This research investigates how selected secondary schools develop and sustain their motivation and strategies to teach students with significant disabilities as members of regular classes. Funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, Integration Action for Inclusion in School and Community, Ontario (IAI) led this project, in partnership with the Centre for Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario.

Although Ontario law requires the accommodation of students with disabilities in regular classes, placement in special education classes persists - especially for students with developmental disabilities attending secondary school. Segregation may be increasing, despite the wealth of evidence on the educational benefits and the cost effectiveness of inclusive education. This project supports an extensive body of literature which has provided ample information about “what” inclusive education is, and “why” it must happen. This research considers “how” to sustain and enhance secondary school inclusion, especially from the perspectives of the school staff directly involved.

A great deal of professional development and school reform has taken place across Ontario because of the 2005 document: Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6. The province is expanding this work to promote differentiated instruction and universal design for learning all the way to grade 12, with a new document Learning for All, due out in spring 2009. The Ministry and the researchers saw a need to consider how this happens in schools which have no segregated special education classes and where teachers in regular classrooms must provide a very high degree of curriculum modification for some of their students.

The Essential Best Practices in Inclusive High Schools (developed at the University of New Hampshire) provided the framework which enabled schools to consider a variety of indicators which are empirically based and have been shown to relate to effective inclusive practices. By means of questionnaires and focus group discussions, staff teams in two Ontario secondary schools shared their experiences and perspectives. Both schools identified remarkably similar strengths in their commitment to set high expectations for the learning of all students and in their sense that all students belong and should participate fully in all aspects of the school environment. They saw a need to improve curriculum and instructional support as well as future planning for their students. They also called for more system support and collaboration for reflective practice. Important areas for discussion involved social relationships among students, the role of educational assistants and future access to assistive and augmentative communication. One group of parents discussed both the improved opportunities for their sons and daughters, and the need for ongoing advocacy. Teachers strongly agreed that their efforts to meaningfully include students with intellectual disabilities have helped them to teach students of all abilities more effectively.

By conducting this unique research, a family advocacy organization has assisted the schools to demonstrate both their work and their willingness to improve education for students of all abilities, learning together as members of regular high school classrooms. Through the information shared in the final report, families and educators will be able to better understand each others’ perspectives and discover ways to improve the future planning, academic learning and social opportunities for their students. While there is much to be learned from this project, participants call for further reflection and collaboration for continued school improvement.