

Introducing Your Child to School and the Classroom . . .

by Luciano Contini

Some basics parents should know

As you prepare your child for entry into the education system or into another school year, you will be meeting with School Board staff to determine the best way to meet your child's unique needs, with the goal of helping ensure that he or she receives the best education possible. If you are not already aware, there are some basic facts that I would like to bring to your attention prior to your proceeding.

First, every child, regardless of challenges or otherwise, has a right to be included in a classroom with their peers. Second, regardless of challenges or otherwise, every child is different and so every child has different needs.

What does all this mean for you? To follow are some quick facts as an overview, so that you have some basic knowledge to prepare you for demanding the highest possible quality of education for your children.

Your child with Down syndrome has the same right to quality education as any other child in the education system, including the right to participate in the same social activities as their peers. The law specifically states that the School Board must first look at ways of including your child with Down syndrome in a classroom with their same-age peers. The law also implies that they cannot claim that they do not have enough resources in place or enough funds to cover the cost of whatever your child needs to be included in that classroom, unless doing so drives them into bankruptcy. Also, to be truly included, a challenged child should not be forced to attend a different school than their siblings because the special services that your challenged child needs are only offered at certain, or not all of the School Board's schools.

You may find that the people you meet with from the School Board do not fully understand the law as explained above. When you meet with them, try to understand that they may just be acting as they are told or that they have not been made aware of the standards that apply to these situations. You will find that some do understand what needs to be done to include your child in a regular classroom, and others do not. What I can tell you is that the staff are

definitely aware that a child with special needs has needs that are different from the child who is not exceptional, and they are likely fully aware of what services do currently exist at their school or within their School Board. What they may not know is that the school or the School Board may be obligated to do more than what they currently have to offer in order to include your child in a regular classroom.

Spending money just short of going bankrupt to meet the unique needs of special needs children is a high standard; however, we must understand why this is the standard before we judge it. This standard helps ensure dignity for those with disabilities and other groups that need protection under law, and it helps ensure their natural right to be treated equally in society. This includes the right for children with special needs to first be considered for inclusion in the regular classroom before all else. There are certainly situations where all of a child's special needs cannot be reasonably met in a regular classroom and because of that, this child will have to be provided special education services at a location apart from children their age, either for a short period of time or for a long period of time. However, this decision cannot be made without first looking at all of the options available for the child in a regular classroom, and this decision cannot be made by

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only looking at special education services that the school or School Board offers today. Also, please be aware that if specialized services are required for a limited period of time, at the same time the School Board must do so with a plan for bringing the child back into her or his regular classroom. Again, every child is different, every child has different needs and therefore meeting those needs often requires looking beyond what is currently offered by the School Board. Because of this, it is not possible to meet every child's needs by a School Board practice that provides services to meet the needs of more than child the very same way. A child's needs can change at any time, and so the School Board must remain flexible in order to be able to meet those needs as they change.

Why is it so important to have my child included in a regular classroom?

Some benefits are specific, and some are more general. There is considerable research evidence that shows that children with special needs do better academically when they are in the same class as their same-age peers. What cannot easily be measured are the effects that inclusion can have on a social level. My son is currently in an inclusive environment, where he learns and plays with other children his age. It is inspiring to see the how far the educators go to involve him in regular classroom activities. More inspiring is to watch how the other children copy the behaviour of the teachers when my son is experiencing some challenges in class, either socially or academically. By the way the teachers interact with my son they are teaching all of the other children to be compassionate and helpful in how they themselves interact with him. This is extremely important to my son, our family, and most importantly, to his classmates. Since being included

is normal for him at this stage, his classmates would likely wonder why those with special needs would be separated from them at school. Would they think the same if separation at school was instead normal? Children are shaped by what they see and hear, and if they have not been taught to "include" either directly or by seeing others doing so, they are less likely to understand or appreciate that such differences are acceptable and that these differences make up "the human family", as is so nicely stated by the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.

Your journey may not be easy in the beginning, but please remember that your efforts to ensure your child's equality brings benefits not only to your child, but to you, other children with challenges and I believe, given my personal experience, to "the human family" as a whole.

Luciano Contini is the DSAS Representative on the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) of the Sudbury Catholic District School Board. He can be reached at (705) 586-6377 and/or at HRCapacity@eastlink.ca. We are also in need of an alternate for this role. If you direct your taxes in support of the Catholic education system in Sudbury and share his passion for advocacy, please contact info@dsas.ca and type "SEAC" in the subject line of your email.