

May 20, 2004

Hon. Dalton McGuinty
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Dear Sir:

It is surely a good sign for Ontario students that you take such an interest in their education. On April 22nd., you said – with great passion – that you would stake your reputation on improving educational outcomes. We want to know how this will help ALL students – *including* those who have disabilities

Since 1995, we have worked collaboratively all across Ontario on a number of projects to improve education. Your government will be interested in the unprecedented partnerships we encourage among students, people with disabilities, families, educators, administrators, community support people, teacher federations and faculties of education. The government actually brought our Coalition together; so it was frustrating that we seemed to be set aside, as if we were a “special interest group”. History shows that being called “special” has sometimes done considerable harm to people with disabilities. *People First Ontario* members tell us they wasted their school years in “life skills” activities, and then learned to read and write as adults. They challenge us to prove that “special ed.” is either “special” or “education”. In fact, the Provincial Auditor posed the same question in 1993 and again in 2001. Do not set a separate table for discussion about special education. Please let us demonstrate how truly inclusive education means better education for all students and better support for their teachers. We can help you improve educational outcomes for all.

For the past 20 years, we have seen too many special education resources wasted on Identification and Placement. “Identification” attaches labels to students, which do not provide teachers with the information they need to teach, but all too often prejudge what students “cannot do”. “Placement” encourages school boards to remove “exceptional” students. We have seen that segregating them away from their neighbourhoods and congregating them among other children having difficulty does not improve their education.¹

In spite of legal changes and Individual Education Plan Standards, extreme differences in educational opportunities persist among Ontario's school boards. We have been appalled to hear from families across Ontario that children with developmental disabilities are

¹ An interesting study was conducted by your new Children's Minister Marie Bountrogianni, in 1995, when she worked as a school board psychologist. She found that her board segregated students at a much higher rate than the provincial average, but the cost of additional support when provided in regular classrooms was one third of the additional cost of segregated classes. However, these students seldom returned to the mainstream, and the board did not know whether they were doing any better at all.

forced to be segregated and are denied academic opportunities – particularly since Intensive Support Amount (ISA) funding rewarded boards for student failure. So we appreciate that you want to help every student “achieve the highest level of achievement that his or her ability and willingness to work hard will permit”. Your government aims to ensure that 75% of Ontario’s students reach a high level of academic achievement by age 12. But what do you propose for the other 25% of our sons and daughters? Will they also pursue literacy goals? Will they get the help of tutors, literacy teachers and summer camps to improve achievement? What if they cannot pass the grade 10 literacy test and will never graduate from high school, no matter how hard they work and how well they succeed with individual learning objectives? Will they establish networks, gain skills and have experiences that we know promote future employment?

We agree with you that “all students should be and feel safe at school and in their schoolyards”. A Toronto Task Force condemns current legislation as “a tool to get rid of the student who seems to have problems, rather than getting rid of the problems”. It is apparent that students with disabilities and from racial minorities do not feel safe, and experience arbitrary exclusion from school, altogether.² We have informed your Education Minister Gerard Kennedy that the Intensive Support Amount funding formula makes thousands of children with disabilities especially vulnerable.³ How will you ensure “responsibility, respect and results”? Children learn from adults’ actions, not just their words. We have proposed solutions. What will be done to change the Safe Schools Act and the special education funding formula?

We too understand that Ontario needs “a curriculum that recognizes that kids aren’t standard”. But surely this means that outcomes must be measured in ways other than Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results, which exclude many exceptional students. Teachers tell us that what they are taught about EQAO testing is the opposite of what they were taught about improving the Ontario curriculum. And, for the past 3 years of the Ministry’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) Review, the Deputy Minister found that too little attempt was made to connect exceptional students to provincial academic objectives. We see that removing all students perceived as “different” can lead to the erroneous assumption that those remaining in regular classrooms are all “the same”.

² The Toronto District School Board’s Task Force on Safe and Compassionate Schools has found that parents of students with disabilities and from racial minorities feel they are especially vulnerable under the current Safe Schools Act. (How appalling it is that almost 6000 children - more than one third of students suspended in that board in 2002-03 - were 10 years of age and under.)

³ We presented documentation to the Minister showing that ISA funding criteria made 36,000 Ontario students vulnerable to exclusion from school altogether last year – an increase of 23,000 in 2 years. Minister Kennedy seemed especially interested that the previous government had ignored the advice of its Education Ministry staff to avoid human rights violations, and promote respectful individual communication and behavioural support. With ARCH (A Legal Resource Centre for Persons with Disabilities), we presented the Education Minister with a no-cost law reform proposal to keep students safe from arbitrary removal from school. We have been waiting since December 4th for an answer. We received no response to our letter of January 29th. to the Minister, asking for his leadership to take away the power of school principals to ban their own students from school premises without appeal.

It has been our experience that the best way to help ALL students is by effectively *including* those who have disabilities. However, inclusion is NOT about students with disabilities; it is NOT about "special needs", but instead focuses on and fosters strengths. Inclusive education involves unconditional acceptance of all the children from a given neighbourhood, as individuals in all their diversity, with their parents as partners. They learn together with and from each other. The varied learning styles, interests and abilities present in every classroom require teachers to have a variety of skills, techniques and knowledge – in order to foster a love of learning in every child.⁴

We are alarmed to hear about the growth of private schools and want to help you strengthen public education. We reject elitism and think most Ontario parents and educators want schools to welcome the challenge of diversity.

We can help you to demonstrate the effective classroom strategies that enable all students to learn better together, through a project that encourages school and community collaboration. We can help make that “ladder of opportunity” you passionately strive for accessible to all of our sons and daughters. Please arrange for us to discuss possibilities with your staff. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Patty Gillis
Chair

⁴ The 2000 World Education Forum, stated that *Inclusion in Education*

- provides “the support necessary to enable schools to encourage the highest achievement of all learners”
- is not about “special educational needs” but about removing “barriers to learning and participating”
- sees “the development of a supportive community for staff and learners” to be “as important as the encouragement of academic attainment”
- increases “the capacity of the staff” and “the responsiveness of lessons - to respond to the diversity of learners”
- means “learning and teaching are varied and differentiated, collaborative, active, and draw on all available resources within teachers and other staff, learners, parents/carers and communities”