

## Spotlighting Inclusive School Practices

### **The Impact of an Inclusive School Culture: How One Teacher's Efforts and Opportunities for Peer Interactions at Washburn Rural High School Led to a Former Student's Dream of Opening a Coffee Shop.**



Caitlyn Halsey will tell you her high school experiences led her to where she is today- owner and manager of Dialogue Coffee House in Topeka. The day Caitlyn left Washburn Rural High School (WRHS) as a graduating senior she had a business plan ready to go. While it took a couple of years to see the plan come to fruition, Caitlyn's dream is now reality and her coffee shop not only provides its patrons an inviting atmosphere, quality food, and great

coffee, but also provides individuals with disabilities training and employment that has the potential to open the doors to further employment opportunities. Caitlyn's dream to open a coffee shop that employs people with disabilities began as a result of her being involved in many of the WRHS programs students can participate in with peers who have disabilities.



Washburn Rural High School is a class 6A high school with approximately 1900 students. Inclusion of all students is expected and part of the culture of this school. There are many opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact, largely because of the efforts of long-time special educator Kak Eli-Schneider who retired this past May. Eli-Schneider's roles over the years include special education teacher, transition coordinator, and transition program educator- and her passion is not only to see her students become independent and included in school and community life but also includes a desire to see ALL students interact and develop relationships in and out of school. During her years at WRHS Eli-Schneider created many opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact and develop relationships including a peer mentorship program, Special Olympics, Unified Sports, Circle of Friends, and a specially designed, school-run business program. As a result of these programs many WRHS students went on to seek careers in areas including special education, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech/language therapy because of the relationships they developed with students who have special needs. Eli-Schneider shared that the best part of sharing her heart for inclusion is knowing that the peers involved in her programs- who will someday be parents, employees, community members, and employers themselves- developed compassion, understanding, and kindness towards individuals with disabilities.



One of the students impacted by Eli-Schneider and the programs she developed was Caitlin. Because of the relationships Caitlin developed and the opportunities she had as a peer mentor, a Special Olympic volunteer, a Unified Sports partner, a participant in the school-run businesses, and in an outside-of-school ministry program, Caitlin began dreaming of a place where all kinds of people could come together. This dream, because of a teacher's tireless efforts, a

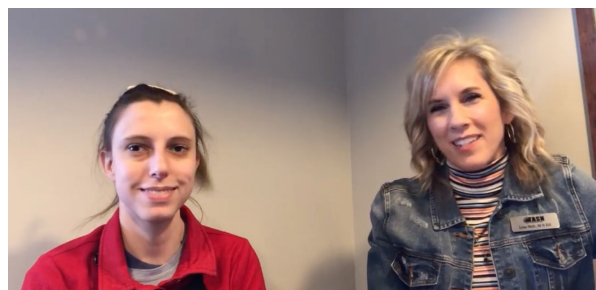
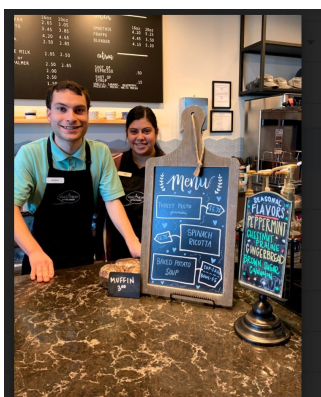
school's culture of inclusion, and a girl's dedication and persistence, resulted in Dialogue Coffee House.

Dialogue currently employs 21 people and Caitlyn describes Dialogue as a "...starting place for those who might struggle with finding employment...they can receive extra training and find the next next step in their goals". Many of her employees were or are currently in the WRHS transition program and some have additional places of employment which are integrated and competitive. Employees have a variety of job duties based on their strengths and interests. Training includes coffee-shop specific duties as well as social skills, which Caitlyn describes as "a crucial part of working anywhere".

Eli-Schneider provided much support to Caitlyn the past couple of years as the coffee shop plans were developed and employees were hired and trained. Now that Eli-Schneider is retired she will consult at Dialogue and stay involved with Unified Sports, Special Olympics, and Young Life Capernaum. Caitlyn looks forward to continued collaboration with Eli-Schneider and the future of the coffee shop which includes growing the bakery side of the business and getting out more into the community and into other businesses. She shared, "We hope to be an educational resource for the community and bridge the gap, creating a more inclusive city."

Collaboration is a large part of a special educator's life. Collaboration, passion, and effort focused on inclusion of ALL people can result in positive student outcomes in community, school, and family life. Caitlyn and Kak, you are doing a great job demonstrating these traits and we look forward to what the future holds for you and your employees!

If you're in the Topeka area, make sure to visit Dialogue Coffee House! In the words of regular customers: "It's a great way to start your day..with a positive environment!" and "The coffee is great, the customer service is amazing, you feel loved when you walk in and I love the conversations".



Are you considering ways to make your school and/or classroom more inclusive? Here are a few resources:

- [The Golden Rule of Providing Support in Inclusive Classrooms: Support Others as You Would Wish to be Supported"](#)
- [It's More Than "Just Being In": Creating Authentic Inclusion for Students with Complex Support Needs](#)
- [www.paulakluth.com](http://www.paulakluth.com)

Are you considering creating a school-run business for your students? As you determine what type of business might be possible in your school, consider the following:

### **How would this business provide opportunities for inclusion?**

Research tells us there are better post-school outcomes for students with disabilities when they are included in general education with their same-age peers. Some of the positive effects of inclusion include:

- higher expectations for student learning
- increased student engagement
- improved communication and social skills
- increased academic outcomes
- improved postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (Jorgensen, 2018; Wehman, Datlow-Smith, and Schall, 2009)

All students can benefit from being part of a school-run business. Consider businesses that would provide opportunities for students with and without disabilities to work together.

### **For more information about Washburn Rural High School's programs:**

- [The Culture of Our School](#)
- [The Culture of Our School Part 2: "You Can't Put a Value on It"](#)
- [Power of One](#)
- [Special Interest Areas and Employment](#)
- ["They are an asset": A Kansas Student is a valued employee in a Topeka grocery store](#)

### **For more information about Dialogue Coffee House:**

- [Facebook](#)
- [Website](#)
- [Coffee Shop with Unique Purpose to open near 29th and Gage](#)

### **Resources:**

- [Inclusion in general education correlated with improved education, employment, and independent living outcomes](#)
- [Off the Page #10: Can we talk about the coffee cart?](#)
- [School Based Enterprise Toolkit](#)

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