

# Barrier-Free H&PE

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## Abstract

This article looks at the ways in which creating an inclusive active space can support every student succeed. Sharing insight on teaching strategies, accommodations, modifications, safety and more, the article also demonstrates how inclusive education enhances learning and engagement for all students. Additionally, a variety of useful educator resources, tools and examples are shared throughout to support educators navigate the set-up inclusive active learning spaces.

## Key Words

Inclusion, Equity, Physical Activity, Health & Physical Activity, Education, Physical Education, Learning, Safety, Teaching Strategies, Teamwork, Accommodations

# Barrier-Free H&PE

## Inclusion means every student can succeed.

“That’s not fair!” It’s a refrain that teachers—especially at the elementary level—hear often, but what students often fail to understand is that, when it comes to learning, fairness doesn’t necessarily mean everyone follows the same rules or gets the same types of support.

“There’s a graphic I use for inclusion workshops,” explains Andrea Häefele, a Health and Physical Education (H&PE) teacher at Highgate Public School in Markham, Ontario, and a workshop leader who specializes in inclusion for students with and without special needs. “It’s an image of three students of different heights trying to see over a fence. The shortest might need three steps; the middle kid might need one. The tallest doesn’t need any steps.” At first glance, the cartoon seems to be about providing students with the individual support that they need to overcome an obstacle... and that’s certainly part of the answer, but then Häefele explains that there’s an even better solution. “You could take the fence away. Removing that barrier is what makes it accessible for everyone.”

Inclusion means that every student can succeed—whether it’s through accommodations that address their learning needs or through adapted curriculum expectations. “In many cases, addressing the inequality by putting accessibility as the *first* thought rather than an afterthought, we can remove the systemic barriers,” comments Häefele. And that’s not just good for students with special needs, it’s good for everyone.

## Inclusive education enhances everyone’s learning.

Laura Seckington, an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Community Class Teacher who also works at Highgate Public School (and who co-facilitates inclusion training with Häefele) has seen H&PE have a big impact on the six students in her class, each of whom have varying levels of needs. “The skills learned in H&PE are the route to a lot of other skills we teach in the classroom,” she says. “For example, following directions, moving safely, teamwork and sportsmanship.” Going to the gym for physical education also gives her students the chance to move around and explore with their bodies, which is important for children on the autism spectrum.

However, when Seckington’s students (who have their own program but are sometimes integrated with same-age peers) join other classes for physical education, it’s not only a learning opportunity for them—it’s also educational for their peers. “Teamwork is a huge part of inclusive education. Students need to learn how to work with people with different skill sets, strengths and needs in different situations,” says Seckington. This ability to work with and

get along with others ties in to the Living Skills—a set of expectations related to personal, inter-personal and critical and creative thinking skills that are woven throughout the H&PE curriculum.

### **Inclusion starts with knowing your learner.**

However, it's not enough for Seckington's students to join their same-age peers in the gym. For inclusion to be effective, it needs to be meaningful. As an H&PE teacher, it's Häefe's job to find ways to work with each student's strengths, allowing them to participate to the best of their abilities.

"Individuals need to be given different supports to make it possible for them to have equal access to education," she explains. "For example, if a student cannot walk, a wheelchair may be needed for them to be ambulatory. If a student has a hard time regulating behaviour they may require a token system to help them work towards their understanding of success."

According to both Häefe and Seckington, good teaching—and effective inclusion—starts with knowing your learner. What does each student need to be successful? And if they aren't successful, what further steps can be taken to support them? Teachers need to recognize and understand a student's disability but, from there, focus on their possibilities. "That means learning how the student learns best. Knowing your student, and then using that as a springboard to help them move forward to be successful," says Häefe.

### **Offering accommodations is just good teaching.**

In Häefe's physical education class, all students—not just those who've been identified as having special needs—are given a variety of supports (or accommodations) to help them learn.

For example, if the curriculum expectation being addressed in a lesson is to send a ball to a target, there can be many ways for the student to achieve it. Some students might find it easy to throw a ball into a hoop. But for a student who experiences challenges holding an object (like a ball), providing a bean bag that's easier to grasp could enable them to complete the task—as could providing a larger target or allowing them to stand closer.

"I like to think of accommodation as 'the stuff'," says Seckington. "An accommodation is something provided to a student to help them achieve an expectation or goal according to their needs. For example, a lot of my students use headphones to help block out the noise in the big echoey gymnasium."

But an accommodation isn't limited to providing varied equipment. It can also include support from an adult (or sometimes a peer) who can act as a "human accommodation"—repeating instructions or breaking tasks down to help the student achieve success. Or it might simply mean providing the student with more time to complete a task. The equipment, rules, support, environment or assessment strategy may change, but whatever form an accommodation takes, the curriculum expectation stays the same.

### **Modifications can further support student success.**

Depending on a student's needs, accommodations sometimes aren't sufficient. "A modification is when the curriculum must be changed," explains Seckington. Going back to the expectation of throwing a ball at a target, if that isn't possible for a student, it's appropriate to decrease the complexity of the skill required and to change the expectation. The student might instead be expected to drop the ball into the target, or the target could be removed all-together and the student could throw the ball anywhere.

Modifications can also help ensure student success when it comes to health lessons in a special needs class. "A lot of the health curriculum is just not realistic or attainable for my students," says Seckington. "In a Special Education classroom, goals are set at the beginning of the year based on strengths and needs of all students, what they already know and what is *important* for them to know." The class focuses on meeting expectations that are relevant to them, such as learning the names of parts of the body and how to take care of themselves mentally and physically.

While accommodations can be easy to implement in the class on a day-by-day or even minute-by-minute basis, modifications take more planning. “Ophea’s [Steps to Inclusion](#) resource talks about the steps to follow if you need to modify an expectation for a student,” says Häefele.

## **Safety is a precondition for effective learning.**

Learning to be inclusive of others and sensitive to differences doesn’t always come naturally to students, but by fostering a school community that values inclusivity, educators can help create a space that feels safe for everyone.

In fact, providing a learning environment that fosters both physical and emotional safety is one of the fundamental principles on which the H&PE Curriculum is based. The principle recognizes that in H&PE students are taking part in activities that involve inherent risk and that they’re doing so in a space where their peers can see them explore, succeed and make mistakes. “If students don’t have a mindset of feeling safe,” says Häefele, “how can we expect them to learn?”

## **Parents are key partners in the process.**

In addition to being an educator and workshop leader, Häefele also sees the issue of inclusivity through another lens: as a parent of a child with special needs.

“As a parent of a child with special needs,” she says, “I think parents are the best resource to help teachers get to know their learner.”

To help Seckington get to know her students she begins each school year by sending home a parent survey. It includes questions about each student’s needs, strengths and any gaps in their learning. “I also encourage parents to do activities with their child at home,” she says. This can be something as simple as going for a walk together, or practising a dance routine the class is working on to help the student gain familiarity with it.”

Finally, students with special needs may not always have the voice or skills they need to advocate for themselves. It’s important for parents to get the help they need to navigate the education system. “Some parents find that difficult,” she says. This is especially true for parents who are English language learners. A school’s Special Education Resource Teacher is a great first point of contact. They can help parents to access in-school resources as well as direct them to outside support agencies.

## **Help for educators is close-at-hand.**

There are also a variety of inclusion resources and supports available to teachers. A great first stop is Ophea’s [Steps to Inclusion](#) resource. “It’s especially good for educators who have never had an inclusion initiative at their school before,” says Seckington, who considers it a back-to-basics resource. Within the free PDF, educators will find flowcharts for board resources, printable parent surveys, skills checklists and more.

Seckington also recommends the [Autism Speaks School Community Toolkit](#)—another free PDF. Although the resource is Autism-focused, she believes it can easily be used for any special need. “It’s not just for schools but for teaching members of the community,” she says. For example, the toolkit includes a chapter on how parents can talk to their child’s bus driver or crossing guard about their child’s needs. [InclusiveSchools.org](#) is another one of her go-to resources, while [Inclusiveeducation.ca](#) is a useful site that provides a Canadian perspective.

And, of course, the [H&PE Curriculum](#) has plenty to offer on the subject of inclusion, while the Ministry of Education’s [IEP Resource Guide \(2014\)](#) is an important source of information for educators who are navigating the process of setting up an IEP (Individual Education Program) for a student who needs a modified curriculum.

## **In an inclusive environment, challenges are seen as learning opportunities.**

Through initiatives like the [Safe and Accepting Schools Act](#) the Ministry of Education and Ontario schools have taken significant steps toward ensuring learning environments where everyone feels welcome, safe and respected. And while these types of school environments support inclusion, the work, by its very nature, must be ongoing.

As we've seen, inclusion means every student is participating to the best of their abilities and is given the support they need to succeed. It also means that all students feel safe, valued and respected—but beyond these common factors, inclusive education in H&PE can (and should) look as varied and ever-changing as students themselves—with flexible physical spaces, equipment choices, game rules and goals.

When student needs are put first in this way, an inclusive gym is truly an exciting and dynamic learning environment to be part of. "Challenges aren't looked at as obstacles," explains Seckington, summing it up nicely. "Instead, they're seen as learning opportunities."