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Many Ontario schools failing students who have an intellectual disability: report

Toronto, ON – Despite recent developments in human rights and education law, as well as a shift in special education delivery and efforts to make schools more inclusive, public education in elementary and secondary schools is failing many students who have intellectual disabilities. This finding is one of the many insights gained from *If Inclusion Means Everyone Why Not Me?*, a report released today at Ryerson University.

The report's authors shared their conclusions with students of Ryerson's Disability Studies program. The launch of the report is the culmination of a year-long collaboration involving Community Living Ontario, Western University, Brock University, ARCH Disability Law Centre, Brockville and District Association for Community Involvement, and Inclusive Education Canada.

Data was compiled from survey results of 280 parents or guardians of students who have an intellectual disability who were enrolled in Ontario's public education system or who had graduated in the last five years. 33 in-depth interviews were subsequently conducted to gain a greater understanding of the students' experiences in school, including academic, social and extracurricular opportunities, as well as various aspects of their relationships with the school.

The following is an overview of the survey results and interviews, grouped into five categories:

- Academic and social barriers: 67% of parents or guardians reported that students who have an intellectual disability often did not have access to the appropriate curriculum, or did not have the proper academic accommodations to make the curriculum accessible to them (53%). Students often did not participate in extracurricular school activities (62.7%).
- Exclusion: Students who have an intellectual disability were excluded from school or the classroom for disability-related reasons (45%).
- Conflict: 74% of parents or caregivers reported high levels of conflict with schools or school boards (56%), and they indicated that they had very limited recourse to appropriate dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Planning and communication: 32% of parents reported that they did not feel that they had been involved in the development of their child's Individual Education Plan, even though school boards have a legal obligation to consult with parents with respect to the development of an accommodation plan.
- Leadership: Students who have an intellectual disability and their families were often dependent on the style, belief systems, and interpretation of service delivery of school leadership.

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“Leadership by school officials was consistently identified as crucial to the quality of the education that students received according to the parents and caregivers we interviewed,” said Dr. Jacqueline Specht, report co-author, Director of the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education, and Professor in the Faculty of Education at Western University.

“Parents frequently noted that school principals could have an especially profound effect on the school culture and the quality of their child’s education, and that good leadership at the administrative level was often crucial in conflict resolution.”

The personal narratives of parents also highlighted the significant additional hardships that exclusion exerted on families and students.

“Parents described the painful loss of educational and social opportunities their child experienced, as well as their own issues,” said Dr. Sheila Bennett, Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University, who also co-wrote the report. “This included loss of work time, enhanced stress levels, financial strain and frequent disruptions. It was clear from our work that exclusion was one of the most painful and trying instances for parents.”

In addition, responses to the survey indicated that, in many ways, parents were equally dissatisfied with many aspects of their children’s education, in both inclusive and segregated placements.

“Despite the general dissatisfaction, there were some notable benefits that accrued to students in more inclusive settings,” added Bennett.

“For instance, students in inclusive settings were far more likely to be included in extracurricular and unstructured school activities, meaning that they had a much greater opportunity to socialize with their peers outside of the traditional classroom. It was also evident that students in an inclusive high school setting were far more likely to be enrolled in for-credit courses, allowing them to more fully reap the benefits of our education system.”

Gordon Porter, Director of Inclusive Education Canada, suggested the findings of the report are consistent with students’ experiences in other parts of Canada.

“Our work with families and parent groups across Canada reflects what is happening to far too many children in a number of provinces. This report will be useful to parents and advocates who want change in their schools,” added Porter.

The report concluded that significant reforms to the Education Act were needed, as well as a new strong and responsive education standard pursuant to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The report’s authors also encouraged the Government of Ontario and local school boards to

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undertake similar efforts to better understand the experiences and challenges of students who have disabilities generally.

“The full inclusion of students who have an intellectual disability remains an unmet goal for our education system, even though school boards have clear obligations to ensure that students can fully access all the benefits of the education system,” said Luke Reid, report co-author and Staff Lawyer at ARCH Disability Law Centre.

“Despite the fact that these obligations are outlined in *Moore v. British Columbia*, a 2012 Supreme Court decision and are reinforced by Canada’s international commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, unnecessary hardships persist for students who have an intellectual disability. As parents throughout this study repeatedly emphasized, real leadership is necessary to address these barriers, starting with schools and school boards and then at the provincial level.”

Go to <https://bit.ly/2HNY2GE> to download *If Inclusion Means Everyone Why Not Me?*

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