

## **DISABILITY & INCLUSION IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

### **CONTEXT:**

A major shift in education for learners experiencing disabilities is occurring at the world level. This shift, largely, is led by United Nations policy and is being facilitated by international agencies, such as UNESCO and the World Bank. The phrase “Education for All”, in the instance of disability, has been clarified by the UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994 and the recent UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities to mean “inclusive education”. In turn, inclusive education has been deemed to mean education for learners experiencing disabilities in the regular classrooms of community schools in the company of their typical peers. Segregation is not considered appropriate.

There are major Canadian connections to inclusive education.

- The term “inclusive education” first was used at a meeting of the Marsha Forest Centre in 1989. Since that time, the term has spread around the world.
- The Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB) of Hamilton, Ontario was a pioneer in inclusive education. Beginning in 1969, well before the concept of “inclusion” was developed, HWCDSB began to move toward placing all students, regardless of difference, in the regular classrooms of its community schools. The Board became the first school system in the world to become fully inclusive.
- New Brunswick, Yukon, the Northwest Territory, and Nunavut have followed more recently by declaring, and moving to implement, policies of inclusion in their schools.

- A variety of individual schools also have done their best to become inclusive, though in school systems still supporting the special education model.

These have been positive moves in reaching toward an inclusive society in Canada/ These educational jurisdictions have been “resourceful, innovative, and resilient” in transforming educational systems, which once kept learners experiencing disabilities on the fringes of society in non-inclusive special education settings, to ones in which they embrace differences of ability and thereby have advanced the life-long social inclusion of this group of Canadians. They have not slipped “into complacency, or even self-delusion”, but have not realized the values of inclusion

We see education as one of the two bedrocks in creating a society where all are respected, all belong, and all are accorded equity based on their individual abilities and needs, in other words, an inclusive society based on rights. The first of these bedrocks is the family. This is where everyone receives unconditional love and respect and develops as a person. The second is the school system. It is the school system that takes in all children and introduces them to all the other children of their communities. It is in school that one learns how our society works, what knowledge is important, and what the moral underpinnings of society are. The school system also is the only agency of society that takes in every Canadian at an early age, works with them on an intensive basis for hours on an almost daily basis, and keeps them until they are young adults. No other system in our society, other than the family, has these characteristics.

***OUR CONCLUSION IS THAT, IF CANADA WANTS AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY,  
THIS SOCIETY MUST REST ON AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM.***

Unfortunately, only four of thirteen Canadian educational jurisdictions, and these among the least populated, have committed themselves fully to inclusive education. All other jurisdictions employ terms such as “inclusion” and “inclusivity” while maintaining vigorous traditional special education views and practices. A definitely questionable approach.

- The Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest in the land and viewed as an educational leader, recently announced, its vision for the future of education for learners experiencing disabilities. The vision is to continue with its special education approach.
- British Columbia has declared itself educationally inclusive. It also states that inclusion is not a place, but a service, within this reasoning. Therefore segregated educational settings are deemed to meet students’ needs, and are considered inclusive.
- Ontario continues to follow a 1994 policy, which states that the regular classroom is the first choice for all learners. However, the province tempers this statement by making provision for segregated settings if, in the view of the school system, a segregated setting will better meet the needs of students experiencing disabilities.

The TDSB decision to continue with the special education model, and the understanding of B.C. and Ontario of the meaning of inclusive education are not in accord with UN policy and the general international move toward inclusive education. However, they should not be construed as deliberately obstructive. It may be concluded, however, that having sophisticated special education systems in place, being confident that these systems are doing a good job, and not having a firm understanding of equity

and inclusive society and their relationship, have led to complacency, a sort of “If it isn’t broken, why fix it?” outlook.

If one adds to this view that Canadian Faculties of Education appear torn between preparing future teachers for school systems continuing to support segregated special education, or for inclusive education, a model not yet followed by the majority of Canadian school systems, one should not be surprised that many Canadian teachers are not well-prepared for inclusion.

Thirdly, there is need to consider that the federal government, which ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is constitutionally barred from being active in education at the elementary and secondary levels, and are viewed primarily as providers of funds at the preschool and postsecondary levels. Our attempts to initiate a conversation with the federal government on inclusive education have been unsuccessful.

Thus, we have a contest in which the UN and other agencies advocate and support inclusive education, and in which the majority of Canadian school jurisdictions espouse inclusive education while clinging to the special education model. Additionally, the federal government seems to consider itself unable to support movement to inclusive education, and the quality of teacher preparation for inclusion is doubtful at best. However, all support the concept of inclusive society, though many do not appear to connect the concept to educational policy and practice.

A number of nations, in response to similar contexts, have turned to developing guides for school systems and schools. We have had opportunity through our travels and consultancies to examine a number of such guides. For a number of reasons, primarily

different educational contexts, the reality of having more than one group (Canadian learners experiencing disabilities) who are excluded from education) e.g. Romani children in Europe, members of Scheduled Tribes in India, worker children in many nations, and children in poverty) the guides we have seen do not fit the Canadian context.

***We propose to design a guide to implementation of inclusive education to fit the Canadian context. Such a guide will be made available to Canadian governmental organizations, school systems, faculties of education, professional teacher associations, parent organizations, and organizations of Canadians experiencing disabilities.***