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**Analysis of the Ministry of Education's 2005 Resource Guide
Planning Entry to School**

*which can be found on the Ministry of Education website at
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/planningentry.html>
and could be made available in every school in Ontario.*

Ontario's Deputy Minister of Education sent this Guide to all school boards November 28, 2005, with huge expectations, saying that it is meant

- "to improve educational outcomes for all students"
- "to increase the capacity of schools to effectively address the strengths and needs of a wider range of learners" and
- to build "more cooperative relationships between schools and families, particularly those with children who may be facing significant learning challenges"¹.

The Resource Guide acknowledges that the entry into school of children who are considered to have special needs "is more complex and requires careful planning"², involving partnerships among schools, families and communities. It is ironic that the Ministry itself did not engage in broader consultation when it prepared this Guide.

The Ministry Guide outlines general principles in planning and provides examples. The best parts of the Guide are about those less controversial aspects of planning about which schools are less likely to have needed assistance. The Ministry does not take a leadership role to improve the process by establishing provincial policy or prescribing practices to be followed. Readers of the Guide are likely to conclude that the Ministry must consider exemplary those practices described in its Appendix A.

The Ontario Coalition is concerned about some of the practices referred to in this Resource Guide.

Parents lie awake nights when we are about to send our beautiful little ones off into the world. This rite of passage can be a celebration - aren't parents supposed to feel relief when "the birdies leave the nest"? But it can be so frightening, especially when we know some children are not able to "fly" on their own. Some may always need support to learn and to experience the joys of "flight". Most parents haven't been in a school for a long time, when we first contemplate how school will treat our children. But if we understand how our child was supported in an inclusive pre-school, we already know what will work in kindergarten. Success does not mean documenting, treating or overcoming the child's challenges, but calls for the acceptance and creativity of adults.

We encourage families, allies and advocates to think carefully about the following:

- a. It is assumed that early identification will lead to early intervention³. But what results are really expected from that intervention? Is there an assumption that disabilities can be "cured"? What about children who face more significant and ongoing health and developmental challenges?
- b. This Guide encourages parents and community agencies to share information well before students come to school⁴. We advise parents to be very careful about what information they share with

¹ Memo from Deputy Minister of Education Ben Levin to all Directors of Education dated November 28, 2005

² Planning Entry to School Resource Guide Page 5

³ Page 23 and pages 75-76. See also www.fairstart.ca re the Thunder Bay "Fair Start" partnership

⁴ Page 21 and page 28

- schools. They need to think about how assessment information will alter educational programming – positively? or negatively?
- c. No information can be shared with a school without parental consent⁵. Your childcare and healthcare personnel should not send information directly to the school and should not talk to school staff about your child, unless you agree about what information is to be shared.
 - d. Childcare, medical and even school staff may not have been informed that in 2004 the Ministry of Education stopped the harmful Intensive Support Amount funding formula. ISA was called “diagnosis for dollars” because it meant school boards could get more provincial funding when they gathered negative assessments and documented student problems. This funding could be spent elsewhere and did not ensure that a student would get needed support. Next year, it appears that special education funding will no longer dependent upon numbers of students deemed to be “needy”, but relates mostly to the school board’s total population.
 - e. Parents and agencies should know that no information should be put into, or kept in a students Ontario Student Record (the OSR file that is kept in the school office, which all school staff can see) unless it is both accurate and “conducive to the improvement of instruction”⁶.
 - f. Students do suffer from prejudgments. Assessments and screening results show only what skills a child demonstrates on that particular test, on that particular day, under those circumstances, as compared with other children. They cannot and should not be used to predict the child’s educational future.⁷ We are also concerned that kindergarten teachers are being called upon to use “predictive screening tools to determine which students may be at-risk for future school difficulties, classroom based interventions to support those students, and formative assessment tools to measure their ongoing progress throughout the year(s).”⁸
 - g. The Ministry definition of the Developmental Disability label prejudices, by stating what students are predicted to *not – ever -* be capable of achieving academically, socially and economically.
 - h. The screening tools used for early identification may not be valid for students with certain disabilities. For example, a student with motor differences will not be able to perform the same physical tasks as other children now (or perhaps ever), but that is no indication that his potential for learning is less. Some students may not be able to achieve their potential unless augmentative communication or assistive technology help is provided.
 - i. The Ministry of Education is starting to promote inclusion through universal design for learning⁹, but too many classrooms and schools are set up for typically-developing children. It is not information about disabilities as much as information about learning styles, motivation and strengths that will help school teams (involving parents) to establish those disability-related accommodations to which students are entitled under the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Ontario Education Act.¹⁰
 - j. The Resource Guide refers to “the skills the child will require for a successful entry to school”¹¹ This is wrong. There should never be any expectation that students with disabilities must gain skills prior to entering kindergarten. Instead, the focus of transitional planning should be on developing the kindergarten’s teacher’s and the school team’s skills in inclusive design and creating individual plans for support.
 - k. Those plans must relate to one student at a time, as an individual, and not the potentially discriminatory exceptionality category or disability label. “The Welcome Checklist for Elementary Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders”¹² says it is “All About Me”. However, if the awareness training for all staff is about “autism”, it could be too generalized and intrusive.
 - l. The Guide proposes a Planning Calendar¹³ that suggests different processes for children with special needs prior to starting school. We know that some Boards send students directly to

⁵ For more information, see the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Health Care Consent Act, 1996

⁶ Ontario Student Record Guidelines <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/osr/osr.html#9>

⁷ For more information, see http://www.inclusive-education.ca/resources/documents/psych_testing.php

⁸ for more information, see <http://www.ldao.ca/wbtt/index.php#intro>

⁹ See Education for All: The Expert Panel Report on Literacy and Numeracy for Students with Special Education Needs: Kindergarten to Grade 6 at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/speced/panel/speced.pdf>

¹⁰ For more information, see www.inclusive-education.ca/resources/documents/OHRC_analysis_nov_30_04.pdf

¹¹ Page 29

¹² Pages 71-74 from the Ottawa Carleton Catholic school board

¹³ Pages 26-27

segregated classes based on the case conferences recommended here. All too often we see that students who are identified early as having disabilities are also immediately streamed away from kindergarten. (The Toronto District Board has established segregated classes called Kindergarten Intensive Program, Diagnostic Kindergarten, and Kindergarten Language Intervention.)

- m. This Guide includes one example where a school board advises determining “school placements required” and discussing “placement options” with parents before schools even start to gather information about the individual students.¹⁴ Parents should know that no student is to be segregated unless there has been an Identification Placement Review Committee meeting (IPRC) first and parents have extensive rights to appeal IPRC Placement decisions. The Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education can provide information about parents’ and students’ rights.¹⁵
- n. The Guide suggests that preschool agencies share “successful preschool program strategies”¹⁶ Parents might need agency help to communicate not just the “special needs of the child” but also the child’s strengths, friendships, interests, etc. Get help from friends and allies so you can take a sentence listing your child’s 3 main strengths – as a powerful mantra – to meetings! Parents often need allies who know students’ rights, understand inclusive education and will accompany parents not just to meetings but all along the often difficult journey as they learn to advocate for their children in the school system.

Parents may find a very old Ministry of Education document helpful. Created ‘way back in 1978, and revised in 1982, *Policy and Program Memorandum #11* expressed government leadership about accommodating students as they begin school. It still governs school board activity and can still be found at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/11.html>.

Find out all you can about effective, inclusive education; so you will be convinced that what you want is right, attainable and worth the struggle. Inclusive education means all students receive support to learn as members of a regular classroom, participating in and contributing to their own neighbourhood school – the one their brothers and sisters and neighbours attend. Teaching methods are adapted in ways that can enrich education for all students, and that do not necessarily cost more money.

Every child’s strongest right is to just show up at the neighbourhood school. It cannot turn any student away, unless parents give up, or exhaust their considerable rights of appeal. It hurts parents so much when principals reject our children – but maybe they are just trying to make their own lives easier. School boards want us to believe that it’s only those “special” places that have the expertise and resources that even want kids with disabilities. But we have a long shameful history of sending people with disabilities away from society. Many never come back. Even now, students who go to segregated classes and schools live separate lives, and can become strangers. You are part of a struggle for social justice – for better education and full citizenship. So talk to other parents; don’t go alone to meetings; ask for help from your child’s resource teacher or support worker; visit schools; be your child’s strongest champion.

Expect the very best from educators and administrators; keep expecting them to care about *all* kids. Make them accountable; every child is part of the future we share. Be “real” together: if their comments hurt you, tell them. Invite educators and administrators to take off those hats. Maybe they are parents too – how would they feel? But celebrate good teamwork too. You know your child best, while the teacher knows all about kindergarten. Curriculum builds upon what kids CAN do, not what they cannot; so good planning doesn’t mean just anticipating problems. While your child’s challenges may be different, they are not likely the greatest that teachers ever face. Imagine Monday morning in Kindergarten: what will it take to include your child – even 15 minutes at a time? Kids thrive in families, and we didn’t get advance instructions! Don’t accept excuses; find solutions. Change can be difficult, but the good news is that inclusive education is better for everyone. Just ask the kids!

¹⁴ Page 70 Appendix 13 re Rainbow District School Board

¹⁵ Go to www.inclusive-education.ca

¹⁶ Page 28 - 29