

## *Special Education in Ontario: Do We Care Where We're Going?*

Special education began in Ontario in 1908 with the creation by the Hospital for Sick Children of an open-air class on Toronto Island. In 1910, the Special Classes Act was passed, legalizing the few special classes that already had opened in large cities. The first course for teachers of special classes was given at Wellesley School in the summer of 1916.<sup>1</sup> However, it was not until 1980, with the passing of Bill 82, that universal access for all school-age children, regardless of special needs, was written into the Education Act.

Today, the Education Act and Regulations in Ontario require school boards to provide an appropriate education for their exceptional students. Special education is made available for students with communication, behaviour, physical, intellectual and multiple exceptionalities. Exceptional students are entitled to regular education services plus a layer of special education services and programs required to meet their individual needs. Boards must use grants designated for special education to provide this additional layer.

Boards must submit annually a Special Education Plan to the Ministry of Education for approval.<sup>2</sup> The plan details the special education programs and services provided by the board, including how it uses its Special Education Per Pupil Amount and Intensive Support Amount grants.

Approximately 10 percent of elementary and secondary school students are formally identified as exceptional by Identification Placement and Review Committees. Another 10 percent receive special education support without formal identification. Some students are eligible for intensive daily special education assistance from a specialist teacher. For others, the support is less direct. It involves specialist teachers and regular class teachers planning program modifications collaboratively for delivery by the regular teacher. The degree and type of extra assistance depend on the nature and degree of special need. Specialist teachers, educational assistants, psychologists, diagnosticians, consultants and other support staff may be included in the special education team. Individualized equipment

and learning materials also may be provided within the special education program.

An Individual Education Plan must be developed for each formally identified exceptional student.<sup>3</sup> The Individual Education Plan describes in detail the special services, modifications and accommodations that will be provided. A blind 10-year-old child, for example, may require the teaching of special skills, such as Braille. The delivery of this pupil's Grade 5 program will include other modifications, such as increased oral input. Similarly, program modifications will be required for a Grade 8 student with an intellectual delay. The program typically would focus more on the reading and mathematics skills necessary for everyday activities, such as cooking or shopping, than on complex, abstract reasoning. These program adjustments and any others appropriate to identified individual needs must be included in the student's Individual Education Plan.

Significant collaboration is necessary among educators and other professionals such as those with Health, Corrections, and Community and Social Services. Together, team members assist children and families who have multifaceted needs. The necessity for multidisciplinary intervention is especially evident during transitions as children move in and out of care provided by various support systems.

Considering the many types and degrees of special needs, the complexity and volume of special education are readily apparent. Essentially, special education involves individually tailoring and personalizing the school experience for each exceptional pupil when 'off the rack' does not fit. Most pupils with individually tailored programs receive them partially, if not full time, in regular classrooms. Regular classroom teachers and special education staff work

together as do their exceptional and other students. It is more usual than not to have several exceptional pupils participating in each regular classroom within a school. Regular and special education coexist and have an impact upon each other. Thus, consideration of special education issues is an important aspect of any discussion or examination of schooling.

Special education issues are worthy of attention not only because they affect exceptional students and their classmates but also because they involve priorities, beliefs, values and attitudes within society at large. For those who believe that a measure of a society is how well it serves its disadvantaged, quality of educational services for exceptional pupils will be an important marker. Many of us value the richness that a multidimensional society affords and we strive to avoid ghettos based on color, culture, class, intellectual ability or other human qualities. Attitudes developed through interaction among children with various likenesses and differences help shape our attitudes and actions as adults.

On January 27, 2000, the Ontario Minister of Education introduced a multi-year plan to increase accountability and quality in special education programs and services. It was announced that improvements will be made by:

- developing standards for Individual Education Plans to improve consistency in the quality of special education programs across the province (to be in place by winter/spring 2000)
- initiating an audit of Individual Education Plans at the school board level to ensure that they comply with standards, and that they describe consistently and accurately the programs and services students receive (to be in place by fall/winter 2000)

- developing standards for boards' Special Education Plans to ensure that boards are accountable for delivering high-quality programs and services system-wide (to be in place by winter/spring 2000)
- developing program standards for each exceptionality in order to improve our understanding of the most effective way to provide quality special education programs across the province (to take effect between September 2000-December 2002)
- developing better coordination of services for students with special needs, in order to improve access to services for children with special needs, whether offered at home, school or a medical setting, and which respects parents' wishes for consistency and continuity of care (no timeline announced)
- refining the funding formula to:
  - continue to protect special education funding
  - continue to provide a portion of special education funding on the basis of enrollment
  - confirm Intensive Support Amount funding as a process to recognize that students with high needs are unevenly distributed across the province
  - enable boards to use their Intensive Support Amount funding (within the special education envelope) in ways which enable them to meet the wide range of special needs of exceptional students in their board (to be in place by spring 2000).

These initiatives repeat the now familiar themes of accountability and standards. There are, however, issues within and beyond the scope of the announced measures that beg further attention. If we care about education, it is critical that the issues be examined in the context of our beliefs, values and attitudes. Some examples follow.

### ***Funding***

Education funding concerns are not limited to special education. When underfunding is a general education concern, as it is, special education is particularly vulnerable.

If we believe that exceptional children deserve an appropriate education, then special education will be treated as integral and not an 'extra.' As such, it will not be viewed as the first place either to cut back or limit growth. We will recognize as a priority the funding of proactive, preventive initiatives during the early years.

### ***Identification***

Clear operational definitions are lacking in special education. We vacillate between medical and educational constructs when describing and categorizing special needs. There is lack of clarity and consistency with regard to defining types of exceptionalities. It is often difficult to reach agreement as to when a need is severe enough to warrant an 'exceptional' designation. Continued concern is expressed by some that individualization compromises standards. Our assessment and identification procedures tend to be deficit driven and we often overlook strengths.

If we value individual growth, then we must identify needs well and individualize programs to best suit each pupil. We must not use standards to close doors on opportunity for appropriate education.

### ***Professional Development***

Our expectations for high-quality programs and teaching are constantly increasing, as they should. There has been tremendous recent growth in our knowledge about learning disorders and how most effectively to teach to special needs. However, we have not made available to teachers and other school support staff the training opportunities they require in order to use effectively this new knowledge in their teaching practice. Just one example of the problem is the number of unused software applications waiting to be used on school computers if and when staff receive appropriate training.

If we believe that research, development and professional growth lead to improved learning opportunities for children, then we need to support these activities. We require a positive commitment to mandating professional growth rather than a negative, punitive focus on teacher testing.

### ***Staffing***

During the past few years, the roles of school staff and the composition and dynamics of staff interaction have undergone significant change. The legislated withdrawal of school administrators from teacher unions, decreased teaching and clerical staff, and increased deployment of educational assistants have significantly affected special education service delivery.

Principals and vice-principals have had, in legislation, clear administrative responsibilities beyond those of teachers. In spite of differences in their roles, however, team bonds were developed through common participation in union organized activities such as professional development, district extracurricular events for students and collective bargaining. The common organization was referred to as *federation*, not *union*, and played a cohesive function among staff within schools.

Principals and vice-principals now belong to their own professional group, the Ontario Principals' Council. In addition, the numbers of educational assistants, most of whom work with exceptional students, have increased substantially during the past few years. In most jurisdictions, educational assistants belong to a union that also includes school secretaries. Thus, clusters of people with different group affiliations now staff schools. The split between professional staff and the growth of paraprofessional staff have changed the types of interactions among staff and the degree of trust previously found within a school.

If we value a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach which makes efficient and effective use of staff knowledge and skills, then we need to review special education staffing. We must address issues of negativity and alienation that hinder the development of a vibrant school culture.

### ***Advocacy and Accountability***

There are procedures in place for parent involvement in board wide planning and in individual student program and progress review. Special Education Advisory Committees,<sup>4</sup> Individual Education Plans<sup>5</sup> and Identification Place-

ment and Review Committees<sup>6</sup> all serve important advocacy and accountability functions. Each collaborative process requires nurturing so that it best serves students and ensures that parents are meaningfully involved.

If we value parent involvement in the education process, then we need to provide resources to facilitate their effective participation. We must increase the quality of information available to parents about special education. Training also is required both for parents and school staff in how most effectively to meet and plan together in situations that are often highly charged emotionally.

Since 1908, we have seen the birth and growth of special education in Ontario. We are now well positioned to use emerging knowledge about teaching, learning and new technology to benefit children with special needs.

Our increased knowledge about exceptional students, and improved teaching and learning tools should be creating excitement and optimism among parents and educators. Unfortunately, that potential optimism is tempered by skepticism about the motivation for change. We need to know that the direction in which we are headed is congruent with our beliefs, values and attitudes concerning special education and exceptional children. Without that knowledge, lack of trust will grow and trust is critical to successful, productive educational partnerships.

We are eager to move ahead in special education and we do care about where we are going. We need assurance, however, that each step forward is rooted in the principles we value. The human and financial resources we allocate will be determined by our commitment to the academic, social and personal well-being of

exceptional children. Hopefully, we will treat each child as our own.

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#### **Endnotes**

1. McIntosh, John. (1977). "The Evolution of a Magazine (Special Education in Canada)." *Special Education in Canada*, 52(1): 22-25.
2. Regulation 306/1990, *Special Education Programs and Services*.
3. Regulation 181/98.
4. Regulation 464/97.
5. Regulation 181/98.
6. Regulation 181/98.

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