



Michael George, a Saint John parent and advocate for disabled children, says New Brunswick teachers have unfairly targeted the inclusion policy as a danger to classrooms. PHOTO: THE CANADIAN PRESS

Inclusion debate needs a constructive tone

MICHAEL GEORGE COMMENTARY

The recent uproar over inclusive education, stirred up in large part by the executive of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA), is having serious impacts that go far beyond what takes place in the classroom. The shameful incitement of an uninformed public to condemn a policy that very few are even aware of, let alone have read, is creating battle lines between families, students and teachers.

On the surface, NBTA is calling for a "review" of Policy 322 on inclusive education. As a result, sensational stories of Kevlar-clad teachers have appeared, implying that safety in the classroom is threatened on a daily basis. Whatever safety issues do exist, these stories only serve to stoke fear and paranoia, while singling out and demonizing a vulnerable segment of the population, making them the scapegoat for claims that inclusion "doesn't work." This is intolerance, discrimination and bullying in their purest form, and it must stop. We would deplore singling out people based on gender, the colour of their skin, their religious beliefs, their sexual orientation, or their nationality, and so it should be for those with behavioural issues or disabilities.

Interestingly, what has received far less attention is the fact that the Province of New Brunswick was recently awarded the prestigious Zero Project Award for Innovative Policy for Policy

322 on inclusive education. The Zero Project is a global initiative with the sole objective of helping create a world without barriers. It is baffling why the NBTA is contradicting over 3,000 education and human right experts worldwide who have endorsed Policy 322 as world class.

In order to reset this dialogue towards a more constructive tone, let's start with what Policy 322 actually says, compared to what people think it says.

First, the policy states that inclusive education requires the provincial curriculum to be provided equitably to all students – not most students or only those who are deemed to have potential, but to everyone.

The policy does not define inclusive education as only for those students who have a disability. In fact, the word "disability" appears only twice in the policy's entire text. Any suggestions that inclusive education is exclusively about those students is factually incorrect.

Second, Policy 322 says that the provincial curriculum is to be provided in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate peers. It is the responsibility of all school personnel, not just the classroom teacher, to ensure each student can participate fully. When a student's learning needs cannot be met, the policy clearly allows for variations in the learning environment. No student is forced to be a prisoner in the classroom, despite anecdotal stories that suggest otherwise.

With proper supports, all students can

learn, develop, and succeed. The policy is very clear on this point, requiring that both the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and school districts establish and maintain systemic supports that make inclusion of all students a reality. If these supports are lacking, the battle cry should be to ensure they are in place. That should be the focus. Repeatedly reviewing and changing a policy to suit current reality is not an effective strategy.

Organizations take on the characteristics of their leaders. That includes government, NBTA, school districts, and schools themselves. Leaders set the tone for the organization's culture and, in this case, teacher engagement. Any inclusion policy is only as strong as the on-site leaders who implement it on a daily basis.

Third point: every school in the province is required to have a Positive Learning and Working Environment Plan. Part of that plan includes strategies to effectively manage any situation where a student's conduct or actions pose imminent danger to others or themselves. Nowhere in Policy 322 does it state that a disruptive or violent student cannot be removed from the classroom. What it does advise is that removal of the student always be done with the intent of re-including the student into the learning environment in the future.

There are many triggers for aggressive outbursts, including being bullied or enduring an abusive home life. To suggest that these behaviour crises are the

result of inclusion is unproven and unfair.

As a parent of a young adult with complex disabilities, I have witnessed a lot. For too many years, my son was subjected to woefully inadequate educational supports and faced a host of "experts" who saw little potential in him. This negatively impacted his growth and development. No one has the moral authority to decide who qualifies to be taught and who doesn't, but somehow these experts thought they did.

When we found those who truly believed in our son, who understood the value of an inclusive learning environment, who had high expectations of him, and who continually asked, "What's the most I can do?" great things happened.

"Inclusive education practices are not only necessary for all students to develop and prosper, but are also critical to building a society that is inclusive of all people and their basic legal, civil and human rights." This is what is important about Policy 322.

As a society, when we exclude people, we stifle human potential, and that hurts us all.

Every life is of equal value, so let's focus on supporting all students to become the persons they are meant to be. That should require no review.

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