

Class Size And Composition...A Slippery Slope For Children With Disabilities



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The Manitoba Teachers' Society recently released a report that summarizes its work assessing the increased feelings of stress teachers are experiencing province wide. This report indicates that majority of teachers feel overwhelmed with their workload and lists a series of recommendations to address this challenge. While these recommendations seem designed to best support the classroom teacher, it is important to understand that some of the implications of these measures may have detrimental impacts upon students with disabilities and their families. This is especially true of recommendations regarding class composition, where children would be ranked according to how much of the teacher's time and energy would be required to educate them. The suggested ranking system, noted in an appendix to the report, does not take into consideration any support that the student may bring into the classroom with them such as an educational assistant or potential support from resource teaching staff. It also does not consider what the potential benefits of having that student placed within the classroom might be. Examples include:

- promoting teamwork among the students,
- providing opportunities to learn about diversity and inclusion, and
- allowing for the use of alternate teaching styles that can benefit all of the other students within the classroom, particularly those with invisible disabilities or those who may have borderline struggles with learning.

It was particularly alarming to read suggestions that "alternative programs" be instituted to provide "the most enabling environment" rather than have all students placed within the regular classroom. The amendment to the Public Schools Act: Appropriate Educational Programming, places particular emphasis upon the need to have students placed within the regular classroom at their neighbourhood schools.

This is a cornerstone to inclusive education. Historically, phrases like "most enabling environment" and "alternative programs" have been used to segregate students with disabilities, and their interpretation is more often subjective, usually in the hands of administrative staff and without thorough consultation with the families and students involved in those placement decisions.

The suggested recommendations made within the Manitoba Teachers Society report should in no way, shape or form, lead to a debate on the merits of inclusive education versus segregated programming. That debate ended with the proclamation of the Amendment to the Public Schools Act. The Canadian Charter of

Rights and Freedoms and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms the proclamation.

Our children belong in the classroom with their peers, and our teachers must receive the supports that they need to ensure that all of the children in their classroom can obtain an appropriate education. This support should include more professional development, consultation with specialists who can provide their insights into barriers to the provision of the curriculum, and the use of educational assistants to support classroom practices that encourage learning opportunities. The use of educational assistants can range from providing opportunities for the teacher to engage in smaller group or one-on-one work with specific students, to addressing the unique support needs of specific students who are in the classroom. Alternatively, using the categorical funding available for the appropriate educational programming for specific students can offset the costs of hiring additional teaching or resource staff. Those decisions need to be made by a collaborative team of stakeholders that includes the parents (and student whenever appropriate). Too often, even with the amendment to the Public Schools Act, parents are left in the dark about the programming for their children with special needs. Not surprisingly, parents in this position can feel very defensive and want their child to have direct support (in the form of an educational assistant) to ensure that their learning, social and emotional needs are met during the school day.

It is important that classroom teachers are able to take ownership of all of their students and that the school and school division ensure that classroom teachers are encouraged and supported to do so.

Public education is about preparing all of our children for a future world that is inclusive, socially just, and diverse. By working collaboratively to root out the barriers to attaining these goals and supporting each other in the process, we will be able to move towards these goals and our children and society will be richer for it.