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Back to INCLUSIVE School - September 2007
INCLUDES POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE UPCOMING ELECTION

September feels like "New Year's" for many of us. Are you back in the school routine?

Did details about school planning get resolved in June, or at the end of August...

or are you still trying to schedule that first big meeting of the school year?

The Coalition considers what is happening across Ontario every year at this time, and encourages better networking among advocates for effective, inclusive education.

School begins at a very politically sensitive time this year, as Ontario heads for an October 10th election.

Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty wants to be known as "The Education Premier". Liberal Education Minister Kathleen Wynne is running for re-election in the Toronto riding of Don Valley West, against Conservative Opposition Leader John Tory. As school began, McGuinty talked about "hope" and Wynne talked about "promise": let's see what they mean. While the Coalition is non-partisan, some of the issues in the news may resonate with our work for effective inclusive education across Ontario:

Political slogans: Inclusion? Segregation?

A key part of the Conservative party platform is to extend public funding to religious private schools. They call this "inclusion" saying, since Catholic schools are already publicly funded, it is unfair that parents have to pay fees when they choose other faith-based education. The Liberals oppose this plan, saying that more religious schools would result in "segregation", dividing communities, and would take money away from the existing system. The Conservatives are calling McGuinty a hypocrite, since he was educated in Catholic schools, himself. The Green Party now proposes that neither Catholic schools nor any other religious schools receive public funding.

This may be an especially good time for us to explain publicly and to political candidates what inclusion is and how much segregation hurts students, families, schools and communities.

Education Funding

Back in 1998, the previous Conservative government radically changed the education funding formula in Ontario – to allocate all money to school boards centrally, according to a controversial and complex set of special purpose "envelopes". I THINK THIS SECTION COULD BE TIGHTENED UP.

No More ISA: The Coalition spent many years fighting the formula within special education funding that was called the Intensive Support Amount (ISA Levels 2 and 3). We knew that students were harmed by the documentation required in its "diagnosis for dollars" process, which was actually a disincentive to helping those students.

During their first year in government, the Liberals found that numbers of so-called "high needs students" kept increasing – beyond reason - and also that some boards were not spending all their grants and banking considerable special ed funding in reserves. They stopped the ISA process in the summer of 2004; so "ISA" no longer exists as a financial incentive to identify students and document problems. Each school board's grant was converted into a different High Needs Per Pupil Amount rate. They know how much to expect, based on whether their total enrolment went up or down.

Political considerations: The Ministry of Education has not had the political will to settle on a new formula, and keeps promising to review special ed funding issues. Last school year was the first in which some school boards expected to lose this sort of funding, because their enrolments declined. This Spring, the Ministry of Education changed its mind, so that boards with declining enrolment would keep the same level of this funding as they got in the previous year, while growing boards got more. This has encouraged school boards associations to continue their lobbying for a return to an open-ended system that pays them more, the more students they identify as "needy", and allows them to decide how that money will be spent.

In the meantime, the province says it has increased special education funding by \$79 million this school year. This is \$28 million more than was allocated back at the end of June, in the lead-up to the election. \$20 million more for supporting Educational Assistants was allocated for this school year, just before the election was called.

Special Equipment Amount: SEA funding (formerly called ISA Level 1) reimburses boards for specialized equipment prescribed for individual students. Boards must pay the first \$800. During the 2005-06 school year, the Coalition was shocked to learn that 13 of Ontario's 72 school boards had not obtained a single

penny of this funding – apparently because they had not asked for any. How can it be that there was not a single student in any of those boards who would have benefited from special computer technology for literacy, amplification system, etc.? The Ministry led a symposium on assistive technology last September, for people from every school board. We have not been able to obtain statistics for last school year – although we are quite sure the Ministry has them.

Special Incidence Portion: This is the one remaining part of education funding that perpetuates the “diagnosis for dollars” problems. Boards can receive an additional \$27,000 for every student they document as needing – and receiving – more than 2 staff with them throughout the school day. Since the government stopped ISA Levels 2 and 3 in 2004, millions more have been allocated under SIP. This means many more students have been documented as dangerous and are at risk of suspension and expulsion, even while their board continues to receive this money.

On September 7th, the Globe and Mail reported that a University of Toronto study showed that 60% of Ontarians are very or somewhat satisfied with education in the province, but that 73% are willing to spend more on it.

Ever since the problems with ISA were revealed in 2004, Education Ministers Gerard Kennedy and Kathleen Wynne have said they want to be sure that special education funding is actually benefiting students. Now is a great time to let politicians know what you think.

Has the Liberal government improved education over the past 4 years?

The Liberals say they are especially proud of their record to resolve the unrest with teachers’ unions that was a huge problem during the past two Conservative governments. The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) placed a full-page ad in the Toronto Star promoting public education, in general, the day school started.

The Liberals say Ontario students are learning better – thanks to the changes they have made. They say they are fulfilling their promise to improve provincial literacy test results, which they see as a good way to measure outcomes. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) system was set up by the Conservatives, who have recently accused the Liberals (and the teaching profession) of inflating those literacy results. ETFO teacher’s union’s president wrote a letter to the editor of the Toronto Star on September 6th, commending the changes made by the Liberals but arguing that EQAO tests are a waste of time and money, since ongoing classroom teacher evaluations are more useful.

The Coalition thinks that there are important educational outcomes that cannot be measured by EQAO tests. We want to improve education for the students excluded from EQAO testing.

And we want to promote so much about education beyond those basics, and which we think can actually improve literacy and numeracy in the long run. Do our politicians know enough about effective inclusive education and why it is worth working for?

Full-day Kindergarten? The Liberals have just promised that they would offer full-day kindergarten across Ontario by 2010, if re-elected. Perhaps early childhood educators, not just teachers, would be involved. Toronto Catholic board has started this as a pilot project in 7 of its schools, where teachers say students have gained both academically and socially. This could mean children could have a more consistent day, working parents would save money and more day care spaces would be freed up. *Tell that to the families who meet resistance when they register little ones with disabilities for kindergarten now. Politicians need to hear from families whose children have been made unwelcome in kindergarten – so that their entry is stalled or so that children are denied access altogether.*

Autism lobbying – Families of children with autism seem very active during this election campaign, saying that the Liberals have not fulfilled McGuinty’s promise to make Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) available to all children with autism. In fact, since he made that promise, the Ministry of Education fought against these families, calling IBI a “therapeutic approach”, and the courts have so far said schools need not provide it. Various legal cases have determined that this treatment is neither a necessary medical service, nor an essential educational service. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Children’s and Youth Services has expanded its funding to more children, and the Ministry of Education has offered a variety of grants for training and support related to students with autism – but only through Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), which they call “instructional methods”. The Conservatives and NDP solidly support the families who seem to imply that such treatment cures autism. *Is it IBI or ABA? How much would it cost to expand treatment? What support is available to children whose parents do not want ABA/IBI, but rather see autism as a condition requiring communication and other accommodations? Is IBI/ABA really compatible with inclusion? Will the behavioural approach to students with autism “spill over” to affect students with other disability labels? Are people who will require life-long support seen as less worthy of help?*

Safe Schools?

The Coalition met with Gerard Kennedy before he was elected and shortly after he became Education Minister. We provided statistics as well as compelling individual stories about the harm done through suspensions, expulsions, and suggested ways in which the Safe Schools Act should be re-written. Especially problematic has been Regulation 305 because it allows school principals to ban students from school altogether – potentially forever - without appeal. Families have also kept students home from school – not “voluntarily”, but because they knew accommodations were not being provided and feared total exclusion.

When the Liberal government organized a review of "Safe Schools" issues, the Coalition submitted an analysis, although there was little, real, public consultation. The Ministry did expose expulsion and suspension rates for each school board – which were shockingly high. The Ontario Human Rights Commission itself laid complaints against both the Toronto District School Board and the Ministry of Education, which led to legal decisions forcing changes in policies and practices to prevent harm to students with disabilities and from racial minorities.

School safety became a big issue after Jordan Manners was shot in his Toronto high school at the end of May, and an investigation was hurriedly organized. In late August, the government announced additional funding for psychologists, social workers and counsellors to support students at risk, as well as police officers in schools to prevent bullying. Funding has also been provided to train school administrators.

Just before the election was called, the law has changed. Recent memos to all boards clarify new requirements. Overall, there are more resources and training about preventing dangerous behaviour. The emphasis is more on rehabilitation than on punishment, on more thoughtful understanding about ways to keep students learning. Students out of school less than 6 days must receive homework packages. Student Action Plans must specify academic components for students who are out of school 6 days or more, and non-academic components as well, for those out 11 to 20 days. All such students who have IEPs must continue to receive accommodations as promised during those 20 days out of school, in the programs all boards must offer to students who are out of school more than 20 days, and when re-entry to school is considered.

Decisions about suspensions and expulsions *now must* take into account the following conditions that were merely discretionary before:

- The pupil does not have the ability to control his or her behaviour.
- The pupil does not have the ability to understand the foreseeable consequences of his or her behaviour.
- The pupil's continuing presence in the school does not create an unacceptable risk to the safety of any person

as well as the following new conditions:

- the pupil's history
- whether a progressive discipline approach has been used with the pupil
- whether the activity for which the pupil may be or is being suspended or expelled was related to any harassment of the pupil because of his or her race, ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation or to any other harassment
- how the suspension or expulsion would affect the pupil's ongoing education
- the age of the pupil
- in the case of a pupil for whom an individual education plan has been developed,
 - whether the behaviour was a manifestation of a disability identified in the pupil's individual education plan,
 - whether appropriate individualized accommodation has been provided, and
 - whether the suspension or expulsion is likely to result in an aggravation or worsening of the pupil's behaviour or conduct.

The Coalition has just learned that new Regulation 471 was approved in August, so that no pupil enrolled in a school can be denied access even if his/her presence is considered to be detrimental to the safety or well-being of a person on the premises in the judgment of school or board administration. This includes pupils who have been expelled but are not registered with another board, and pupils attending a program for suspended or expelled pupils, that is located on the school premises.

Parent Involvement: There is a new Provincial Parent Board to advise the Minister of Education and another year of "Parents Reaching Out" grants. Integration Action for Inclusion received a grant late last winter to assist the coalition to provide training and networking to families and their allies in 6 locations across Ontario, concerning effective high school inclusion and career development. Applications must be submitted by October 19th. Schools should submit one proposal for a maximum of \$1000. Regional and provincial groups may apply for up to \$30,000. For more information, please see <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/reaching.html>. The June 2006 Special Education Transformation document said that the Parent Engagement Office should particularly assist parents of students with special educational needs.

***Engagement** seems to be everyone's goal these days. We are told that students do better when they are engaged - and when their parents are engaged - in their learning. The Coalition has always defined inclusion as meaning that students learn better when they are valued members of regular classrooms in their own neighbourhood schools, when teachers are committed to the success of all their students, and where there is a truly collaborative school community culture... however...*

Conflict Resolution was an issue in Special Education Transformation. The Ministry will release a document about informal, collaborative practices at the end of September, and provide regional training. A working group is looking at ways to provide formal dispute resolution, and pilot studies will take place in selected school boards later in the Fall.

Individual Education Plans: IEPs are a major source of conflict between families and schools. Regulation 181 requires that IEPs be written - within 30 school days of the start of school, after very thorough collaboration with parents – and that they guarantee what special education program and services are *to be received* by the pupil. It's IEP season right now. The Ministry has written IEP Standards and Resource Guides and reviewed samples of IEPs since the law was enacted in 1998 – and they still know they need a lot of improvement (even when boards get to choose which of their IEPs to show the Ministry!). One third of Ontario school boards still use a format that is inadequate; so the Ministry has merely suggested a more complete Template. Most IEPs the Coalition sees are appalling - anything but "individualized" (since they perpetuate stereotypes about disabilities) and "educational" (having low, vague expectations, which promote segregation). Late last school year, each school board received a Ministry critique of the sample of IEPs it submitted to the Ministry. The Ministry continues to provide in-service to those Boards who want to improve their IEPs. Like us – the Ministry is looking for examples of effective IEPs.

Assessment and Evaluation: The Ministry of Education provided additional money last year – indirectly to school boards via the Ontario Psychological Association – to shorten wait times for a variety of professional assessments of young students up to grade 4. This hope this gives teachers the information they need to teach students – as individuals, according to their unique learning styles, incorporating both strengths and needs. The Ministry will bring people from every school board – especially classroom teachers – to a provincial symposium on assessment and student evaluation January 8 and 9th.

Student Success: Inclusive education means better education for all students, going far beyond what we once knew as "special education". Years ago, Coalition pioneers saw that students were being harmed by segregation. We fought for access to regular classrooms, knowing that students with disabilities would learn better there – both socially and academically - and hoping relationships would develop that would improve their futures. We found out that students without disabilities also could become better citizens when they had been in inclusive classroom. Eventually we allied with educators who showed us that co-operative learning not only accommodates but also celebrates differences. There has arisen a lively pedagogy that adapts instruction according to all the students' learning styles – combinations of strengths and needs, that do not relate to disability labels at all. To design everything about education *universally* – in ways that exclude no one – not only respects the rights of students with disabilities but also improves education for everyone. Ministry staff now say that its *Education for All* document contains ideas to assist teachers all the way through high school. The Ministry has promoted many good opportunities to broaden learning in Ontario schools, but we are still very concerned that some students are not seeing the benefit. Students with developmental disabilities seem to be more segregated than ever, and are particularly denied access to academic learning. *The Coalition is working out the details for a joint project with the Ministry to research the factors promoting true inclusion in some schools, where students with developmental disabilities benefit from student success initiatives, along with everyone else. We would rather be part of broad educational change, although there is always the risk that students' rights will be forgotten in the world beyond special ed.*

Local school board autonomy remains a concern to the Coalition. The Ministry of Education may put new policies into place and issue directives, but some school boards still flaunt even the law itself, for some students. Where is the political leadership? This past year, the Ministry has been looking more closely at several school boards in a Special Education and Pilot Financial Review. They compared one board with no segregated Placements with another with a great many. They asked how practices are determined, how money is spent – and what the outcomes are. We encourage more such questions. *Governments claim that educational opportunities are improving equally across Ontario, but they let trustees and administrators determine school board directions. For example, how can some boards get away with simply not requesting a single penny in Special Equipment Amount funding? We are told that both levels of political accountability must be respected – since we have the power to elect trustees as well as MPPs. This means we must exercise our political rights – not just to vote, but to raise election issues – NOW.*

David Onley has just become Ontario's Lieutenant Governor. Affected by polio as a child, he has challenged stereotypes as a TV news person who uses canes and a motorized scooter. It was frustrating that his appointment was announced at a segregated sports facility, but he says he will work to improve all kinds of access. He has refused to enter Queen's Park through its back door ramp. He says accessibility means enabling all people to fulfill their full potential. As he asked for the help he needed to climb several steps at his investiture, he also said accessibility can be as simple as offering a hand to someone else.

(we need some final statement about the coalition's plans for the year – perhaps about new leadership cultivated through the PRO gatherings)