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As school began this year, a Toronto parent wrote to Education Minister Gerard Kennedy:

"I have relied heavily on the Coalition's web site and information in the past...as well as personal help via. phone and email, and a weekend conference that was held a few years back. They were able to link me to other parents who are active with the Ontario community living association for help with advocacy. They sent me vital resources via email. They connected me to the most up to date government internet links. They informed me of current policy. They provided a life line at my lowest moments during the continually exhausting fight to keep my daughter fully integrated when every year the IPRC recommendation is full segregation... This Coalition is crucial in terms of educating parents, educators, even government officials about inclusive education."

Ten years ago, it was to outsiders who had challenged the school system - people with intellectual disabilities and families – that the Ontario government turned, to lead a process of school change throughout the province. The education ministry had begun a new policy of "integration", and knew schools needed to provide better support for students with disabilities to learn as members of regular classrooms, in their neighbourhood schools. The *Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education* was created, to lead the *Building Inclusive Schools Project*. Schools applied – competed, in fact – to ask for the Coalition's help, to be accepted as partners. Thus, the Coalition has provided collaborative professional development to elementary and secondary, public and Catholic, French and English schools – in communities across Ontario. A series of other projects has extended the Coalition's contributions and expanded its expertise.

It is just such training that is recommended now by the Education Ministry's Working Table on Special Education Reform. The Coalition can help Ontario schools apply available research-based practices and make better use of available funding - to bring support quickly to students and teachers.

What motivates schools to change?

Some of the Coalition's most effective leaders have been people who themselves were assessed as having an intellectual disability, segregated in school, isolated throughout life, lacking in job skills, left for years in "lifeskills programs". The Coalition has created unprecedented partnerships among people with disabilities, students, families, educators, administrators, government, faculties of education, teachers' unions, community advocates and friends - across Ontario and beyond. At our training gatherings, participants take off their various "hats", and share ideas and inspiration to improve education - because we all want a *better* future for the students.

Education For All: The Expert Panel Report, on Literacy and Numeracy for Students with Special Educational Needs, K. to Gr. 6, asks that teachers design instruction that respects and supports the diverse learning styles of their students.

This fits well with recommendations released last Fall, by the *Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC)*, in its Guidelines on Accessible Education.

The Coalition knows that Ontario students labeled with intellectual disabilities are usually forced into segregated classes and schools. A Ministry 2001-03 Review of Individual Education Plans revealed that exceptional students are too often relegated to alternative "lifeskills" and behavioural programming, and that better efforts must be made to modify the provincial curriculum. The "Safe Schools" review is alarmed that many students are denied an education altogether. So we wonder: will "all" really mean "all"? The Coalition can identify new resources and offer straightforward training to help teachers plan lessons that connect students to the provincial curriculum and to their classmates.

The Expert Panel report encourages teamwork among teachers, but puts little emphasis on parent involvement, even though research shows this is a key factor for student academic success. The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) unilaterally received \$25 million in professional development money from the province. Administrators decide how to use this money in accordance with the Expert Panel recommendations, without necessarily involving parents. Again, we wonder: will all students really benefit?

So we are pleased that the Ministry's recently announced Parent Involvement Policy recognizes the need for meaningful parent involvement in schools, and provides local, regional and provincial support and funding.

Although the law changed in 1998 to require collaboration with parents and older students and to develop accommodations through Individual Education Planning, schools too rarely welcome parents as partners, and too often waste resources on paperwork that does not bring help into classrooms. Coalition training helps families understand school challenges and yet convey their priorities and motivate schools to raise learning objectives for their sons and daughters. We also help schools to resolve conflicts by learning how to involve parents as a key part of the learning community.

The work of the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education has been structured around the four elements empirically identified to be necessary in school restructuring efforts:

- **Knowledge of effective instructional strategies for diverse classrooms**
- **Building collaboration**
- **Creating a common vision**
- **Dealing with change**

*Inclusion is something that changes over time –
it is a series of small adjustments, not just a replicated model.*

Inclusion creates opportunities for people to learn

- We advise government about effective policies, based on our knowledge of practices in place across the province and on sound pedagogy.
- We inform local communities about provincial policy and communicate with government about its impact upon students and teachers across Ontario.
- We train families across Ontario to participate better in educational planning – understand students' rights.
- We provide teachers with information about effective inclusive and with strategies to adapt classroom instruction so that all children can learn, contribute and participate in meaningful ways.
 - ✓ Heather Wilson Boast, recently retired Director of Education in the Superior Greenstone District School Board, said the Coalition self-advocates and families had provided the most significant professional development of her career.
 - ✓ International students wrote: "We had a good time and experienced great things in Canada. Thank you so much! When we came back in Korea, we wrote a report about a person with disabilities focused on inclusive education in Canada."
 - ✓ A New Brunswick parent said: "Good newsletter. An amazing amount of positive content."
 - ✓ A Greater Toronto MPP's office wrote: "This is excellent information and I thank you sincerely for all the assistance you have provided over the past weeks ... to help our office. We'd have been lost without you."
 - ✓ A Toronto Special Education Resource Teacher asked: "I am greatly interested in promoting full integration and inclusion at my school... Would you be able to help me to access more information, i.e. newspaper articles, magazines, periodicals, books about integration and inclusion at the highschool level?"
 - ✓ A Windsor parent who is a member of a Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) responded: "Great work you are doing! I get wonderful information... that supports my knowledge base and work at SEAC."

Inclusion means all school staff, students and parents work together as a team in partnership – not in isolation.

- ✓ From an educational assistant in Niagara: “It’s been a long time since there have been encouraging words! Thanks for sharing them and thanks for your ongoing commitment!”
- ✓ From a Toronto parent: “I just wanted to thank you so much for the time you took out of your busy schedule to help me yesterday. I went into today’s meeting feeling calm and comfortable. I wrote down everything which also helped to keep me calm. I think that it took the wind out of the sails of the woman who called the meeting as the meeting was not adversarial at all.”
- ✓ From a Kenora organization which works closely with First Nations communities: “Thank you for your ongoing energies and commitment in fighting for the rights for persons who have a disability. We as parents thank you - we as community agencies also thank you.”

“Inclusion is a fundamental belief that considers each person an important, accepted member of the school and community”.

- Teachers and parents must *focus on students’ strengths and aim higher for their futures.*
 - ✓ A Toronto parent wrote: “Thank you very much for your voicing your opinion far more eloquently than I can about how important it is for kids like (my son) to feel they belong. As much as I want (him) to have friends for social reasons, I forget how critical it is to learning and don’t use this reasoning as much as I should when I advocate for opportunities for social interactions.”
- We create leadership opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities – in particular, by establishing mentorships with high school students, teachers, and families.
- We conduct research to demonstrate 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.
 - ✓ Wayne McKay said: “*Sometimes the language of inclusion, mainstreaming, destreaming, integration, etc., is used interchangeably. Sometimes this language is even utilized as political rhetoric because these words conjure up notions of equality. But equality, in real life is not so easy as a political slogan. Equality is often messy, requiring tough balancing acts. More than anything though, the language of equality is about belonging, about equal ‘concern, respect, and consideration’... ‘Belonging. Such an achingly simple word. It conjures up some of our deepest yearnings, and for some of us, perhaps our most painful memories. Equality claims begin and end with a desire for belonging for community. Ideas of equality lie at the heart of the Canadian promise of community’. The language of equality is also about the equal benefit and protection of the law. When we talk about education, the benefits are enormous.*”

Inclusion is characterized by an attitude of problem solving to discover what is possible... not placing blame, getting stuck or giving up. Inclusion is ‘solution-oriented’.

- The Lakehead SEAC works closely with its Board-wide Council of School Councils and makes use of information from the Coalition. The SEAC Chair says: “We sit at the tables that make decisions regarding the kids we represent. Not everyone is on the same page but lots are. There are a lot of things happening in our schools that we are very happy with. We keep working at changing the rest of it and for the most part, we enjoy working with those making the changes.” She hopes the Ministry of Education’s new Parent Involvement funding can “be extended to the Coalition given the wealth of experience and ability to make things happen.”

The Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education brings together hundreds of allies. We can prevent conflict and ensure cost-effective accommodations for students with disabilities. Better yet... we can encourage alternatives to “one size fits all, “survival of the fittest” ideas about education to improve schools in ways that benefit all students and their teachers.