

## **We have to try harder to include those with special needs**

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Being a young person with an unmapped future lying ahead, whenever I feel intimidated I adopt the reassuring mantra that the sky is the limit, that nothing is impossible. It is an inspiring concept, but does it ring true? Imagine living as a person with special needs, possessing the courage to dream but facing external limitations that hinder your achievements. Wouldn't it be wonderful if society would extend a helping hand across these barriers?

Inclusion is a current topic at Kitchener city council and an issue that is being addressed provincially. Locally, the conversation has focused on the need for assistance for blind Grand River Transit passengers. The government has committed funding to a variety of services for people with special needs. Ontario's ambitious plan would make Braille, audio packages, large print and American Sign Language widely available by 2011. Some believe that it is unwise for the government to begin this venture in poor economic times. When allocating taxpayers' dollars, it is imperative to confirm beforehand that the service is essential.

I had the great pleasure of attending the Re: Action4Inclusion conference hosted by Community Living Ontario. One hundred young people from all over Ontario gathered to assess current inclusion practices and discuss ways to improve the assimilation of special needs students into classroom settings and putting ideas into action when we returned home.

The real world is gearing up to be fully inclusive and elementary schools strive to include special needs students in all aspects of daily curriculum. The glaring inconsistency occurs when these special needs students reach secondary school and the prevailing conditions change.

Though there are some practical reasons to exclude these students from some educational activities, the gap between these individuals and the mainstream students widens.

I am an advocate of inclusion in the classroom particularly when it best suits the "special" student's needs. The issue is very close to my heart because my best friend's brother is a high school student with Down syndrome and an indomitable spirit. I have seen firsthand how challenging it is for families to advocate for their special needs child. Often the child's needs are unique and constantly changing. They need a representative to be their voice and to be a vigilant observer who can recognize their present ability and future capabilities. If any child's potential is overlooked or the curriculum isn't provided in a suitable fashion, the window of opportunity closes.

Special needs students may have different cognitive development levels than the mainstream students, but I believe that the need for social interaction is equal among all teenagers. Ideally, the concept of inclusion would extend to lunch periods and involvement of special needs students in extracurricular activities as well.

Inclusion of these students is beneficial in a myriad of ways, the least of which are achieving the sense of belonging one gets from following the same routines as all of one's peers, the opportunity to be mentored by a fellow student and exposure to a wide array of opinions.

The most unexpected of all is the benefit to the "regular" students. Sitting alongside special needs students helps everyone to practise acceptance and compassion and provides opportunities to look beyond the disability to discover an often overlooked inner beauty.

Ontario is on the right track, removing physical barriers for people with special needs. The next step is to dissolve the social barriers that marginalize members of our society. It starts with a desire to understand, a shedding of judgmental tendencies and a tip of the scales from exclusion to inclusion which becomes possible with just the slightest shift in thinking.

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