



Count them in Inclusion helps disabled pupils

By Damon Lee
Staff Photographer

Brian Holtzen was so successful his first year in kindergarten, his parents and teachers decided to hold him back.

Looking back on his second year, Brian's teacher, Kristi Larson, has no regrets.

"We've seen huge, tremendous growth in Brian," Larson said. "All of a sudden, Brian is walking; he's talking all the time."

Walking and talking may seem like small achievements for two years of kindergarten, but for Brian, they are the first steps in a rewarding kind of education.

Brian was born with cerebral palsy. In the past, he would have been isolated in a special-education classroom. But at Hawthorne Elementary School, he has been able to take part in a regular classroom as part of an inclusion program.

Inclusion is the latest method in the Lincoln Public Schools' special-education program. Hawthorne introduced it 2 1/2 years ago after four years of more limited integration practices.

Inclusion means different things in different schools, Larson said. For Brian, it has meant being involved in all the same activities as his classmates. Brian works on the same lessons, she said, but his objectives and a few materials are different.

The benefits of inclusion are substantial, Larson said. In separate special-education curricula, self-help skills are stressed through repetition of activities. With inclusion, students with special needs have better incentives to learn skills.

"They have their regular-education peers as models," Larson said. "They really want to do what they see the other kids doing."

Having regular-education students as peers helps with social skills, she said. Disabled students become better behaved children, especially in public.

Brian's social and physical progress is evidence of the benefits of the regular peer group, Larson said. She cited his ability to brush his teeth as simple yet significant proof of his learning.

Brian wouldn't even hold a toothbrush at first, she said. He hated going in to the boys' room to groom. But

after watching his classmates brush their teeth, he wanted to do the same. Now, Brian can brush his teeth by himself.

And although Brian's speech may sound mumbled, it has definitely improved.

"To those of us who know Brian ... we can understand him," she said. "Brian definitely talks—a lot. And a lot of times he has to be asked not to talk, which is a neat thing to do."

The benefits of inclusion reach beyond disabled students, though. Larson said the other students learned that differences were not always limiting.

Students also learn to make friends with disabled children, Larson said. This has been encouraged with a program called

Circle of Friends. With Circle of Friends, a small group of students meet with Larson and Brian and take part in special activities.

Brian's friends learn to think about his

needs, she said. They establish real friendships, rather than just trying to be helpers.

Larson said she foresaw inclusion becoming an integral part of education, and she said she would welcome the change.

"My dream is to see the labels taken away from children," she said. "That way, teachers can just be teachers."

But there is a price to pay for inclusion.

"It's twice as much work," Larson said. "I'm covering two jobs, and I'm getting paid for one."

"But the benefits are twice as rewarding," she added.

One benefit is knowing that Brian will be able to move on to first grade next year.

The adjustment to first grade might have been too much for Brian last year, Larson said, because he used to be apprehensive with new people. But making the transition with his new friends will be easier. He has been getting a head start by meeting with his future teacher the last few weeks.

First grade will be similar to kindergarten as far as inclusion is concerned, Larson said. The same opportunities will be there, along with more individualized attention because of a smaller class size.

"That will be nice for Brian," she said.

Top: Kristi Larson tries to get Brian to pick his name from two name card options.

Top right: Brian gets a head butt from classmate Scott Sweeney. Sweeney has become one of Brian's closest friends through the inclusion program and Circle of Friends.

Above: Brian takes time out to think during nap time.

Right: Lynette Snyder, a paraeducator at Hawthorne, tries to convince Brian to finish a run around the playground during physical education class. When Brian gets tired, he often gets stubborn.



Photos by
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