

Because education is about community

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HELEN HENDERSON

"I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change....I'm asking you to believe in yours."

The words belong to Barack Obama, installed this week as the 44th president of the United States. But they speak to all citizens of the world.

Obama ran on a platform that included a pledge to promote independent community living and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Something to take to heart as Canadians get ready to mark inclusive education week next month.

In Toronto, the seven-day celebration, from Feb. 15 through 21, will be heralded by a free one-day conference Feb. 13 for parents, teachers and people with disabilities.

It has an impressive lineup of scheduled speakers, including Ontario Human Rights Commission chief Barbara Hall. But it's just the set-up for the main event: seven days during which the Canadian Association for Community Living and Inclusive Education Canada hope parents, teachers and advocates will spread the word about the value of educating all children together.

Even the most hard-core academics know that education is about a lot more than math and science and arts and classrooms and technology. Ultimately, it's about community, from local neighbourhoods to the national and international stage. What we learn in our formative years about people – their similarities and differences, their diverse takes on life – is what truly sets our path for success in the future.

Schools that include everyone promote harmony along with an appreciation for the differences that mark us individually and culturally. Segregation fosters unfamiliarity, distrust and disrespect, breeding grounds for harassment and bullying – among kids and countries.

"If you don't get ready for life with others in school, then when?" asks Gordon Porter, chair of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission and director of inclusive education initiatives for the Canadian Association for Community Living.

Porter, who will be co-chairing the one-day conference with Diane Dewing, a parent/teacher and executive member of the Elementary Teachers Federation of

Ontario, has written extensively about the long-term benefits of inclusive education.

Research by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development shows that countries with the highest degrees of inclusion in their schools not only get better results, but they also narrow the gap between high and low achievers, Porter notes. "By educating children together, in socially inclusive groups, we help assure consistently better outcomes for everyone," he says.

Parents of children with serious intellectual disabilities do not expect their kids to accomplish the same academic goals as classmates who are not intellectually disabled, Porter stresses. But they do want them to be able to participate as far as they can.

"They want them to be known by classmates as peers, deserving of dignity, of citizenship, and of a good life....They want the social inclusion in school that will build a basis for social inclusion in society after schooling in over."

That being said, "research clearly shows that children with disabilities educated in regular classes...are much more likely to go on to higher education, employment, higher incomes and more community participation in their adult lives," Porter points out.

Funding and operating two segregated systems is counterproductive as well as inefficient, he argues. Instead, he suggests putting the resources we have into the regular system to keep class sizes reasonable while offering teachers the training, planning time and assistance they need.

"Because the investment to support inclusion is principally directed toward supporting classroom teachers, it has spillover positive benefits for other students," he says.

"This investment is critical if we are to make schools instruments for creating an equitable and democratic society."

Along with Porter and Dewing, participants in the one-day conference include Emily Noble, president of the Canadian Teachers Federation, and Michael Bach, executive vice-president of the Canadian Association for Community Living. The event, organized in conjunction with the Toronto District School Board, will take place at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. There is no fee but you are asked to register in advance.

For more information, see inclusiveeducation.ca.

helenhenderson@sympatico.ca