

## *Striving to Thrive with Integrity and Excellence*

Our school has always worked hard to continue growing and has never been content to just keep doing the same thing. We actively assess what we do and look for ways to improve. Excellence in serving Christ is our goal.

Over the past several years our school has undergone a noticeable change. We are becoming a true team, an example of the body of Christ working together. It began first with behaviour training and character development. We abandoned the notion that each teacher should be solely responsible for determining and carrying out rules and expectations for his/her class. Instead, we met together, brainstormed, and formed a school plan, outlining what we wanted our students to exhibit in behaviour and Christ-like character and how we could best make this happen. Next, we began viewing each of the students in our school as all of our responsibility, working together to carry out the plan. This meant that students could expect the same reaction from any staff member they encountered. A big part of this initiative was the establishment of our 'Kindness Club'. We watch for students to engage in 'Random Acts of Kindness' and surprise them with certificates in Chapel. This allows us to focus on promoting positive behaviours while training them to be a daily part of our students' lives. Our focus is on teaching, training, and practicing, and it works.

Recently, we brought this same idea to our special education program. Formerly, students were withdrawn from their classes and given a separate program, designed to meet their needs, with little or no collaboration with parents or classroom teachers. Children were learning but we weren't seeing the transference of their skills back into their classrooms or beyond. God began challenging us to more effectively meet the needs of children with exceptionalities, learning disabilities, and gifted abilities. We have since changed our special education program into one that reflects the team heart of our school. The results have been amazing. Our teachers began training in; Special Education Specialist, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Therapy. We began attending special education workshops and professional development opportunities, researched strategies and techniques, and created programs that effectively addressed the challenges of individuals within the group setting. We now know that one person cannot effectively bring lasting growth and change. It takes a team to accomplish what is needed.

Our special education program (called tutoring, to remove any stigma) begins with an assessment to determine the strengths and needs of the student, next the resource teacher sets up a meeting that includes herself and the student, parents, classroom teacher, principal, and therapists, and other professionals involved in the child's life. The team meets together to create a plan that will consistently address the strengths and challenges of the child at school and at home. There is great consistency in implementing the plan and the results become magnified because of this carry over. Student awareness is another important component of this model. We ensure that each student understands what they need to be successful and are equipped to advocate for themselves. We also provide peer awareness workshops for all our students so that they can learn what it is like to have an exceptionality and how best to relate to all of their classmates in a kind

and caring way. Wherever the child is, the plan is followed and the child experiences growth and success. Recently, we realized that although this plan was great, it could be even better. It was time to take what we had been learning and doing into the community.

It came to our attention that some of our students, who were now experiencing success at school and home, were not having this same experience in their churches. This was cause for concern for us. Our mission's statement states, "The primary goal of Calvary Christian School is to prepare students academically and spiritually for a life of service, according to individual talents and abilities for the honour and glory of God." It is vitally important to us that our students establish themselves within Christ's body and have the opportunity to play a role in the church. We did not want our students missing out in their children's church programs. We recognized that there was a lack of understanding and training and so we began a new path. Our desire is to support children beyond the walls of our school. Our first step has been to launch training workshops to equip individuals in churches. We designed workshops to provide children's pastors, leaders, and volunteers the knowledge and strategies they need to successfully reach and minister to all children and meet their needs within their regular church programs.

In 2009, we launched these Children's Ministry Workshops. We invited pastors, leaders, parents, and volunteers to our school and provided a two hour session for them. We offered these workshops free of charge. The workshop is broken down into four parts:

1. **Children with Fine Motor Difficulties**
2. **Children with Perceptual and Sensory Difficulties**
3. **Children with Visual Difficulties**
4. **Children with Auditory Difficulties**

During each part we explore background information about the exceptionality represented, engage in activities that simulate the experience of a child with this exceptionality, brainstorm areas of children's programs that might pose a challenge, and determine reactions that might occur because of this. Finally, we discuss specific, easily implemented strategies to make their programs more successful and less stressful for all children and teachers. Hand-outs and refreshments are provided for each participant. Our goal is to help churches create environments that minimizes frustration and maximizes learning and fun for all children and leaders.

The workshops have been warmly received and appreciated. We have been invited into individual churches to run the program for their staff and volunteers. We provide this service free of charge. We are available on an ongoing basis to offer support, answers, or suggestions for specific situations that arise. It has been amazing to partner with churches in this way and has built relationship with churches that may not have known anything about us previously.

This year, we also partnered with a local church to offer a parent seminar where we invited an international speaker/author. Invitations were sent into the community, to

churches, schools, and daycare centers for this free seminar. This event exposed us to new people who did not know we existed as an option for their children's schooling. Several parents stayed to view our school display and speak with our principal and staff. Many stated that they could not believe the seminar was offered free and that they could not have attended if we had charged a fee.

Each summer, our principal travels to churches with a display and information about our school. Some churches allow him to share who we are from the platform, others allow just the display, and some are not open to either. It is interesting that some churches that are not open to that type of visit are very open to us coming and presenting our workshop. It provides an avenue for us to let people know about us in a service-based way.

As a result of the workshops, several families have visited our school and we have become aware of and involved in other community supports. Parents and church leaders have contacted us for ideas, support, and encouragement. Attendees are now telling their friends and family about our school and what we have to offer.

It is vitally important to note that this is a bonus in providing these workshops. Our first and foremost goal and priority is to bless others. We desire to bless children by making their church experience more positive, we desire to bless churches by making them better equipped to deliver the important message of who God is and who He desires to be in the lives of His children, and we desire to bless our community with information and awareness of what it means to serve Him. The workshops are not delivered as a solicitation or a marketing scheme. They are given from our hearts to bless those around us. God then takes this service and blesses us with opportunities to reach others with His love and with an awareness that we are here to serve them. This kind of awareness has proven to be the best advertising we could have.

We are very excited about the opportunity we have been given to support churches in the work they are doing. We will continue to look for new topics and opportunities to bless others with the training with which we have been blessed. We hope and desire that many children will benefit from the information and support we are able to provide. The goal is for children to hear the Gospel, understand the love God has for them, and find within the church, a place where they belong, a place where all children can thrive, learn, and grow together.