

Allison Hanes: Mackay Centre offers a school of empathy



ALLISON HANES, MONTREAL GAZETTE

More from Allison Hanes, Montreal Gazette ([HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/AHANES2014](http://montrealgazette.com/author/ahanes2014))

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Jacqueline Burt, left, holds Erika Ellingsen's hand after pairing up with her for a group assignment at the Mackay Centre School. *ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

At 10 years old, Jacqueline Burt has left behind her friends for a year to attend a school for children with special needs.

Jacqueline is special — but not in the way you might expect. She is a normal-functioning student attending classes with disabled children as part of the Mackay Centre School's reverse integration program.

With a push on to integrate more special needs students into regular classrooms, Mackay's program does the exact opposite. But it nevertheless demonstrates that schooling children in empathy may help make all schools truly inclusive.

Mackay and Philip Layton School, which share a facility on Décarie Blvd., are operated by the English Montreal School Board and the local health department to cater to the needs of children with hearing, visual, mobility, cognitive and communication impairments. Colourful artwork hangs in the corridors like at any school, but the hallways are extra wide, the playground is accessible, the gym is filled with adapted sports equipment and some of the signage is written in braille.

Yet every year for decades, as many as 15 students without disabilities have joined the tight-knit Mackay community. There are seven at present, including Jacqueline, a Grade 5 student from Royal Vale School, and her brother, Ethan, in Grade 3.

Applications for next year are currently being processed. How many get accepted depends on the needs of Mackay's traditional students as well as evaluations of the candidates' suitability, says school principal Patrizia Ciccarelli. The school has a responsibility to make sure the visiting students aren't being held back, she said, but they also can't be a drag on the significant resources the school has at its disposal.

"We're not looking for 100s or straight A's," she said. More important

are empathy, eagerness to participate, sociability, openness and cooperation. “We want it to be fair for everybody and more importantly, we want it to be successful.”

The students in reverse integration follow the curriculum for their grade level. But the class sizes are much smaller. And besides the teachers, there are often physiotherapists, speech pathologists, childcare workers and resource teachers present in the classroom, allowing for more one-on-one attention.

Reverse integration also gives participants the opportunity to learn things that aren't taught at regular schools. Jacqueline has learned sign language and taken a course on how to safely push a wheelchair in order to help out some of her classmates. She has even played wheelchair basketball.

“That's really fun,” she said, breaking out into a wide smile. “Sometimes people push you and sometimes you push yourself.”

But perhaps the most significant thing the reverse integration students learn are life lessons.



Asher Wolfensohn, bottom right, works on a music project with Nathaniel Enright, left, at the Mackay Centre School. *ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Asher Wolfensohn, a Grade 5 student from Akiva, a Jewish day school, says how he looks at others has changed since he started at Mackay last fall.

“Before, the first thing that came into my head was ‘He’s in a wheelchair.’ Now I look at him and say ‘He’s a nice guy,’” said the 11-year-old, who has a broad smile, sandy hair and freckles.

What Asher likes about Mackay is that “everyone gets accepted for who they are, no matter how they talk or look.” And what he’s learned is to think about others.

“I learned how to calm down and have patience for when everyone is talking,” Asher said.

His mother, Jackie Rosenhek, said her active and gregarious middle child

has undergone a transformation while attending Mackay. While some people were taken aback that they'd put Asher in a school for special needs students, she said academically he's thriving. The sports fanatic is coming home discussing world events. But more important, he is showing a newfound compassion.

"It brings out the best in him. He's usually a pretty mischievous kid but it brings out his helpful, gentle side," said Rosenhek. "He's learned to put his needs after other people's needs."

Rosenhek already knew the experience could be eye-opening. Growing up, her own sister was a reverse integration student and she recalls it having a profound effect on herself as well.

"When my sister did it, she had a friend over for a play date and we were like, 'Whoa, a kid in a wheelchair is at our house.' Once we got over the initial shock, it showed our family that kids with disabilities were kids like everybody else," she said. "I hope what he takes away from it is the ability to put himself in other people's shoes."

If reverse integration students are gaining a sense of empathy from their experience, Mackay's usual students are also getting plenty out of it too, said Ciccarelli, most notably, the possibility of new friendships.

Mackay, with its loving and supportive environment, provides plenty of opportunity for socialization. It can be difficult for many disabled children to make friends outside of school because of constraints both physical and social. Something as simple as having a play date at a friend's house can be excessively complicated, said Ciccarelli.

"It's not easy for a child in a wheelchair to necessarily be able to go over to another student's house because that house may not be adapted. It may have stairs; they may need help with dressing or feeding or toileting," she said. "That in itself creates a barrier around them that other children don't have."

A University of Windsor study published in 2012, based on a survey of

special needs kids and their families, found that fully half reported having no friends or only one close peer relationship, especially if they attend a regular school. And the relationships can rupture as children get older and their parents are no longer arranging their social lives. Social pressure and the urge fit in can sabotage these fragile friendships. And for special needs children, adolescence can be painfully lonely.

But bringing in typical students to Mackay helps break down those obstacles — well beyond the reverse integration year and perhaps permanently.



Charlotte Bazinet, left, and Ethan Burt take part in a group reading assignment at the Mackay Centre School. *ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Charlotte Bazinet, a Grade 3 student who normally attends Edinburgh School, said she still sees her old friends, but she mostly plays with friends from Mackay now.

“I’ve learned that even if you have a friend with a disability it’s the same

thing as a friend without and no matter what you can still be friends,” she said.

Charlotte’s sister is also attending pre-kindergarten at Mackay this year as a reverse integration student. Their mother, Emmanuelle Khoury, said her daughters are developing a true sense of humanity, Charlotte especially.

“She is learning so much about different ways of being in the world. I think she was always a kind and helpful person, but this experience is reinforcing it,” said Khoury.

The beauty of reverse integration is that the effects on the participating students will resonate in every part of their young lives, said Melanie Philip, a Grade 5 teacher at Mackay.

“I believe they become advocates for children with special needs, leaders in their community and protectors of those who cannot speak for themselves,” she said. “When they go back to their home schools they carry the Mackay torch with them in their compassion and in their care for people with special needs in their communities, in their neighbourhoods and their families.”

A little compassion goes a long way.