

Building residential school not the answer

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The last few weeks have seen considerable discussion about the report of the province's child and youth advocate, Connecting the Dots.

We wholeheartedly support the vast majority of Bernard Richard's recommendations, but his call for a segregated school for some children with complex needs causes us real concern.

We appreciate that Mr. Richard's heart is in the right place, but this would be a regrettable and regressive move for the province.

An uplifting front page story in the Feb. 18 Daily Gleaner, headlined "Benjamin's life story takes turn for better," outlined the story of a bipolar boy who, thanks to community support, has progressed to a point where he has his eye on a career as a chef.

Mr. Richard's report said Benjamin's case was "a good outcome because it forced intervention team workers in this youth's hometown to develop a made-in-New Brunswick solution that was supportive of the child's family."

The kicker is that Benjamin was almost sent to a residential school in Nova Scotia, but the school was filled. This was very fortunate, because if Benjamin had been removed from his family and community school, it is all but a certainty that he would not have progressed the way he has.

If the government agrees with Mr. Richard's recommendation to build a residential school, it is also all but a certainty that at least some of the future Benjamin's of this province will end up there.

The biggest problem with a residential school for children with intellectual disabilities is, simply put, if they build it, they will fill it. That's the sad reality.

It's not as if this province and this country haven't had experience with residential schools. Their legacy is well known. It's for good reason these facilities closed.

To revert to this kind of segregation would be most regrettable. I suspect support for the idea is based in the myths we hear about inclusion. Let's look at two of those.

Myth Number 1: Inclusive education means all children spend all their time in a regular classroom regardless of circumstance. What inclusion really means is that we find the appropriate level of support for each child and then provide it.

If this means it is better for certain children to leave their classrooms for specific periods of time in order to meet their individual needs and enable them to reach their full potential, then this is what should happen.

Myth Number 2: Inclusive classrooms negatively affect the other children. The effect is just the opposite. Children in inclusive classrooms learn important lessons in tolerance. When these children become adults, they will contribute to a more understanding society where there is a

place for all people including those with intellectual disabilities. Their own learning is not compromised as long as the appropriate support for the child is provided.

Mr. Richard's report includes many positive ideas but a call for a residential school isn't one of them. Being segregated from their peers and removed from their neighbourhood schools and their families is not the way to meet the challenges of children with complex needs.

Inclusion is the answer. We need only to support it properly with the right resources at the right time. If we do, it will work to its potential and in that, help those who require it to reach theirs.

Krista Carr is the Executive Director of New Brunswick Association for Community Living.

To access the Report – ***Connecting the Dots: A report on the condition of youth-at-risk and youth with very complex needs in New Brunswick***

: <http://www.gnb.ca/0073/PDF/ConnectingtheDots-e.pdf>