

District Program (LI) held at Arbutus Global Middle School:

Hello and thank you for making the time to hear from me tonight.

I'm sorry I don't have a power point to visualize my points – life happened. But I want to introduce you to my son James, which thankfully I can do because we're at home and on zoom!

Our educational journey has been unconventional, and a rollercoaster, so I want to share with you how we've ended up at the LI program held at Arbutus and talk about the vital resource this in our community and to kids like James and their families.

James received his diagnosis at the age of 3 after arriving back to Canada. In those early days I thought that with enough therapy James would arrive to Kindergarten just like any other kid – you wouldn't know a difference. Obviously I didn't know and understand Autism, and I didn't have acceptance around diverse brains.

When he started Kindergarten at Braefoot Elementary, a lovely school with principal Tarj Mann, James struggled, more than most kids do. It was clear by the end of kindy that James was going to need a lot more than the regular classroom could provide – but I didn't have the language or knowledge at the time where to go or what to do. I just knew that James wasn't going to grow into his potential in the mainstream class.

James transitioned to a private learning centre that our therapy centre operated, he was there for two years.

We then transitioned to distributed learning. With access to ministry funds, Autism funding, and private funding, we hired a 1:1 tutor. This was the boost James needed to set him up for success. We were starting from a place where he had no communication (after years of failed attempts), and no output to show us what he knew. Over two years he gained sign language that he initiated, an AAC-iPad communication tool, the ability to point, and many tools to express himself. James started to love learning. He would work for hours at a time and request more worksheets and assignments. James had grown by leaps and bounds, he felt understood, he was confident, he was finally showing interest in other kids.

His growth paired with the financial expense of us paying for this kind of instruction lead us back to the public school system.

After just 5 months in grade 5, James transitioned to middle school and into the LI program held at Arbutus. I learned about this program through a parent at Special Olympics whose child also attended. This program is the perfect blend of our experience of distributed learning with classroom benefits of being with peers. When James was in 100% inclusion in grade 5, his educational and social needs were not able to be met. The EA and teacher did their best, but he was often sent home with cutting and pasting and a note saying he had a good day. Most of the time they were trying to avoid him escaping on the elevator due to boredom. A side-note about peers; James' peers are the kids he spends time with on weekends, attends sports lessons with, and who he'll attend day programs with as an adult. These bonds with his peer group, along with the parental relationships to help navigate and access resources in our community is essential for total wellbeing for the family. James' age peers are growing at a different rate, and with different priorities than James. While I agree that exposure for a more wholesome community acceptance for people with diversity is a wonderful long-term goal, the

immediate needs to assist James in reaching his potential outweighs the community long-term goals. So, James is at Arbutus, the teacher and his EA tailor his educational materials based off of James. They are responsive to providing new learning opportunities in that align with his broader IEP goals. The class makes meaningful connection with the school, and participates when it is right for the child. I can't tell you the joy we all feel because James is being met at his level, being pushed to do more, and supported every single day. The nightmares of uncertainty and the behaviours that would follow are in the rearview mirror and I can never go back.

So, what is needed here?

1. Hours for material creation. The classroom EAs are able to be with the kids from bell to bell making sure they are always getting an opportunity to grow and meet a new goal. When do they have the time to come up with the materials to support him? I want to show you the communication book as an example and brag about it...  
The class simply needs a few hours a week to carry out their amazing work. This is supportive and inclusive education.
2. More families need to know about this program. This is the ONLY way my son could be receiving an education, and I can't find out about it when I look online. The families who have kids with unique needs are researching to the ends of the internet for supports to help their kids. This incredible resource is available, but the only way to learn about it is word of mouth. This is not enough. The website to programs of choice do not mention the LI program or Victor school, and they need to.
3. Change the name of this program, Low Incidence does not describe who my son is, or his peers. These kids can hear, do you want your children having that kind of low self-esteem because they are in a program called Low Incidence? In fact, I NEVER use that terminology when describing this program to others, other than to rail against the name. This is low hanging fruit.
4. Lastly – the big one – if you're looking to have true inclusion in SD61, there must be options. James cannot learn in a typical classroom. No matter how many supports you bring into the class, it's the wrong environment for him, and THAT'S OK. No one is failing him, it's just not the right fit. Not every work environment is the right fit for every employee – it's the same with school. This program must continue because without it there are no options for families who are like us, and there are enough to continue running this program long-term.

I will provide my notes to you so you may see the action items for you to implement. I will follow up in spring 2022 to remind you of the importance of this program (and the one to follow in Reynolds High School) when setting your annual budgets.

Thank you again for the work you do, the important decisions you make, and for dedicating your careers to the betterment of our kids, and the future of our community.