

Making Canadian Schools Inclusive:
A Call to Action

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On March 30, 2007, I was privileged to represent CASHRA (Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies), as 80 nations, including Canada, signed the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.¹ In a speech following the signing, Canada's Ambassador to the UN pledged the Government of Canada to work with the provinces and the non-governmental sector to effectively implement the Convention in Canada's federal context.

For a developed country like Canada, one of the more notable provisions of the Convention is Article 24, dealing with educational services. In compelling language, it requires signatory nations to assure opportunities for "appropriate" and "inclusive" education for students with disabilities. This international convention becomes one more factor in an already complex mix of law, policy and practice that makes the education of students with diverse learning needs an issue in Canada, and indeed internationally.

How to best provide quality educational services to students with disabilities, and other special needs, is a flash point issue for education systems in Canada. The news stories are frequent and engaging. A family or parent demands one thing and a school district offers something else. Sometimes the demand is for more special services and sometimes for more access to regular education. The public often seems confused by the term "inclusion" and by the continuing struggle to establish a fair and equitable – but also sensible – Canadian approach to the matter. The struggle of parents, teachers and the educational system to find ways to move ahead with sound policy, practices and funding policies ultimately connects to human rights law and to our vision of what inclusion means in our increasingly diverse communities.²

How did we get to this point? And how do we move ahead with a combination of vision, values and fairness?

While this article will not be a definitive discussion, I trust it will foster more serious and vigorous consideration about policies and practices than we have seen in recent years. I believe that we need to develop a vision for our public education system that embraces inclusion in meaningful and practical ways that make it a reality in every community. It is past time for educational leaders and policy makers to bite the bullet and purge our educational system of segregation and discrimination based on a diagnosis or clinically based label. Exceptions to inclusion will occur from time to time, but they are currently much too common in many parts of Canada. We need to make these “exceptions” truly exceptional, and they need to be restricted to “individuals” in the local school, not to groups based on clinical labels. Finally, we need a new wave of principled school reform that will contribute to accommodating the diversity of our student population, to inclusion as a guiding principle, and to school improvement on a broad basis for all our students.

In exploring special or inclusive education, my point of view has developed over several decades based on my experiences in three distinct roles. First I have an educational perspective based on more than 40 years as a teacher, school principal, district official (special education) and a university instructor (teacher educator). Second, I have an advocacy perspective from my role as a volunteer in parent and family associations for people with intellectual disabilities (CAACL) on a local, provincial, national and international level. Finally, I have a human rights perspective from my work in Canadian and international human rights efforts and as a member and current chair of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission.

In an attempt to bring some clarity to the issue, I want to share some thoughts on what it takes to make inclusive education work. Let me proceed by identifying some key questions – and tentative answers.

What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education means, simply, that all students, including those with disabilities and other special needs, are educated in regular classrooms with their age peers in their community schools. Students with disabilities go to the same schools as their brothers and sisters, are provided with access to the same learning opportunities as other children, and are engaged in both the academic and social activities of the classroom. In inclusive schools, support is directed to both the students and their teachers so they can accomplish relevant individual goals. When this movement started, the word most commonly used was “integration”, but for many, integration implied a less bold vision, limited to the presence of the child in the classroom. Today we understand inclusion to be about how we create environments in which all students can be successful, regardless of ability.

Why is this a critical and controversial issue?

It’s an issue because it takes serious effort to change the status quo. Until fifty years ago, education was considered a privilege for the few and for those who learned easily. Many Canadian children failed to benefit from public education, and children with disabilities benefited even less than most. We developed segregated special education programs to address this gap. In some provinces, these programs were very large and well funded, and they became accepted as the way to do things. The demand to include *all* children in regular schools and classrooms developed in the early 1980s. In Canada, this push for reform was supported by the equality provisions of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which came into force in 1985. Since then the push for integration, and later inclusion, has become an on-going element of educational politics in Canada.

The controversy is fueled in part by a strong feeling among both the public and educators that students with some types of disabilities will not benefit from what happens in a regular classroom, particularly in the higher grades where differences in student ability become more noticeable. This belief is partly caused by a lack of understanding about inclusive education and the ways in which students with varying abilities can be successfully taught in the same environment. It may also reflect the inherent belief – indeed the fear – that inclusion will water down or weaken overall educational outcomes

We also need to acknowledge that there is still some devaluing of people with disabilities (particularly cognitive disabilities).

What is wrong with traditional special education?

Traditional special education, typically carried out by specialist teachers and in isolation from other children in special classes or special schools, has failed in several ways. First, it has failed to produce results. Students who experience segregated special education are not prepared for fulfilling lives in their communities when their education is finished. Research in Canada has indicated that they do less well than similar children who go to regular schools.³ There is nothing surprising in this. A segregated school program does not prepare young people to be part of the community and society when they become adults. Growing up and interacting with their peers does that.

Second, a system that encourages schools and teachers to abandon children and youth who have learning challenges is not good policy. Presuming that any child with special needs must be sent to a special program erodes the professional stature of teaching as a profession. Individual teachers may need support in a number of areas but their professional and ethical responsibility is to teach all children. Defining the regular classroom a place for “ordinary” learners and putting unrealistic pressure on school systems to develop a parallel system for all those thus abandoned also takes the focus off efforts for school improvement. It is bad educational policy, and in the long term it is not financially sustainable, as the struggles over funding issues experienced in many parts of Canada demonstrate.

Finally, segregated special education is not appropriate from a moral or human rights perspective. In 2007, we still have thousands of children in Canada who are confined to segregated classes, and a few still attend segregated schools. Twenty-five years after the Charter, and in an international environment where Canada should be providing leadership in the implementation of the recent UN Convention – we can do better.

What do we need to make our schools inclusive?

First we need to state clearly that our goal is to have “inclusive, effective, community schools” that are both committed to inclusion and able to effectively carry it out. Once the goal is set and before us, we can make plans to move ahead. It is a challenging goal that will take a significant investment in leadership at all levels – at the policy level; the education system level; and the school and classroom levels.

Let me list a few of the critical steps needed to implement this approach⁴:

- 1) We need to make a plan for transition and change and accept that this will take at least 3-5 years to do properly;
- 2) School staff must know how to make their schools and classrooms effective for diverse student populations, and so we need to invest in training for existing teachers and school leaders as well as for new teachers.
- 3) Understanding that teachers need support to accept and meet this challenge, we need to work with them and their associations to develop supports they need.
- 4) We need to start by creating positive models of success – classrooms, schools and communities that do a good job and can share their success and strategies with neighbors.
- 5) We need to identify a cadre of leaders and innovators at all levels and assist them in building networks where they can produce and share knowledge unique to their communities.
- 6) We need to identify and share “best practices” from research and knowledge that is already available and can be enriched and enhanced by local experience.
- 7) We need to understand that innovations and changes that will make a difference will require resources. That means money and people.

What does experience tell us about the process of creating inclusive schools?

The schools in which I worked as an educational leader in New Brunswick began to implement inclusive education practices in 1982 and had the approach substantially in

place by 1985. In the more than 20 years since, teachers and school leaders, here and elsewhere in Canada, have learned a great deal about what it takes to be successful with inclusion. They have also struggled with obstacles and difficulties, many of which continue.

On the political or policy level in New Brunswick, at least three significant province-wide reviews of inclusion have been carried out, most recently the MacKay Report,⁵ released in 2006. All three reviews identified the value and positive features of an inclusive educational approach, identified areas for improvement, and suggested the need for more support to teachers and students. All three also indicated the need for leadership, policy clarity, and additional resources to provide more systemic supports. I note this history because I want to emphasize that creating inclusive schools is not a one-time job. Successful inclusion requires persistence and innovation to sustain the effort and to develop approaches to meet the new challenges that emerge over time.

On a personal level, I have seen many success stories where teachers and parents have worked together to achieve success for individual students. I have seen a student with no verbal language find other ways to communicate with non-disabled peers. I have seen shy and reticent children gain confidence and self worth through daily interaction with other students in a variety of classroom situations. I have also seen teachers who have persevered look back and proudly note both the progress made by individual students, and their own progress as teachers. Committed and skilled teachers who are properly supported can make inclusion work.

What about the cost?

Money is not the issue in moving from segregation to inclusion. In fact some of the smaller and less wealthy communities and provinces of Canada are leading the way. Many of Canada's wealthiest provinces and communities spend a great deal of money on segregated special education programs, but little on making regular classrooms places where students with special needs can be welcomed and successfully included. Money spent on segregated special education needs to be re-directed to support teachers in

inclusive regular schools.⁶ In some situations the investment may need to be increased, especially during the transition period. However, because the investment to support inclusion is principally directed toward supporting classroom teachers, it has spill-over positive benefits for other students and for the classroom environment as a whole. This investment is critical if we are to make our schools instruments for creating an equitable and democratic society.

What about the future?

I see inclusion as one of the sustaining pillars of public education in 21st century Canada. Our schools must reflect our commitment to democratic values, to welcoming diversity in our communities, and to inclusion as a key aspect of our society. If we are to educate all our children, and do it well, we need to ensure that every school is both effective and inclusive.

Human Rights Commissions throughout Canada have identified special education as a critical issue. Commissions in Ontario and New Brunswick have established guidelines for accommodating students with disabilities in the education system.⁷ Other commissions have also identified this as a priority area that continues to result in many complaints each year. It will undoubtedly be the focus of future deliberations by human rights commissions.⁸

The UN Convention sets out a bold and progressive vision of education rights for children with disabilities and articulates inclusion as an essential element in that vision. Canadians can provide the world with a practical demonstration that inclusion can work to the benefit of society in general. To do so, we must set our sights on a clear target and work together to deliver nothing less to our children.

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¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 2006. Passed by 76th Plenary Session of the General Assembly, December 13, 2006.

² Crawford, Cameron, *Scoping inclusive education for Canadian students with intellectual and other disabilities*, 2005. ISBN 1-896989-90-X, Toronto: L’Institut Roeher Institute.

³ Crawford, Cameron, *Towards a Mutual Framework of Expectations on Inclusive Education: Discussion Document, 2004*). Toronto: L’Institut Roeher Institute.

⁴ Porter, Gordon L. and Stone, Julie, “*An Inclusive School Model: A Framework and Key Strategies for Success*”. 1998. Chapter in Cooperative Learning and Strategies for Inclusion: Celebrating Diversity in the Classroom; Second Edition; Editor: JoAnne W. Putnam; Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing Company Ltd.

⁵ MacKay, Wayne, *Report on Inclusive Education*, 2006, Ministry of Education, Province of New Brunswick, <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/publications/mackay/mackay-e.asp>.

⁶ Crawford, Cameron, & Porter, Gordon L., “*Supporting Teachers: A Foundation for Advancing Inclusive Education*.” 2004. Toronto, Ontario: The Roeher Institute.

⁷ Human Rights Commissions in Ontario and New Brunswick have published “guidelines”. The Ontario Guideline can be accessed at <http://ohrc.on.ca/english/publications/accessible-education-guide.shtml>; the New Brunswick Guideline is located at: <http://www.gnb.ca/cnb/news/hrc/2007e1320hr.htm>

⁸ CASHRA is working with other national groups to hold a National Forum on the topic in the Fall of 2008. Check: <http://www.cashra.ca>.