

Press Release

Parents of children with Down Syndrome want integrated education for their children. This means that we want them to walk to school with their brothers, sisters, and friends to their neighbourhood school as a matter of right, attend regular classes with their chronologically age appropriate peers, where they receive individualized programming geared to their strengths and needs.

Integration is not a matter of ability as many mistakenly believe. It is a matter of choosing to support and transmit respectful values rather than survival of the fittest values. It is as much a civil rights issue as an education issue.

There have been many instances in the past in North American society when certain prejudicial practices were considered acceptable. Indeed, it was these practices and the systems that grew up around them which forced disadvantaged groups to create places for themselves as best they could. Therefore there was a segregated educational system for Black people in the United States. There are many Jewish hospitals across the United States and Canada, one right here in Toronto, that were established because Jewish doctors could not get privileges in general hospitals. Women have for a long time laboured in the marketplace for unequal pay.

Today, in more enlightened times, we recognize that these things are wrong.

The issue is no different in segregated education. This system was built by a previous generation of loving parents whose children were absolutely locked out of the public education system. There are twenty year olds with Down Syndrome today who did not get the opportunity to go to school until they were nine years old.

However, as time goes on and our awareness and research grows on civil and human rights and what is also educationally sound for children with special needs, we must turn away from the segregated system and move our children into the mainstream, which is after all, where we want them to lead their lives.

We have moved away from seeing our children within a medical model wherein education is treatment, to education as a process of integration - acquiring knowledge, skills, preparing to assume adult work, family and societal responsibilities, and becoming part of the social fabric of the community.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees all Canadians, "the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law, without discrimination," including discrimination based on mental and physical disability.

We question whether segregated education, whether in classes or schools, which leads our children not to full participation in Canadian society, which is their right, but to a type of "underworld" of institutions, sheltered workshops, and chronic poverty, is really their entitlement to equal benefit of education under the law.

These are the main points in our responses to the Minister:

- 1) We want the Ministry to make a clear commitment to integrated education for children with special needs - this means local school, regular, chronologically age appropriate class.

Further, we want the children who remain, by parental choice, in segregated classes to be registered to the home room teacher in that child's regular chronologically age appropriate class.

- 2) I.P.R.C. function should move from labelling and placement, to identification and cooperative program planning around each exceptional child's learning strengths and needs.
- 3) Appeal Boards - the Minister suggests moving the Appeal Boards from the Act itself to the regulations. The right to appeal must remain entrenched in the Act itself.
- 4) Labelling - The Ministry of Education labels children according to disabilities and levels of functioning - eg. L.D., T.M.R., E.M.R. Labelling is a damaging process and an ineffective tool in remediation. We want the global label "exceptional" to be sufficient and the children then assessed according to their specific learning needs.
- 5) Segregated Schools for Students Labelled Trainable Retarded including those run by the Metro Toronto School Board - We want these schools closed and the students to become the responsibility of their local boards, local school, regular chronologically age appropriate class.
- 6) Delete the Section on Hard to Serve - We do not believe there is a child who cannot profit from instruction.
- 7) Children in Institutions - These are our most deprived citizens and those most in need of contacts with the outside world. These children should be served by their local boards in community schools rather than have programs delivered to them in the institutions to ghettoize them further. This would entail cooperation between the Ministry of Education and other Ministries.

Bill 82 is considered by the Ministry to be an enabling Bill intending to offer the widest range of educational possibilities to exceptional children (such as L.D.class, E.M.R. classes, M.H. classes). However, the option of integration, wherein the exceptional child receives educational programs and services in his regular, chronologically age appropriate class in his local school is not in reality available to families who see this as fundamental to their childrens' development, and on-going participation in Canadian life,

Parents and professionals who believe in integration have been waiting a long time. They are ready with goodwill and expertise to cooperate with the Ministry to implement integrated education.