

Manitoba's Summit on Inclusive Education: A True Celebration!

On February 20, 2008, Manitoba hosted its second summit on inclusive education. This year's summit was special for three reasons:

1. Since our last summit, four years ago, Manitoba has adopted new legislation regarding the education of children with special needs entitled the "**Appropriate Education Act**,"
2. Our Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth, the **Honourable Peter Bjornson**, had declared the week, February 17 to 23, to be Manitoba Inclusive Education Week, and
3. This year Community Living Manitoba has partnered with Manitoba Council for Exceptional Children in hosting this summit.

These alone were wonderful reasons to celebrate the day, but to top it all off, we had some amazing and wonderful stories and experiences that were shared by students, teachers, parents, school and school division administrators and members of the Department of Education. **Bendina Miller, President of Canadian Association for Community Living** was also on hand to deliver greetings from CACL and lend her voice to the many stories that showcased the growing body of knowledge and awareness of the value of including children with special needs in all aspects of the school community.

Stuart Dahl, a grade 12 student at a Winnipeg high school shared his views on how it is important for his voice to be heard so that he can get to know his peers and they can get to know him. This process takes time and requires that all students have a chance to interact over their school career, not just in elementary school, but up into high school and beyond.

We also heard from a parent, **Liz Hutchings**, who pointed out that for children with special needs, their behaviour is their communication and we as parents and educators need to be cognizant of this on a day-to-day basis.

Billie Schibler, Manitoba's Children's Advocate, and Dr. Rudy Ambtman of MCEC spoke about the need to sometimes engage the services of the Children's Advocate to help parents who feel helpless when confronting the school system, or to help children who do not have an effective parent voice. Their proposed demonstration project that would see a more formal role between the Department of Education and The Children's Advocate was greeted with many nods from audience members, but they are still in search of financial backing in order to get this project underway.

Other presentations throughout the day included a keynote address from **Mary Ruth Coleman of the Council for Exceptional Children International** that highlighted the importance of framing our children's contributions to society in a positive manner...remembering the Ability within the Dis-Ability. Local radio host, **Richard Cloutier**, spoke about how the

news is made and how we can work effectively with news agents in getting our inclusive education message out. The Department of Education spoke about progress made since the proclamation of the Appropriate Education Act and other topics covered included transition planning out of childcare and into school, transitioning from school into adult services, how school division administrators promote inclusive education in their schools and many more.

Feedback from the day was very positive with many attendees looking forward to another summit in the coming year. Community Living Manitoba wishes to extend a hearty "Thank You" to the Manitoba Council for Exceptional Children and to the many presenters who helped to make the day such a huge success.

- Anne Kresta – Community living Manitoba