

A CALL TO ACTION – on the 10th Anniversary of The Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education

It was early in 1995; the Ontario government said that regular class placement should be normal practice in special education across the province. They knew schools had a lot to learn, and they entrusted us – the previously radical outsiders – to teach the teachers. Ten years ago this spring, the Building Inclusive Schools Project began. Schools applied – competed, in fact – to ask for our help and be accepted as our partners. Were networks important? The government thought so; it required various groups involved to work together, and that is how the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education came into being. Committed volunteers forged unprecedented and creative partnerships among people with disabilities, students, families, educators, administrators, government, faculties of education, teachers' unions, community advocates and friends.

Our 10th anniversary should be a time for celebration of the Coalition's enormous accomplishments. Instead it is a time of great crisis.

Consider this. In our first year, we had a \$200,000 grant from the Ontario government. From 2000-02, we received \$100,000 a year from the Trillium Foundation. *Our stewardship has been excellent.* Since 2002, we have squeaked by with a mere \$20,000 a year from Community Living Ontario's Community Inclusion projects. **But in April, the Coalition will be starved completely of funds and struggling to survive.**

Every project we've had has enabled us to expand and support this crucial advocacy network:

We have the expertise people desperately need:

- We both inform people across Ontario about provincial policy, and communicate with government about its impact upon students and teachers throughout the province.
- We understand the obstacles and we know how to overcome them.
- We help families across Ontario participate better in educational planning - to set the highest possible individualized learning goals relative to the provincial curriculum, to establish the required accommodations and to help students learn together.
- We challenge teachers and parents *to focus on students' strengths and to aim higher for their futures.* Heather Wilson Boast, who is now Director of Education in the Superior Greenstone District School Board, once told us our People First consultants, students and parents provided the most significant professional development of her career.
- Having learned a great deal about collaborative school cultures, co-operative classroom learning, and system restructuring, we understand that the educational change we seek for students with disabilities really means better education for all students. This means we have many, many allies in our work.

Not enough has changed. The Ministry of Education's major missions are to improve literacy and keep students in school. It concerns us when educational success is measured too narrowly, in terms of provincial (EQAO) test results. Educational improvement requires flexibility, not standardization.

We are glad to see civil servants working on better support to students in regular classroom placements. But too many teachers and families do not have access to information about effective inclusive education. Prejudice and discrimination persist. Most students labelled with intellectual disabilities are still segregated and held back by low expectations. Families that assert students' rights to regular class placements, often get worn down in the struggle to obtain effective accommodations. Schools too seldom accept the expertise of families and assistance of community agencies. Too many people find excuses, instead of solutions.

The time for ACTION is now - concerning:

The Special Education FUNDING FORMULA

Last summer, Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy persistently tracked problems and courageously stopped the Intensive Support Amount special education funding formula.

ISA has rewarded school boards with extra provincial funding when they documented student disability and failure. ISA funding kept increasing, and the number of Ontario students who were labelled as

severely disabled doubled over the past 2 years. But there was never any guarantee that ISA money would support those students. In fact, the Minister found that \$102 million was never spent at all - even while students have been denied support - and he took this money back from those schools boards involved. But because he hasn't decided what to do next, this money is still not helping our children and their teachers.

We appreciate that Minister Kennedy heard our analysis and stories of the harm ISA has done to our children's education, but the Ontario Public School Boards Association apparently was not listening to him or us. On February 4th, the trustees and administrators in OPSBA boldly proposed a funding formula just like ISA - that will let them continue to profit from prejudging and harming students – with even fewer checks and balances. They ignore the data the Minister compiled last summer. Kennedy will certainly not agree with their contention that “programs and services for students with special needs are a good deal better today than was the case five years ago”. If ISA is as transparent as OPSBA says, let them show parents the secret files they created to tell the Ministry about students' problems and promise how resources will be spent. We do not agree with OPSBA that parents “readily understand” and accept ISA; they have been fighting for years against its harmful effects. The Minister said he wants a new funding formula - to make sure special ed money is spent to ensure better outcomes for exceptional students.

The Ontario HUMAN RIGHTS Commission (OHRC) has just concluded a 2-year process of consultation and study, and released its **Guidelines on Accessible Education** (available at www.ohrc.on.ca). This sets the direction for change in education policy across Ontario and at each school board - not just about better "special" education, but to promote inclusion. Schools must prevent barriers by designing curriculum, teaching methods, staffing, evaluation, buildings, etc. so that all students can participate and benefit equally. Schools must also work to remove the physical, attitudinal, systemic and other barriers that already exist. School boards and the Ministry must make thorough attempts to find money and resources for accommodations that respect each student's dignity, individuality and confidentiality. Students with disabilities are entitled to *individualized* accommodations. To judge and support them according to disability labels and diagnoses is discriminatory, according to the OHRC Guidelines. This calls into question all special education policies and practices that promote or relate to disability labels and categories – and certainly the ISA “Profiles” and funding formula. Please see our complete analysis at www.inclusive-education.ca/resources/documents/OHRC_analysis_Nov_30_04.pdf. There may need to be major changes in provincial legislation and school board special ed plans. The Coalition has always said labels don't provide the information teachers need to teach. The best way to bring support to teachers is to involve students and families in collaborative planning.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS are “accommodation plans” under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The Coalition has asked both Minister Kennedy and Human Rights Commissioner Keith Norton to investigate the Ministry of Education's policy about IEPs – as expressed in its IEP Standards and a new 2004 IEP Resource Guide – because it seems to contravene the Ontario Human Rights Code. We are dismayed that schools have been instructed to write IEPs that prejudice and limit student achievement, limit available resources and do not ensure the removal of barriers. The Ministry's IEP policy needs to be greatly improved if we are ever to achieve the better outcomes the Minister calls for. For further analysis, please see www.inclusive-education.ca/resources/documents/IEP_analysis.pdf. OPSBA suggests that progress for some students exempted from provincial literacy and numeracy testing should be measured against their IEP goals and objectives. This means that IEP processes must be improved. School boards have grown ~~too~~ accustomed to setting low expectation for students, in order to get ISA funding. How will they ever learn to “aim higher”? Students cannot be blamed for failure, if they never received the resources they were known to need. The Human Rights code must be enforced, to ensure better individual planning and support.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services has begun a consultation process aimed at the **“TRANSFORMATION” OF DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES**. We know that students with disabilities have better opportunities for career planning, employment and lifelong learning when they have had meaningful academic support, relationships with non-disabled classmates, and broader life experiences. We must keep telling the government that a better future begins with a better education.

What can YOU do? What happens to improve education for ALL of our children depends on decisions of our politicians. They need to know how this affects our children's futures:

- Show people this information.
- Ask Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy and his political staff to remain courageous in opposing ISA funding and to take steps to improve IEPs and protect students' rights.
- Ask your local MPP to encourage the Minister of Education too. Explain exactly how this affects your son or daughter.
- Tell family, friends and neighbours about inclusive education and ask them to support us.
- Pull together your own ideas and your story about the benefits of inclusive education
- Get a newspaper, radio or TV station interested – the Coalition will provide background information.
- Contact your local school board trustee. Public board trustees are members of OPSBA, but may be unaware of their provincial group's proposal. Catholic trustees will want to take action too.
- Contact SEAC representatives on your school board. Right now, they have a legal duty to provide advice on school board special education budgets and planning. Most of the organizations represented there are vehemently opposed to ISA funding, and all are in agreement about improving IEPs to conform with the Human Rights Code
- Ask for the removal of any harmful or false information from your child's school file.
- Get more information and network support if you are being pressured to segregate or exclude your child.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT AND WHY YOU WANT IT

Teachers need information, but so do families. Advocacy is difficult, but you can achieve what you want for your son or daughter. So make sure you ask for what you really want. *For example: Too often there is unreasonable pressure for educational assistants to be "joined at the hip" to students, when they could be helping the teacher, encouraging friendships, and finding other accommodations.* It is a fact of human nature that academic learning improves when students feel welcome, feel good about themselves, and are helped to learn from one another. *Being pulled out of class too often for "therapy", means students never feel they belong in their own classrooms. Adults who have experienced segregation tell us they remember wanting the classroom teacher to be their teacher, and they hated being sent to "the little room down the hall". Danny D'Amore, of Windsor, was only 8 when he refused to go to a life skills room, saying that laundry should be done at home!* Social and academic learning go hand in hand, and neither should be compromised.

The best support for teachers is for parents to oppose the "one size fits all, "survival of the fittest" ideas about education, voiced by a small minority of people.

The best support parents have is the knowledge that all students benefit when individual differences are respected and celebrated in schools.

The Coalition will stay vital if it can find the funding to continue networking and also to offer training in your community to:

- build advocacy skills for inclusive education
- focus on capacity-building - for ourselves and our children
- invite partnerships with principals, teachers and schools, and practice working together
- consider how classroom subjects and activities can be adapted so that all children can participate in meaningful ways.
- improve career planning, employment and lifelong learning.

Be assured that the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education brings hundreds of allies together.

But we need you to advocate for us too!

Please consider making a donation today!

The Coalition can provide tax receipts for donations directed to the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education c/o Integration Action for Inclusion, 181 Cowan Blvd. Cambridge, ON N1T 1J8

Your support now will help to ensure the Coalition continues to provide networking and training.

We have learned from our children that everyone's contribution helps.

REACH US at www.inclusive-education.ca 416-531-8553 inclusion@sympatico.ca