

# **Jim Hansen's 'Each Belongs' changed education for children with special needs**

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**by Daniel Nolan**  
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Jim Hansen in 1998 when he was awarded the Catholic school board's award for distinguished service to Catholic education. - Hamilton Spectator File Photo



Jim Hansen (centre) received the Canadian Association for Community Living's Inclusive Education Award in 2011 from retired Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic school board superintendent Phil DiFrancesco (left) and the CACL's executive vice-president Michael Bach. - Courtesy of the HW Catholic school board, Courtesy of the HW Catholic school board



Jim Hansen in a photo from 1979. A superintendent for the Hamilton Catholic school board, he was a pioneer in integrating disabled

children into regular school classrooms. - Hamilton Spectator File  
Photo

It seems quite ordinary now to have children with special needs — autism, Down's syndrome — in the mix of the regular student body at a regular school, but it wasn't always so.

One person to thank for that is Jim Hansen, a former teacher and superintendent with the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic school system.

Hansen — who died August 8 at the age of 85 — was a pioneer in that education philosophy. The inclusionary model of education was called "Each Belongs," which was a shortened form of Hansen's saying "Each belongs not because he or she can do something or cannot do something. Each belongs because he or she is."

In 1968, he and administration head Pat Brennan formed a committee to look at special education. The next year, the Catholic board became the first in Canada to start integrating students with special needs into mainstream, neighbourhood schools. The program eventually attracted parents from all over, including one parent who moved from Calgary with her Down syndrome's daughter.

It also attracted visits by educators around the world and spread into other school boards. Hansen received numerous accolades for his work and the board named its annual Spirit of Community Award — given to students who are community builders — after Hansen.

In October 2016, the board also named the auditorium in the Nicholas Mancini Centre for him. Hansen's funeral August 11 at Annunciation of Our Lord Church on Limeridge Road West was attended by more than 250 people, including Bishop Douglas Crosby, head of the Hamilton diocese. Current and retired school superintendents and principals formed an honour guard.

"For more than 40 years, Jim's vision and commitment to 'Each Belongs' has helped to shape what our schools are," said Pat Daly, chair of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board. "Few individuals have left such a rich legacy as Jim"

One of Hansen's three sons, Paul, is severely handicapped and is a resident at Rygiel Home. Hansen served as chair of the Rygiel Home board. He told The Spectator in 1991, however, that had nothing to do with his philosophy and he favoured integration in 1958,

before he even had children.

He noted before integration children with special needs were nurtured and protected by "marvellous" teachers in segregated classrooms. This failed to give them a chance to acquire social skills, or learn how to cope for themselves in the schoolyard, "let alone the real world," he said.

"What we really essentially recommended is to do away with special education," Hansen explained. "Every child is special. We were going to make that cliché more than a cliché ... It had nothing to do with handicapped people, except how can you have child-centred schools if you exclude any kid?"

His two other sons were inspired to go into education. David is the education director of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic board and Anthony taught in Halton.

Ward 3 Trustee Tony Perri got to know Hansen when he was asked by him to chair the board's special education advisory committee in 1979. He said he learned how big of an impact "Each Belongs" had when the board started hosting visitors from such countries as Germany and Belgium. He said in the next few months the board will be visited by educators from the Netherlands.

Perri said Hansen had "somewhat of a gruff demeanour," but he knows of many board employees who sought his counsel on work and personal issues.

"He liked to let people think he had a big bark and even bigger bite, but in reality, while his bark could be loud and intimidating, his bite was more like a gold fish nibble," he said. "I miss him dearly."

The youngest of 11 children, Hansen was born in Montreal. At 17, he joined the Christian Brothers, a religious teaching order.

He taught in Toronto for six years, including a stint as an elementary school principal. After leaving the order, he went to Winnipeg and taught public school for six years.

He married his wife Patricia there, but decided to move on and was hired by the Hamilton Catholic board in 1960.

He taught at two schools before becoming a principal in 1966. Two years later, he became an inspector, equivalent to an assistant superintendent.

Hansen leaves wife Patricia, sons David, Paul and Anthony, five

grandchildren, and sister Rita.

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