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BACK TO SCHOOL BULLETIN - September 2004

A glimmer of hope has been revived for effective inclusive education across Ontario, as school begins for another year. Certainly lots of students and even some of their teachers wish the summer could have lasted much longer. Parents advocating for their sons and daughters are always worried, as September approaches.

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. But announcements made by Ontario's Ministry of Education over the summer do encourage the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education. We have struggled against an unjust system of funding for a long time. Dare we hope it has stopped? We dearly want to get back to collaborating to ensure that support is available for students of all abilities to learn together as members of regular classrooms. We are concerned that trust has been eroded and we want to make sure partnerships are re-established.

Effective inclusion is about the way schools respect all individual differences. *It is about finding solutions, not excuses.* For by finding ways to keep students learning together and interdependently, segregated placements and unnecessary withdrawals from the class can be avoided. *Teachers must get to know their students as individuals and be committed to each one's success.* As they develop daily lesson plans to involve everyone, teachers come to understand what additional supports they may need to teach the students of varying abilities, who all belong in their classrooms. Those who know the student best – parents, other students, last year's teacher, childcare and recreation support people – all need to share positive strategies. *The Coalition encourages school teams to see the student's strengths and to aim higher for the future.* 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. So this is an important time.

Respectful collaborative teamwork is needed to bring help quickly to the student, the teacher and the whole class.

All students have a legal right to enrol in regular classrooms, and the law requires that considerable extra support be provided there, before segregation is ever considered. Most school boards in Ontario closed segregated schools for students with intellectual disabilities many years ago. The Coalition is inspired by those individual schools, certain school boards, and indeed the entire province of New Brunswick - that plan flexibly for students without needing any segregated class placements. Parents hear so much about there not being enough money – ever! But that must not stop us in our search for what is best for our sons and daughters, *as is their right.* And we know that good planning makes best use of available funding.

School boards receive provincial grants of many kinds. One is called the Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) whereby amounts are set annually for elementary and secondary students and boards calculate total grants according to their overall enrolment figures. As well, there have been four types of Intensive Support Amount (ISA) funding. ISA #1 reimburses school boards for costly types of specialized equipment needed by individual students. ISA #2 and #3 bring school boards an additional \$12,000 and \$27,000 for every student they document in ways that match provincial criteria. This has been described by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario as harmful and wasteful "diagnosis for dollars". Documentation is more straightforward and less demeaning for students who have physical and sensory impairments. But funding is obtained only when other students are seen to be incapable of earning high school credits, and some are pre-judged as incapable of academic learning altogether. This money need not be spent on the students whose documentation warranted it. In fact, the money need not be spent at all! For many years, the Coalition has documented the horrific damage done by the ISA formula.

At last it seems that Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy sees the problem and has begun to address it.

In particular, the Ministry says "ISA will be replaced over the next year". The relationship between the Ministry of Education and Ontario's 72 school boards has changed. The Minister himself persistently and courageously asked questions, met with administrators and looked over their books - financial, that is. Late this July, he announced what he had learned and what is to be done. (We call your attention to the July 28th. And August 4th. documents from the Ministry of Education from which we quote, below - one of which is also available on the Ministry website at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/ssn/index.html)

Here is what he found, and has revealed:

- It is unacceptable that **almost twice as many Ontario students are now "labelled as severely disabled" in order to get ISA funding** - compared to only 2 years ago. These increases occurred across the province, but in some boards much more than others (We can tell you how your Board fared).
- The Ministry now echoes what the Coalition has said along: **the ISA 2 and 3 "system rewards negative descriptions and there is no funding incentive to reward progress"**. Some boards even admitted that ISA statistics reflect "created need", resulting from their school systems' deficiencies. Furthermore, the Ministry says "the increased labelling of students raises the prospect of custodial care rather than education."
- Boards now admit that ISA documentation was a lot of work, taking resources away from actually helping students. The Ministry now questions whether ISA documentation "has become an end in itself" and "whether the considerable resources invested in the process influence the outcome".
- In 1998-99, this cost Ontario taxpayers almost \$516 million. It appears that the provincial cost has now soared to \$926 million. And the Ministry states: **"Despite the large investment in question, there is no requirement to demonstrate good outcomes."**
- It has finally been revealed that **millions of dollars of this money was never even spent**. The Ministry says provincial special education grants *left unspent* by school boards climbed from \$9 million in 2001-02, all the way up to \$85 million a year later. By this summer, \$102 million intended for special education in Ontario was sitting idle in school board reserves. More than half of Ontario's school boards accumulated what the Ministry calls "large special education surpluses" – even those engaged in legal action against parents, and perhaps even as students' needs were going unmet. Boards with surpluses say funding approvals came so late in 2002-03 that money could not be spent – but why was it not spent the following year? And if some boards did manage to spend all of their money; how did that happen? Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs) have a mandate to advise every school board about special education planning, but many have a lot of unanswered questions about the budget information to which they should be legally entitled.
- It is appalling that provincial grants for 2003-04 were only just confirmed – so long after the school year ended. But school boards do get to carry last year's increases into next year, and their base levels of funding are higher this year than last.
- Boards that still had large surpluses at the end of this August will have next school year's funding reduced by an amount the Ministry calls "calculated underspending". School boards affected are angry, and call this a "clawback". But the money involved will establish a provincial **Effectiveness and Equity Fund**, to which boards can apply for specific financial assistance this school year.
- The Ministry has analyzed boards' staffing plans, showing all of the new staff who were in place last school year, thanks to the provincial grant increases. The Ministry states: **"The reasonable expectation of parents is that funding and staffing increases will equal educational improvement"**. To this end, the Ministry is setting up the **Effectiveness and Efficiency Office**, setting conditions and promising audits.
- **ISA #1** reimburses school boards for certain expensive equipment that individual students may need, to learn. This year the Ministry does not require proof of purchase, but says visits will be made – right into classrooms – to make sure it is being used as required.
- An important part of the harmful funding formula still remains. **Special Incidence Portion (SIP)** funding (another \$27,000) comes to boards if they show that a student requires two additional staff at all times, because of severe behaviour problems. This discourages proactive alternative

support measures, and can make some students more aggressive and vulnerable to suspension and expulsion. The board keeps the money even if the student does not attend school regularly.

But the good news is that there IS more special education money in Ontario this year. More importantly, we hope there will be better attention to learning.

The Education Act defines “special education program” as:

- “in respect of AN exceptional PUPIL” (not a group)
- “based on and modified by continuous assessment and evaluation” - of how that student learns
- “containing specific objectives” - for that student
- “containing an outline of educational services that meets the needs of the exceptional pupil”

This means support should come to individual students right where they belong - in regular classrooms in their own neighbourhood schools. Program then does not mean congregating and segregating students. And it means “programming” for exceptional students must not be prejudged by limiting disability labels – as the Ontario Human Rights Commission strongly concluded in its 2003 Consultation Report The Opportunity to Succeed: Achieving Barrier-free Education for Students with Disabilities.

So IEPs are crucial, and now is IEP season!

(The law says most should be written before October 20th. - to assist this year’s teachers.)

We want the Ministry to enforce its Regulation 181 which 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. Between 2001 and 2003, the Ministry reviewed IEP practices in all school boards, and found that more attention needed to be paid to connecting individual objectives to the provincial curriculum, to assisting classroom teachers and to communicating with parents.

ISA was a horrific outcome measure”, but will it truly disappear? What will take its place? And SIP remains – we are cynical enough to expect plenty of new applications.

**What does it take to ensure that schools and families work together?
to “see the strengths and aim higher for their future”?**

There is no need to focus on what students cannot do, just how they can use their strengths, what learning is next and what is needed to move forward.

Now that the Ministry says it will require boards to report “progress made by students with special needs relative to planned expectations”, the big question is **who gets to decide how high to aim?** The Minister seems to agree with us that schools have become too used to negative planning. We have seen too many IEPs that set low expectations for students and the system, in order to match ISA’s negative criteria for funding. We know this increased the pressure to sideline some students into segregated settings with only Lifeskills objectives. Instead, we urge the Ministry to follow the example of Lakehead District School Board which aims to set literacy goals for all of its students.

**Who will ensure that the highest possible individualized objectives
are set and monitored, in every Ontario school board?**

Perhaps we already have the tools for improvement:

- ❖ The vast amount of time and money school boards poured into documentation for ISA funding can now be re-directed – to bring support quickly to classroom teachers so that students will succeed there.
- ❖ The new Effectiveness and Equity Fund could achieve much – especially if it provides professional development for inclusion - but only if it is accountable to the real stakeholders - students and their families. All we know so far is that “Boards will be given a say”.
- ❖ There may need to be some mediation to ensure that the law is enforced. The Ministry has said for 10 years that regular class placement should be the normal practice - and it certainly is not, for students with certain exceptionalities. And why should school boards differ so much with respect to special education, when the Ministry has said curriculum should be set and monitored provincially.
- ❖ “Effectiveness” and “Equity” will only be gained if teachers receive the training they need to adapt instructional strategies, and assist their students to learn collaboratively.
- ❖ The Coalition hopes to assist the Ministry by offering the collaborative professional development we have developed and delivered in our projects since 1995.

- ❖ The *National Summit on Inclusive Education* is being held in Ottawa (November 24-26th, 2004), thanks to the work of The Canadian Association for Community Living with the Canadian Teachers' Federation, The Conference Board of Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, and others. *This will show that better educational outcomes are a national priority.*

We hope the Ministry will continue to look closely over the shoulders of Ontario's school boards, improve accountability to students, taxpayers, and communities, and encourage and recognize effective inclusive policies and practices.

In the future... the Effectiveness and Efficiency Office promises to promote school board co-operation and effective practices...

The Ministry promises to audit boards and to visit classrooms; and is considering checking whether...

- ✓ early assessment is available,
- ✓ academic achievement occurs,
- ✓ IEPs are evaluated,
- ✓ parents are satisfied, and
- ✓ incidents and suspensions are reduced.

In the meantime, let Education Minister Gerard Kennedy know if a student you know is having difficulty getting support – he said he expects educational improvements, and so do we. 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.

Is anybody listening to students and parents?

Research shows that students' educations improve when their parents are involved. The Coalition grew out of its successful *Building Inclusive Schools* Project, and knows how crucial collaboration is for students with disabilities.

Parents: Make sure we advocate – not for just more money, and not always for staff such as educational assistants – but for the support plan that will ensure our sons and daughters are successfully included.

Learn all we can - to be sure our efforts help establish the path we truly want for our sons and daughters.

The Coalition would be pleased to work with you to present training for students, parents, educators, advocates in your community – detailing practical planning processes.

Premier Dalton McGuinty himself announced this Spring that educational improvement is a top priority.

Presently only about 50% of Ontario students meet the provincial standard for literacy. His government has committed to smaller primary class sizes, and additional literacy and numeracy teachers in all schools – so that 25% more of Ontario's students might pass the standardized tests established under the Education Equality and Accountability Office (EQAO) the previous government established. But we fear this could mean the remaining 25% students are not a provincial priority. And the EQAO Grade 10 literacy test was designed to ensure some students will never graduate from high school – no matter how they succeed otherwise, not matter what accommodations are in their IEPs.

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 resources. And we know that effective inclusive education benefits ALL students and their teachers – it isn't "special" or new; it's good education.

Here is an inspiring example, from parent and SEAC member Kathy Payne Mercer in Port Perry:

My daughter just finished grade 8 and is moving on to high school this week.

We had the opportunity in June to have all Laura's teachers from kindergarten to grade 8 get together. Each of the teachers commented that they learned so much from having Laura in their class. Not only did they see that inclusion works but also they also learned teaching techniques that they then used with all their students.

*We were fortunate to have such an open and willing-to-learn group of teachers
So far our experience with the high school has been equally as positive and open
to making it work. We're keeping our fingers crossed.*

Like Kathy and Laura – **we are concerned yet hopeful, and ready to improve education right now.**