

Making a Difference in Someone's Life - Carole Foran-Swinkels

Carole Foran-Swinkels is a Severe Learning Disabilities Resource Teacher with the Halifax Regional School Board. In her position she works with students with a variety of learning disabilities at several different schools in the Sackville area.

Ben had a lot of difficulties in school resulting from a suspected but undiagnosed learning disability. He had always been a smart kid but had never gotten good marks in most of his classes and his reading, writing and spelling abilities had been behind those of most of his classmates. After being assessed, Ben became eligible for help from the School Board's severe learning disabilities program.

In his first year of Junior High Ben was connected with Mrs. Swinkels. Ben had always wanted to learn and had honestly tried his best but was faced with an uphill struggle. Ben's problem wasn't how fast he thought or how well - anyone daring to debate him on something he cared about would tell you that. His difficulty was processing written information and getting an answer down on paper. Mrs. Swinkels had an impact on that which became more apparent as his first year concluded and his second year in Junior High progressed.

In meeting with Ben twice a week she didn't just deal with his writing and reading abilities, she also supported his work in classes where reading and writing were not the primary concern. Keeping Ben on track when his focus might wander and supporting his development of social skills were added benefits to Mrs. Swinkels teaching repertoire. Ben says "Mrs. Swinkels is someone I can talk to and someone who has helped me a lot". Her soft spoken, but persistent method of assisting students to learn not only facilitates learning, it also promotes the desire to learn through students becoming successful and wanting to build on that success. Ben's view of her teaching methodology is "she's not extremely strict - she's a nice person and talks to you to help you out" - translated from 13 year old to english, this means that Mrs. Swinkels doesn't talk down to her students and makes them want to learn.

In less than two school years Ben has gone from Cs and Ds being typical to As and Bs being the norm. Spell check may always be Ben's best friend but he has gone from just barely getting through reading and writing in school to being told that he has the ability to go to University. Ben isn't a member of Mensa but goes to a Mensa coffee night at a Dartmouth Chapters & Starbucks every month with his family. Over the last two years he has grown to spend much more time looking through Chapters and picking out books than he has hanging out being social with the rest of the group. Now he's using his debating skills arguing in favour of the books he wants to buy because he wants and likes to read.