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Back to INCLUSIVE School - September 2005

*The summer is drawing to a close, and school begins for another year.
Those back-to-school flyers aroused anxiety many weeks ago.
A doughnut commercial on television shows people panicking
when they see a maple leaf that has changed colour.
If parents and teachers feel stressed as school begins, what about the students?
An internet provider commercial pictures a young child graduating from university,
challenging you to "Help your kids do school at high speed".
The Toronto Star disguises an ad for prescription drugs –said to help kids reach their potential.
A private school advertises: "Brilliant, happy, well-adjusted daughter, yours free with tuition".
A church in Warton, Ontario blesses students' backpacks, the Sunday before school starts!*

Most of us entrust our publicly-funded education system – with our children's future.
We send them off to school, where teachers and principals come into and out of their lives only briefly.
Let us not forget that we know our wonderful children best, and care most about their futures.
As taxpayers, we direct the school system: in effect, we pay staff to do a good job for us.
Parents advocating for their sons and daughters stay vigilant, as school begins.
It is a busy time - for meetings among students, parents, teachers and administrators –
to make sure that any required accommodations are in place, for students who have disabilities.

WE want to work well with educators to ensure that support is available -
for students of all abilities to learn together as members of regular classrooms,
and for their teachers to teach students - of all abilities - well.
The Coalition encourages school teams to see the student's strengths and to aim higher for the future.

There is some good news across Ontario:

- Premier Dalton McGuinty said: "This year, almost every elementary student will start the year in a school that has benefited from increased teacher training and new resources".
- Education Minister Gerard Kennedy said: "Delivering better learning conditions everywhere in the province after years of neglect is an enormous undertaking. We are opening up education to give the public more access to the improvements being made on behalf of Ontario's students... This fall, I invite the public to see their support at work in their communities and help school boards and the government by getting involved in their local school."
- Class sizes will be smaller – especially for younger students. Kennedy asks parents to visit the Ministry's website at www.edu.gov.on.ca. Starting in mid-September, the results of class size reduction at every local school will be prominently displayed.
- The government and teacher federations promise that this will be a more peaceful and collaborative school year. Collective agreements have been resolved with teachers in all school boards for the next 4 years, by which time there will have been another provincial election. (Some problems still must be resolved with professional and other support staff unions.)
- This year, teachers will have more preparation time and lower workloads. There are to be more specialist teachers for the arts, music and phys ed. All schools are to have 4 teachers trained in improving literacy and numeracy, The government promises new strategies in high schools to keep

older students from dropping out of school. There has been money for building improvements and textbooks.

- The Coalition agrees with what the *Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario* states on its website, under Including Every Child: *"Each child has their own look, size, shape, colour, interests, skills, talents, and dreams. It's up to parents and teachers to teach the value of our differences, appreciating and celebrating them... Self-esteem is formed at a very early age, as children begin to gain a sense of belonging and acceptance in our world. The respect, love, and confidence that is shown to children by the significant adults in their lives become the basis on which they form their sense of worth."*

For the first time, the government is promoting inclusive education - beyond mere placement in regular classrooms - to improve educational outcomes there for ALL students.

- We know there is no need for the Ministry to establish separate initiatives to improve "regular" and "special" education. All students must have access to the new literacy and numeracy resources. And we know that effective inclusive education benefits ALL students and their teachers.

The **Expert Panel (on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario) Literacy for Learning** report is at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/literacy/panel/> This repeats what the Coalition has always said: that teachers should have high expectations for all students and build on students' strengths, rather than targeting their weaknesses. All students learn best when teachers use a variety of instructional tasks, approaches and groupings.

Just released at the end of last school year was **Education For All: (another) Expert Panel Report, on Literacy and Numeracy for Students with Special Educational Needs, K. to Gr. 6**, found at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/speced/panel/speced.pdf>.

- A Coalition member group - People First – always tells us they wanted "the classroom teacher to be their teacher", and didn't want to go to "the little room down the hall". This report is meant to assist regular classroom teachers, acknowledged to be the "key educators" for students of all abilities.
- People First also says "Label Jars, not People"; This report now acknowledges that teachers need to understand students' differing learning styles, not focus on their exceptionality or disability labels.
- This Report informs teachers about **Universal Design for Learning**. Just as a building should be built wheelchair accessible – from the outset, rather than retrofitting later - instruction should be planned proactively, to respect and support the diverse learning styles of all students. This happens to echo recommendations released last Fall, by the *Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC)*, in its **Guidelines on Accessible Education**. Teachers are also shown methods for Differentiated Instruction – and ways to provide accommodations and modifications.
- The Coalition has developed excellent training for educators and parents about planning lessons that connect students to the provincial curriculum and to their classmates. We challenge the Ministry and school boards to *really* use the Expert Panel ideas to improve education *for all students*. Unlike other exceptionalities, Ontario students labelled with intellectual disabilities are most often forced into segregated classes and schools. Too often, we see students relegated to alternative "lifeskills" and behavioural programming, and too seldom are efforts made to provide the more substantial curriculum modification some students require. It should just be a matter of degree, if "all" really means "all"!
- The Expert Panel reports encourage teamwork among teachers, but put little emphasis on parent involvement, even though research shows this is a key factor for student academic success.
- Last year, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) received \$25 million in **professional development money** from the province. They will use this money to support the improvements the Expert Panel on "*Education for All*" recommended. Each school board automatically gets \$50,000 now, and those that meet the criteria best will receive another \$200,000. We are concerned that parental involvement is not encouraged, but Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs) should find out about plans and provide input to this process right away.

There is more funding for special education this year.

- However, this was not announced until late June. So, *if your son or daughter was denied certain required accommodations before that time "because there was no money", you should ask for reconsideration. SEACs should also revisit Annual Special Ed Plans, if completed earlier.*
- Support for students with disabilities can be paid for out of the various "pots" of school board funding, not just special ed grants.
- **Last year marked the end of an extremely harmful system of funding special education.** The Minister did not entirely honour his promise that the Intensive Support Amount (ISA) special ed funding formula would be replaced last school year. In August 2004, the Minister stated: "The reasonable expectation of parents is that funding and staffing increases will equal educational improvement". He has established a **Working Table on Special Education Funding**, co-chaired by his Parliamentary Assistant M.P.P. Kathleen Wynne and Brock University professor Sheila Bennett. Discussions are underway – not just about funding but also about improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities. (Marilyn Dolmage and Gary Bunch are members of this group)
- School Boards will receive additional amounts of money if they have more students meeting "high needs" criteria now than last year. The way to determine this has changed. Boards no longer receive additional funds by documenting individual students' failures and limitations. You can ask to review your child's Ontario Student Record (OSR file, kept in the school office) and to have any harmful or incorrect information removed. School boards now must count the number of students who are receiving educational assistant support for 50% of the school day (which includes arrival, lunch and recess) or who are enrolled in segregated classes where there is 1 adult for every 4 students. Deducted from this number, are students eligible for ISA 2 and 3 funding, who have moved away.
- *Often parents are told their child must "share" scarce resources with many other needy students. You may be able to find out that your board actually has fewer "needy" students now.* And the Human Rights Code requires that school boards prove "undue hardship" before they can deny funding educational accommodations. *The Ministry is interested in knowing whether funding is adequate for Ontario students.* After all, last year it discovered that many school boards had not spent all their special ed money, and took reserved money back.
- The **ISA #1** part of the special education funding formula still exists. *Make sure your board applies,* because the province will reimburse school boards for certain expensive equipment that individual students may need, to learn.
- A remnant of the old, harmful funding formula still remains. **Special Incidence Portion (SIP)** funding can bring as much as \$54,000 more to boards from the Ministry if they show that a student requires two additional staff at all times, because of severe behaviour problems. This can discourage school boards from trying other support measures. Too much adult attention makes some students more aggressive and vulnerable to suspension and expulsion. The board keeps the money even if the student does not attend school regularly.

An **Individual Education Plan (IEP)** is required by law to be written every year for exceptional students, usually within 30 school days of the start of school - **by October 19th**.

So this is an important time.

- Education Act Regulation 181 states that IEPs must involve parents and older students, and must specify the accommodations students need for success, which are legally required "to be provided" by school boards
- Your child need not be identified as "exceptional" to get additional support.
- This is the first year that IEPs will be developed since the release of the Human Rights Commission's *Guidelines for Accessible Education*. The Coalition analysis of this can be read at http://www.inclusive-education.ca/resources/documents/OHRC_analysis_Nov_30_04.pdf School Boards will be paying more attention now that the Commission itself is pursuing a *complaint against the Toronto District School Board and the Ministry of Education*. *OHRC Research showed students with disabilities experienced ill effects from the provincial Safe Schools Act. The Ministry actually predicted discrimination would occur, back in 1997. Draft Monograph #5 written then provides useful strategies to avoid suspensions and expulsions of students with disabilities. IEPs should involve whatever it takes to avoid expulsion, suspension and exclusion and to keep students in school, supported and learning.*

- The Ministry released a revised **IEP Resource Guide** last Fall, after IEPs were due. See the *Coalition analysis* at http://www.inclusive-education.ca/resources/documents/IEP_Analysis.pdf
- Accommodations cannot be arbitrarily removed from one school year to the next.
- Students in Grade 3 or 6 may face extra pressure because schools want those small samples of students to do well on standardized provincial “EQAO” tests. IEPs should include plans for any accommodations needed for students to be included in EQAO testing.
- A student’s school day can be shortened only where agreed upon by the school team and parents according to the IEP.
- School boards used to spend vast amounts of time and money on documentation for ISA funding. This can now be re-directed – to bring support quickly to regular classroom teachers so that students will succeed there.
- The Ontario Secondary School Teacher’s Federation (OSSTF) says it is important to high school teachers that IEPs really be a helpful tool, not a bureaucratic burden, and be “individual and specific”. *It is quite easy to tell if your child’s IEP has been generated by an “IEP engine” that may reinforce outdated ideas about special education. You can challenge this now.*
- The Human Rights Code protects students from discrimination. Yet the Ministry says principals can determine whether high school students will earn a credit in a course before accommodations have been attempted. They can even specify in the IEP whether a student will graduate, at the beginning of Grade 9. *Ask questions and challenge assumptions. You may need to aim higher!*
- What is written in an IEP “accommodation plan” should be what the school can “deliver” this year. But schools must provide what the student is known to require for learning. *Make sure they know! Perhaps a community professional or a friend can help you communicate this.*
- IEPs are ultimately our school principals’ legal responsibility. They must “go to bat” with the school board for whatever students need to learn and teachers need to teach. But effective inclusive education does not necessarily cost more.
- The Coalition encourages teachers to be advocates – to make sure any required accommodations are written into IEPs. We are pleased that Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) President Emily Noble told her members this August: “Now is the time for teachers to dare to dream. It is time for the true professionals, who understand best the educational needs of elementary students, to determine the learning strategies that take place in their classrooms... We are determined to improve the teaching and learning conditions in Ontario’s public schools and to bring a stronger sense of social justice to our province”.
- *Advocacy strategies do work; so be careful what you ask for. Parents should keep track of the conditions under which their sons and daughters experience success – in school, at home and elsewhere. For example, consider carefully whether your child needs a full-time educational assistant, and how that person can promote real inclusion. Coalition training about inclusive curriculum design and accommodations helps parents be effective school team members.*
- ✓ Education Minister Gerard Kennedy has been looking closely over the shoulders of Ontario’s school boards. We hope changes are coming to improve accountability to students, taxpayers, and communities, and to encourage and recognize effective inclusive policies and practices.
- ✓ The Toronto Star will provide information later this month, following research by Helen Henderson, who has heard from many families across Ontario.
- ✓ Let the government know if a student you know is having difficulty getting support, or if inadequate educational support is threatening your family.
- ✓ Let your M.P.P. know how much this matters – not just to your family, but to the future of Ontario.
Education really needs to be a provincial priority.

You are not alone. We would like to hear from you.

The more we tell others about the issues,
and the more our sons and daughters are involved in school and community life,
the more allies we have – to ask questions, receive answers, and encourage improvement in education.

***One parent said: “When I tuck my child into bed every night, I wonder:
‘Have I done all you deserve today, to make sure you have a better future?’”***

***The Coalition would be pleased to work with you to present training for students, parents,
educators, advocates in your community – detailing practical planning processes
... FOR BETTER EDUCATION ... FOR ALL ... FOR OUR FUTURE ...***