

Full Inclusion Is Possible

by Marsha Forest

I am privileged to act as an education advisor to two unique school systems in southern Ontario, Canada: The Hamilton Wentworth Separate School Board and the Waterloo Region Separate School Board. The stated goal and philosophy of both these systems is that *each belongs*, meaning that all children go to their neighborhood schools and attend age appropriate regular classes. (The criteria for full inclusion is "breathing" i.e., life itself.) Supports and services go to the child when needed. Although this is not yet a reality for every child in these systems, it is a policy being carried out in most instances. Other systems and places in Canada are also moving in this direction, but I would say that these two school boards give us an especially clear image of what is possible and how simple it is to include everyone once we decide to do just that.

For too long, integration, or mainstreaming, has been thought to mean placement of a child with a handicap in a school or classroom. Integration truly has a much deeper meaning that's expressed in the terms "inclusion" and "belonging". Unless this deep meaning is addressed, the movement to integrate children with disabilities will be a *placement* issue rather than a *philosophical* debate.

What we are really doing is asking a new set of questions: *What kind of school communities do we want? Who do we want our children to grow up with? What values will we model for our children? What do we want the future to look like?* These are the questions that must be asked, rather than, "How do we do it?" I believe that if we truly understand the why of integration, the how will follow quite easily. If we really want someone to be part of our lives, we will do what it takes to welcome that person and accommodate his or her needs.

Imagine for a moment that you have a child who today is happy, healthy, attending his or her local school, and progressing normally. Reflect for a moment on where you would want the child to go to school should he or she be in a car accident and become unable to walk without assistance and unable to learn as

quickly. Whenever I ask this question of educators who are also parents, I always receive the same answer: the parent would want the child to stay with the family, as well as be with friends at the regular school in the regular classroom with all the necessary supports.

It's obvious that we've created a system of segregation and isolation that at best doesn't make sense, and at worst is cruel and mean. We must change this not simply for the sake of the person with the disability, but for all of us. And we must act quickly before a new generation repeats our mistakes.

Leadership is One Key

Courageous and dynamic leadership that has a clear vision of where the system is heading is a common element between the Hamilton and Waterloo systems, as well as in other places where quality education exists. Jim Hansen is the guiding force in the Hamilton system, which was integrating children when no one was even talking about the issue. Jim is a gutsy, tough talking, no nonsense Superintendent of Operations who believes without a doubt that all children can learn together and that segregating students is poor educational practice. His system has welcomed all children since 1969.

George Flynn arrived in Waterloo Region as the Director of Education in 1985 and has moved it toward full inclusion since his arrival. In a recent brief to the Select Committee on Education of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario (Sept. 12, 1988) he wrote:

"The function of the education process is to liberate the mind, strengthen its critical powers, inform it with knowledge, engage its human sympathies and illuminate its moral and practical choices. It has never been the intended purpose of education to resist or reject people; on the contrary, it is the goal of education to deliver us from the captivity of unexamined life. The human values of liberty, dignity, privacy and responsibility, which education supports, apply equally to all

people...People matter most." These two individuals have provided the leadership needed to inspire their school systems to fully include and welcome all children.

Fight or Change

We can fight and debate and go to court. We can have due process hearings (in the U.S.) and Tribunals (in Canada). We can hire lawyers who can argue anything. Or, we can stop and look at what we are doing to one another and to our society.

Our schools are simply a reflection of who we are as a culture. According to all the major studies in both our countries we are not doing too well. Illiteracy is rampant, drop-outs fill our streets, our prisons are bulging at the seams. According to some, the school system is only adequately serving 20% of our population. The rest are not getting a fair deal.

I used to wonder why many special education people got so incredibly uptight when the subject of integration was raised. Now I understand. Adults often feel threatened when they know they will need to change and that's what this issue is all about—it has little or nothing to do with some little kid with cerebral palsy or downs syndrome. It has everything to do with change, with our values, and with our very philosophy of education and life itself. Change can be threatening or challenging.

The Living Proof

The Hamilton and Waterloo Systems have given me a living laboratory in which to watch education for the year 2000 in practice. I have seen that full integration can be, and indeed is, a reality. We have the "living proof" right in our own backyard.

There are not neat formulas or magic recipes that either school board would give you. They are not perfect. They are, however, incredibly child-centered systems with leadership that believes in team building, cooperation, collaboration and learning. They are also systems that dare talk about love and social justice.

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To me the key in all of the above is that a new generation is being born—a generation who tolerates difference and change far better than I do, who are less afraid, and who are more loving to people with differences.

The integration of children with disabilities is not an issue of "mainstreaming": it is an issue of *inclusion*. It is very simple. If we want it to happen it will. It takes time and hard work; the re-education of the adults in any system is a big job. The

children are easier for they are less afraid of the unknown. Full inclusion can work. If we involve the children and ask them to help us, it will work beyond our wildest dreams. If we listen to the children and follow their lead, we will see a new system emerge in which all learn and each belongs.

The inclusion of those we have labelled and excluded will liberate our hearts and souls. We will all not only read and write better, but we will be part of creating a more loving and caring world.

Note: There are excellent videos available that show both of these systems in action. There are also written materials available. For further information write The Centre for Integrated Education, Frontier College, 35 Jackes Ave. Toronto, Ontario, M4T 1E2. Or write directly to Mr. George Flynn, Director, Waterloo Region Separate School Board, 90 Mulberry Street, Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3R9.

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