email as needed, well before and beyond the IEP process. The team is very responsive- being able to adjust supports according to the fluctuating needs of students. Mr. Asiala ensures that supports are available to students with intensive needs not only in school, but as needed for them to successfully participate in extra-curricular activities. The team recognizes that providing supports in a way that also fosters social skills and peer relationships is vital to lifelong success. They recognize that every day is a new day and resiliently follow through with this philosophy. The students know that when they leave, they have another day tomorrow to strive for success and that they will have support of the Special Education Teacher and aide to do so.

Tricia Barnett from CyberLynx K-12 Correspondence School, Wasilla

Ms Barnett has been teaching for 26 years. This is her 6th year working at CyberLynx Correspondence School. Ms. Barnett’s teaching philosophy is “teaching is about relationships, empowerment, respect and partnership”. She is a model of parental involvement and empowerment. She is proactive in ensuring that parents are in contact continually with the staff at CyberLynx program to keep the student engaged and successful. Ms. Barnett accepts nothing less than provision of educational services with full inclusion. Everyone is welcome and all are included in the school community by virtue of collaborative planning and modeling the acceptance of diversity on all levels. Ms. Barnett believes that in order for her students to be successful, they must be in full partnership in the process along with their parents. This partnership empowers the students to be actively involved in the selection of subjects, electives and curriculum. When something is not working, the team, which always includes the student, addresses it immediately and makes whatever changes are needed. Through Tricia’s leadership and empowerment, students and families have input on the development, formation and implementation of school activities that are designed around needs, abilities and desires of students and their families. Under Ms. Barnett’s leadership and direction, all group activities at the CyberLynx Wasilla office are designed to allow for differentiation in instruction so that students of all ages and ability levels are planned for and included in a meaningful way.

Bartlett High School Team in Anchorage: Valance Barber, Georgia Berry, Dianne Dabrowski, Lindsey Honemann, Warren Rhodes, and Stacey Woodward.

Bartlett 9th grade academy has been involved in full inclusive practices this year. The Language Arts teachers and the Special Education Collaborators have put forth many hours of training time to enhance the education of all 9th grade students. The teachers plan activities to support the process of engaging students through various ways such as, various student relationships, group projects, classroom presentations, and peer-to-peer support. The teams collaborate on a daily, weekly and monthly basis to evaluate student needs. This has enabled a majority of our 9th grade Special Education students to successfully access the general education curriculum with or

without accommodations and/or modifications. The team has incorporated a master schedule to allow a majority of special education students to access general education curriculum with support from special education staff. They also communicate on a regular basis with all 9th grade students regarding future vocational and educational goals. This interaction occurs with all students and teachers. Students are given multiple opportunities to experience success through participating in various activities in our school to strive to be better individuals in our school community. A committee has been formed to plan the expansion of inclusive practices for the 10th-12th grades in the 2011-2012 school year.

Darlene Bishop from Ladd Elementary School in Fairbanks

Ms. Bishop has been teaching for 25 years. She has taught at Ladd Elementary for the last 19 years. In 2000-2001, Ms. Bishop was a BP Teacher of Excellence. Ms. Bishop works with parents before their child enters kindergarten to help make a social story book to help children with special needs make the transition to kindergarten. She also meets with the pre-school teacher so children with disabilities can be successful in a regular education kindergarten. Ms. Bishop emails parents in the evening to remind the parent of an event or situation that will occur the following day so they can prepare their child. It is also not uncommon to receive an email with information about a positive or constructive incident that occurred that day. Ms. Bishop is an experienced educator who understands the learning styles of each student will differ from other students in her classroom but has successfully implemented instruction in her classroom so her student with "special needs" does not appear any different to other students or individuals within the school. For example, Ms. Bishop regularly changes seating for her students to allow her group to learn to communicate with other students in their class and not just their desk partners. Ms. Bishop is a valued member of the Ladd team and demonstrates her abilities through her actions. She welcomes working with other educators within the school to assist children and families with their education. She values the presence of additional educators in her room to assist a child instead of pulling the child out for direct instruction in a separate environment.

Cindy Corcoran from Badger Road Elementary in Fairbanks

Ms. Corcoran is the special education teacher in the intensive resource room at Badger Road Elementary School, where she has worked for 6 years. Inclusion in the general education classroom is an essential part of the students' day in Ms. Corcoran's classroom. All day long her students and a paraprofessional are in and out of general education classes. Students and staff see them regularly and greet students by name, a high five, a wave, or a smile. Ms. Corcoran's students participate in many school activities including a field trip to Denali National Park, the school talent show, the Christmas play and student recognition assemblies. Ms. Corcoran is persistent about finding general education teachers to include her students in their class. She meets regularly with general education teachers as part of their professional learning community. Teachers even seek her out to ask when they will get to have one of her students in their classroom. Our school philosophy and the individual philosophies of our staff make inclusion real in our building... and Ms. Corcoran is an integral part of it. Visiting persons, parents, and substitutes often mention the inclusion of special education students when they talk about our school. Candidates interviewing for transfer or new Special Education positions often mention the reputation our building has for inclusion of special needs students as the reason they want to work here.

CyberLynx Correspondence School Team in Anchorage: Sue Button, Katrina Cooper, Deanne Shiroma-Carroll, Ann Slabaugh

CyberLynx Correspondence School provides educational services to students wherever they are, including students who are incarcerated. The high school completion program focuses on recovery of missed credits and earning a high school diploma. *“CyberLynx encouraged me and has helped me have self-determination towards becoming a better student not only in achieving my high school diploma but also in learning how to move on to college and make something for myself. CyberLynx created a curriculum for me that not only fit my disability, but also my situation, as I was often transferred to different institutions.”* The CyberLynx team assesses the individual needs of the students by meeting with them either in a prison setting or in their community. Vocational education credits are required which includes volunteer work, internship, gainful employment or mentoring/shadowing work sites. Academics are tailored to meet students’ needs including their choices of coursework. Many students who are incarcerated have began a life of drugs or alcohol, the CyberLynx team keeps that into consideration when assessing their individual needs. They help the students feel successful for completing a course. The CyberLynx team has actively assisted high school students at Highland Mountain Correctional Center when no other school district was willing to educate these students. CyberLynx serves students from Spring Creek Correctional Center, Palmer Correctional Center and Mat-Su Pre-trial. They work with students wherever they are, both academically and geographically.

Michaela Kelly from Lake Hood Elementary in Anchorage

Ms. Kelly is the preschool Special Education teacher at Lake Hood Elementary. She talks with parents before the school year even begins to learn from them what special needs and resources might be needed during the school year. Ms. Kelly has arranged trainings on special issues at her school and then opened the training to all staff and parents. Ms. Kelly informs all parents that the classroom door is always open. In addition, parents are welcome to visit and can call regarding their child at any time. She takes extra time to include extended family members including grandparents, aunts/uncles, care providers, etc. Ms. Kelly has taught many children how to eat independently when no one else thought they could do it. Many teachers would not attempt this due to the huge mess that can result but that does not bother Ms. Kelly. She also teaches parents how to continue the independent feeding skills outside of school. Ms. Kelly created a reading program in her class that paired her students with older readers. The program benefited all students: new friendships were created, reading skills were practiced, and additional socialization gained. Several of the preschool students now recognize and greet their reading buddies outside of the classroom. Ms. Kelly makes an extra effort to understand each child’s needs. The extra effort Ms. Kelly takes to understand each child and their individual goals plus her creativity, flexibility, and caring nature, provide an environment for optimal learning.

Monica Charles-Leinberger from the Lower Kuskokwim School District in Bethel

Ms. Charles-Leinberger is the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) and Behavior Specialist for the Lower Kuskokwim School District. She has advocated extensively for families in her region. She is able to advocate within the District for appropriate educational services. She has assisted many families in attending the FASD Family Camp by identifying funding for them to attend. Ms. Charles-Leinberger works with the child’s team to identify needed supports

for child success in and out of school. She also provides information and training to families so that they have a better understanding of the child's needs and appropriate supports for success. Ms. Charles-Leinberger participates in IEP meetings for students and makes concrete recommendations for accommodations. She recognizes that 'yes we can' is a must have attitude in developing accommodations. She expects staff to ensure the best for her students and provides the information needed to make it happen. Ms. Charles-Leinberger also writes articles in the district and local newspapers to provide information on how to work with students affected with FASD. She also provides practical information on how to work with students affected by FASD to district staff during in-service trainings.

Janet Long from Benny Benson School in Anchorage

Ms. Long is the Special Education Chair and Transition Coordinator at Benny Benson school which is a vocational education program for high school students who need to catch up on their credits. During the summer, Ms. Long has been an intern for the Teacher Industry Externship program at the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. This experience provided her with additional skills to help students transition to adult life. Ms. Long works with students to determine their goals. She provides continuous support through encouragement, assisting in working with the students to make appointments for jobs or make contact with agencies in town to assist the students. Ms. Long is a strong advocate for the students with special needs. All students with special needs are scheduled in regular classes at Benny Benson. Ms. Long works collaboratively with the students' teachers to modify, adjust and support the students to provide an opportunity for their success. Ms. Long works with the teachers and provides them insight as to how would be best to work with her students. She is well respected for her expertise in working with students. She is creative in her approach and finds ways to meet the individual needs of the students. She communicates this effectively to the teachers.

Ruth Mandsager from Huffman Elementary in Anchorage

Ms. Mandsager is a 4th grade teacher at Huffman Elementary School, where she has taught for the last 13 years. She has two students in her class whose special education hours are served entirely in the regular classroom setting. She welcomes resource students for read/writing, social studies and science. She team teaches to double the amount of time spent helping students, giving individual attention, answering questions and doubling the fun! Ms. Mandsager has high expectations for all of her students. Each one is expected to complete all given assignments. When students understand that everyone has the same expectations, they rise to the occasion. She is a master at making on the spot modifications and always takes into account the accommodations written on each IEP. Each student has their own desk in Ms. Mandsager's room. If you were to visit this class, you would not be able to discern a difference between the students who are full time members versus those who are included. Ms. Mandsager has an unusually small room, but somehow she manages to make it work. She has allocated time each week to meet and discuss ideas, plans, and concerns. Ms. Mandsager is a master teacher. She is deserving of this recognition because she has consistently had a positive attitude towards inclusion. She is willing to share her success stories with her fellow staff members and encourages them by offering her support. She not only "takes" the time, but she "makes" the time to ensure that inclusion works.

Soldotna Elementary Team in Soldotna: Tina Gilman, Kristin Sisneros, Zita Spann

Ms. Gilman, Ms. Sisneros and Ms. Spann came together this year to create and implement a classroom program to address the needs and maximize the educational and behavioral gains of their students. Several of the students in Ms. Gilman's program are integrated throughout the day into various general education classes that they are able to participate in. Being proactive is the hallmark of this team's communication style. Whether daily notes, data collection, phone calls, formal or informal meetings, this group actively seeks input from parents for new ideas and feedback on their program, while communicating progress, successes, or any issues that require attention. By staying ahead of issues of concern and involving parents early, they successfully create a sense of partnership with parents, which lends itself to collaborative planning and problem solving where parents truly feel that they are a member of the team. In a very general sense, this team works with other teachers, as well as instructional aides, to find inclusionary opportunities for their students within the school. However, by actively pursuing this, it has helped to engrain a culture of inclusion so that it has become a very natural part of many teachers' planning process. The greatest source of support and partnership for this program comes from parents of the students. By creating and maintaining positive working relationships with families and within the school community, this program has experienced a high degree of success.

Watershed Charter School in Fairbanks

The Watershed Charter School is a new school in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District that was a brainchild of the principal, John Carlson. As part of the program, each student remains with the same teacher for 2 years. There are a maximum of 22 students in each grade's classroom. This instills a sense of familiarity and stability which is vital for special education students. The students programs are enriched with outdoor and community based activities daily. The Watershed Program has been very welcoming to special education students and their parents. Parents of children with disabilities report that they are an equal partner in the decisions made in educating their children. The staff has gone beyond what is required to make sure students with disabilities are successful in both academic and social skills. Children with disabilities are making wonderful progress as a result. The Watershed team is unique in their ability to customize the student's self advocacy and self determination skills. One child with a disability was very shy and introverted, however the school staff have been very successful in assisting him in social situations and facilitating friendships. One parent reports that even though her child was in a regular education classroom in the past, his whole curriculum was modified and he was not on grade level with his peers. This year at Watershed, only two of his grades are modified and he is achieving above average grade level scores for the first time. His teachers provide clear expectations and structure. They provide ideas that are "out of the box" that work.

Thank you to all the Special Education Teachers who work to make sure students with disabilities are included!