If Inclusion Means Everyone,
WHY NOT ME?

ARCH
Disability Law Centre

inclusive
education
Canada

Western
UNIVERSITY · CANADA

Brock
University

COMMUNITY LIVING
Ontario

Brockville and District Association for
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
Inspiring Possibilities

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Executive
Summary

This Report identifies barriers that students labelled with intellectual disabilities and their parents and guardians face in Ontario's public school system and sets out some key insights into their experiences. The authors identified various factors that influence the quality of a student's education.

OF NOTE WERE:

THE ROLE OF ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS and how they often limit the academic and social opportunities available to students;

THE POSITIVE ROLE THAT INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES could play for students who have an intellectual disability;

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD AND PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS with educational service providers;

THE NEED FOR BETTER CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESSES and better adherence to existing processes; and

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG AND POSITIVE LEADERSHIP at the level of school and school board administration.

These elements all play a key role in creating either an inclusive learning environment or an environment filled with ableist barriers.

Despite a shift in special education delivery in recent years, students who have an intellectual disability still face barriers to public education in elementary and secondary schools across Ontario. In particular, these students face attitudinal barriers, which limit their academic opportunities, social barriers which limit their access to the school community and disproportionate rates of exclusion from school.

Families of students who have an intellectual disability also face barriers such as high rates of conflict with schools at various levels, as well as additional financial and emotional strain brought on by the numerous obstacles that are part of their child's school experience.

About Our
Partnership

The research study was conducted as a collaborative involving Community Living Ontario, Western University, Brock University, ARCH Disability Law Centre, Brockville and District Association for Community Involvement, and Inclusive Education Canada. The authors of the report are:

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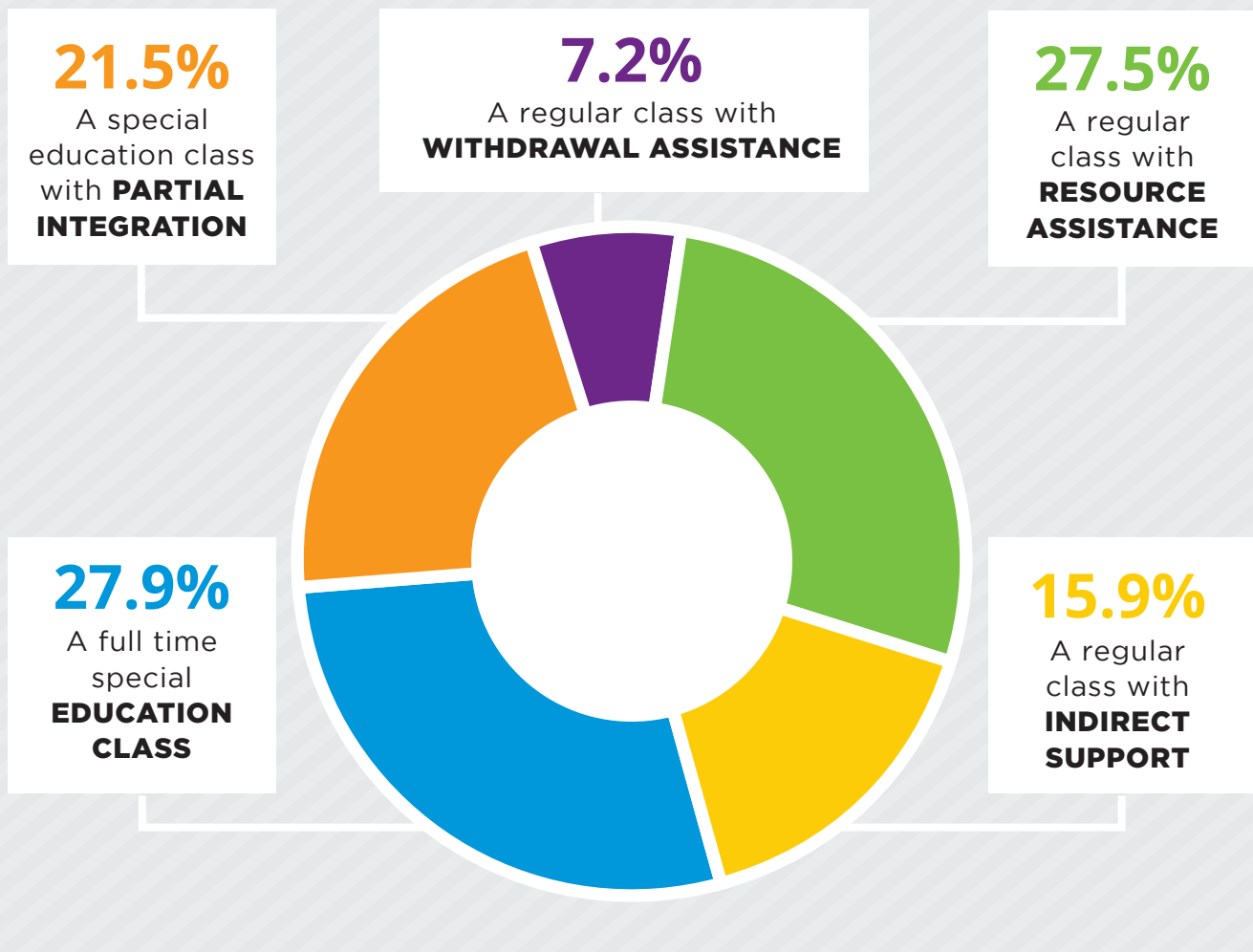
Research
Methodology

Quantitative Methodology

The questionnaire in the report was based on known issues in the research literature as well as knowledge from professionals working in the area of intellectual disabilities. The target audience was parents or guardians of students who have an intellectual disability. The questionnaire was designed to assess parent/guardian perceptions of their child's schooling.

The questionnaire was piloted with parents to ensure language was appropriate and questions were understood. There were 14 questions related to demographic information such as gender, ethnicity, level of education, household income, child's identified disability, and school placement. There were 60 questions related to the broad areas of academic and social experiences in school and parental reporting of absences and involvement with the IPRC/IEP process.

In February 2017, parents of children of who have an intellectual disability in Ontario were asked to participate in a survey examining students' experiences in schools. 701 surveys were begun in Qualtrics, an online survey environment. Of those received, 307 were excluded from the analyses for this report because they had not completed 90% of the survey. We wanted people to have completed most of the survey to ensure we were getting the overall picture from the same respondents. In addition, many people completed the survey thinking of students who did not have an intellectual disability. These survey responses were also excluded for this report. Investigations of the demographic representation do not indicate differences between those included and those excluded from analyses. The total number of surveys included for the analyses was 280. Representation of different school placements was achieved.

Placement of Survey Participants

21.5%
A special education class with **PARTIAL INTEGRATION**

7.2%
A regular class with **WITHDRAWAL ASSISTANCE**

27.5%
A regular class with **RESOURCE ASSISTANCE**

27.9%
A full time special **EDUCATION CLASS**

15.9%
A regular class with **INDIRECT SUPPORT**

We consider a regular class with direct and indirect support as more inclusive placements (43.4%) and a special education class full time or with partial integration as more segregated placements (49.4%).

Overall, the demographic responding to the questionnaires was overwhelmingly Caucasian (83%), female (91%) and formally educated (90% completed college or university). The demographic makeup of this population points to a need for further investigation into the experiences of minority populations with less education and the need for additional outreach efforts to these populations. As we know through our work, those who identify with characteristics that are protected by the Human Rights Code, can experience multiple layers of intersecting disadvantage and discrimination.

It is also of note that, due to practical study design considerations, the authors of this report relied solely on the responses of parents and guardians to questions about their child's education. This indicates a need for further investigations into perceptions of the children themselves. Further exploration of this issue will help bolster the extent to which the voice of the students themselves can shape the discussion in this important area.

Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative research for this project consisted of 35 interviews with parents of children who have an intellectual disability who were currently enrolled in Ontario's public education system, or who had graduated in the last five years. This provided researchers with a current look at special education systems across Ontario school boards. Researchers began by emailing all participants who indicated on the survey that they would be willing to be interviewed and provided contact information. The email invitation was sent out three times, to ensure all participants who wanted to partake had a chance. Interviews took place in September and October of 2017. Participants were asked the same 14 questions about their child's experiences in school. The questions were designed to give parents a chance to discuss all aspects of their child's education, including academic, social and extracurricular opportunities, as well as various aspects of their relationship with the school.

Data analysis began with each researcher reading all 35 transcripts. At this point, two interviews were eliminated from further analysis, as they were outside of the parameters for our research. From here, the transcripts were first sorted into children in an inclusive school environment and children in a segregated school environment, and then divided by question. Each question was then read by a researcher who pulled out relevant quotes and examples from each transcript, to give context around how parents from both sub-categories answered each question. Each summary of the question was then read by each researcher to look for reoccurring themes. Once the themes were established, the summaries were shortened to two page summaries including pertinent quotes and examples from all 33 transcripts to ensure each participant voice was still heard. Each two page summary was then analyzed and highlighted, and the quotes were moved from being sorted by question to the theme they best fit. These sorted themes were then put into two reports, one containing the experiences of those in an inclusive school environment, and those experiences in a segregated school environment.

The Legal
Framework

The full inclusion of students who have a disability remains an unmet goal for our education system. As recently as the early 1980s, students who had a disability could be denied access to education on the basis of their disability. Since that time, there have been developments in law that support more inclusive service delivery for special education. In particular, school boards have clear obligations to provide individualized accommodations for students who have a disability to the point of undue hardship.

In 2012, the Supreme Court of Canada in Moore v. British Columbia clearly articulated the legal requirements that education service providers have towards students who have disabilities pursuant to human rights legislation. The Court underscored the importance of an individualized approach to accommodating students who have a disability, and set a very high threshold for education service providers to meet when proving that accommodating a student would be undue hardship. The Court also framed the human rights obligations of schools and school boards as one of providing "meaningful access" to education for students who have a disability and ensuring that students can fully access the benefits of the education system.[1]

These obligations are reinforced by Canada's international commitments. In 2010, Canada ratified the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which included an obligation to implement inclusive educational practices geared towards ensuring that students who have a disability do not remain marginalized or excluded from the benefits of our education system. Article 24 requires all Canadian provinces to have fully accessible and inclusive educational services designed to maximize the academic and social development of students who have a disability.[2]

The results of this research demonstrate that significant measures need to be taken in order to ensure that these obligations are met.

1 - *Moore v. British Columbia (Education)* 2012 SCC 61, [2012] 3 S.C.R. 360
2 - General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 71st Session, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/4 (25 November 2016).

Overview of
Our Research

Our research highlighted a number of significant barriers and problems that students who have an intellectual disability experience when accessing the education system. Broadly speaking, we have grouped our findings into the following separate categories:

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL BARRIERS – Students who have an intellectual disability often do not have access to the appropriate curriculum or the supports required to make the curriculum accessible to them. They often do not participate in school activities, which limits social engagement.

EXCLUSION – Students who have an intellectual disability still continue to be excluded from school or the classroom for disability related reasons.

CONFLICT – Families report high levels of conflict with schools or school boards and say that they have very limited recourse to appropriate dispute resolution mechanisms.

PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION – Students who have an intellectual disability are entitled to careful and thorough planning that is collaboratively developed. For many, the process of program planning is stagnant and parents report feeling disregarded or left out of the process.

LEADERSHIP - Students who have an intellectual disability and their families are often dependent on the style, belief systems and interpretation of service delivery of school leadership.

Academic and **Social Barriers**

Students who have a disability face significant academic and social barriers at school. Parents reported that their children do not receive proper accommodations and/or supports for their disabilities to enable them to participate in class or various school and extracurricular activities.

a. **53%** of parents reported that their child was not receiving proper academic accommodations;

b. **67%** of parents reported that their child had been excluded from the appropriate curriculum based on their level of learning;

c. **62.7%** reported that their child had been excluded from extracurricular activities; and

d. **32%** of parents reported that their child did not have access to additional support staff when it was needed by their child (e.g. Educational Assistants, etc.). This is comparable to similar statistics reported by People for Education in 2016, which reported that 26% of elementary schools did not have the recommended levels of support available.[3]

Parents reported that they often had to shoulder the additional burden of getting their son or daughter the additional support they need to fully engage with their academics. In order to have their children participate in a school related activity, 63.8% of parents had to leave work; 50% of parents said they had to provide separate transportation for their child, 71.9% said they had to accompany them to school or on a trip to allow them to participate and approximately 38% said that they had to pay for additional supports for their child. These statistics were supported in the interviews, where many parents stated they had to attend field trips with their child, or the child would not be allowed to go.

3 - People for Education, *The geography of opportunity: What's needed for broader student success*, (Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools, 2016) (Toronto: People for Education, 2016) online: People for Education www.peopleforeducation.ca/category/pfe-reports/.

With these statistics in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that 68.2% of parents reported that schools were meeting half or less than half of their child's academic needs. In their interviews, parents emphasized the effects of low expectations and a lack of opportunities for fulsome engagement in the school community as part of the driving force behind many of these academic barriers.

"Academically, [things were] not very good. It started out well and as time deteriorated or school deteriorated, they used to just stick him in a sensory room and [he] received less and less education along the whole time and became more agitated. He wasn't allowed outside, he wasn't allowed in recess or to see other students, he was isolated, locked in a room with rubber mats."

"[My child] was right up there counting all the way up into the 20s and yet on his report card, it said he can only count to five. So there's a disconnect there."

"She hit grade nine, they immediately wanted to put her in a self-contained class because all of a sudden this kid is hitting high school and we've just pushed her through all the elementary grades and not provided her, you know with basic reading and math skills."

"I feel like they really don't understand inclusion. I'm happier that she's there than in a self-contained classroom, but I know they're struggling and that they don't understand universal design and they don't understand true inclusion in the classroom."

"Right so when I pushed for that (co-op) it just seemed like [my child] was put on the back burner and finally in her last [year] I met with the head of spec. ed. and I said 'you know I think we've done a disservice for [my child] in the fact that we did not have a co-op experience'."

"So there is a tendency more to limit the work, it's understandable in a way because they don't want to probably frustrate him but sometimes it's also a sign of not presuming the competence that is there."

"Sometimes there's an assumption that students are going to plateau with their learning, so they kind of stop teaching them to read and write and do basic math skills because they start pushing the life skills."

"My youngest son has said things, when he was little 'they don't like me, the principal won't talk to me, I'm not allowed to leave my classroom."

"She is in grade two now and it seems like she's in this loop where every year she does the same thing. There is absolutely no progress or move forward in any way and the expectations are not being raised, she's just the same and it seems like she's going to graduate in grade five and just be doing the same thing every day."

Academic and social barriers may lead to students experiencing bullying. Despite recent initiatives by the Ministry of Education to create a safe and diverse space in the classroom, many students continue to be bullied at school. Students who have intellectual disabilities are no different in that 64.9% of parents surveyed reported that their children experienced some form of bullying related to their disability. Parents reported that this was often done by other students, parents and, at times, even school staff. A number of parent interviews emphasized the important role of school administrators in ensuring the proper response to bullying and the positive role they can play in resolving these situations.

"There were children that were bullying my child to the point that other children were going home and telling their parents 'oh my god this is absolutely horrible. They're tormenting him so he loses it and then the teachers are blaming him and they won't stop. They do it relentlessly and the teachers don't do anything' to the point where other parents started calling the school and telling me this is wrong, what they're doing to this kid is really wrong."

"[He has not been bullied] to my knowledge but he always had good social contacts. He had a couple of really good friends and one of the girls still goes to high school but she's in grade 10 and suspect that they stood up for him if anything ever came up."

"Yep [he has been bullied]. The school was amazing."

"I do tend to find if it's between a neurotypical child and someone like my son, they do tend to focus in on the behaviours more of my son then the neurotypical child kind of thing. [...]Um so I think that is something that needs to be addressed as well, zero tolerance for bullying should be for everybody, not just focusing in on our kids behavior kind of thing."

"so no bullying I don't think I've seen, a few people calling her names, I don't think I've seen a lot more than say my more typical son has seen in terms of being bullied, in terms of peers right. My thing, I think it's the structure, the EAs and the school system that's being the bully, not so much the other kids."

"I think it was probably normal kids, it wasn't like he was pushed or yelled at or called names or anything like that. He was just laughed at and he took it that way.

"I would say the principal definitely bullied him."

"If the child who's bullied is willing to run to the office every single time, and they're able to articulate who is bullying them and exactly what happened, then the school can step in. However, kids are smart and they tend to pick on the kid that maybe can't articulate it very well, which happened to be my son."

"Well they had this thing called restorative justice in the public school system, which is useless for a kid who can't process things very well."

Exclusions

Despite the legal obligations requiring students who have a disability to have meaningful access to education, our research indicates there is still much work to be done to meet these obligations. The first barrier some families face is simply getting their child access to an education. Our quantitative findings indicate that those children who have a disability experience barriers so significant that they are unable to attend school; 45% of parents reported that at one time or another, they had to keep their child home as a result of a lack of accommodations and/or other services.

Additionally, approximately 11% of parents surveyed reported that their child had been expelled from school for disability-related reasons and 23% of parents reported that their child had been suspended for similar reasons. This is consistent with statistics released by the Ministry of Education in 2015-2016, which reported high levels of suspensions for students who have a disability generally. Approximately 47% of all suspensions and 48% of all expulsions involved a student who has a disability.[4]

In addition, it appears that many children who have disabilities are still excluded from school in a number of other ways. In many cases, children are excluded from school outside of the normal suspension and expulsion process. Approximately 25% of parents surveyed reported that they had simply been told not to bring their child to school. This raises a number of questions, notably whether a school board actually has the statutory authority to tell a parent to keep their child home from school outside of the regular process. Of these parents, 76% reported that informal exclusions were communicated to parents verbally, rather than in writing, and 41% reported that the rationale for the exclusion was not clearly stated. These statistics demonstrate the troubling practice of denying full access to students who have disabilities.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY: There are several ways in which students generally may be excluded from school within the *Education Act* framework:

1. SUSPENSIONS AND EXPULSIONS – Part XIII of the *Education Act* and Regulations sets out a process for disciplinary measures, which include some procedural protections for parents and students.

2. EXCLUSIONS – The *Education Act* in section 265(1)(m) states that it is the duty of a principal to remove someone from the school if they are "detrimental to the physical or mental well-being of the pupils".

3. SHORTENED SCHOOL DAYS – The *Education Act* permits a reduction of the length of the school day in certain circumstances.

These provisions are not intended to specifically address students who have disabilities and can be inappropriately and discriminatorily applied.

It is important to note that under all of these processes, Ontario's *Human Rights Code* mandates that students must be accommodated to the point of undue hardship.

4 - Government of Ontario. "Safe Schools - Suspension and expulsion facts, 2015-2016", (12 December 2017), online: Ministry of Education / Ministère de l'Éducation www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/facts1516.html

Parents also reported that their children experienced "partial" exclusions in the form of shortened school days. Approximately 54% of parents reported that their child had to leave school early and 39% reported that their child was required to arrive late.[5] Reasons include their child's fatigue level; however, a number of other issues such as transportation scheduling, staffing shortages at key times and behavioural support plans not being in place were all reported as reasons why the school day was shortened. These are not appropriate reasons to prevent a child from going to school, especially when on average, children lost over half their school day, approximately 3.86 hours out of their 6 hour school day.

The personal narratives of parents in their interviews highlighted the significant additional hardships that all forms of exclusion exerted on families and students. They described the painful loss of educational and social opportunities their child experienced, as well as their own issues; which included loss of work time, enhanced stress levels, financial strain and frequent disruptions. It was clear from our work that exclusion was one of the most painful and trying instances for parents.

"Yes, [my child has been excluded] for 11 months consecutively now. They said that he is excluded him under section 265 (1) (m). There needs to be some sort of governance to stop the abuse of power that allows principals to all of a sudden exclude children."

"Well whenever there was any issue, anything at all, he was sent home…there's only so much as a parent you can say in this situation, don't do A, B, and C and then they proceed to do A, B and C and then it leads to coming home and it makes you wonder whether they do this on purpose just so they don't have to deal with him, right?"

"Oh sure, there's times where I've kept him home. There's been times I've kept him home over different things or if the teacher's missing from school and there's no supports, I have kept him home. He has missed a lot of days to his life because it's easier to keep him home than send him to school, especially if the teacher was going to be absent."

"Just the calls [that my child] 'is having an off day or he's upset' and we would get to the school and we live about 12 minutes away and he would be sitting there fine and doing his work 'well take him home, he's having an off day'."

"Yes I haven't been able to work. When [my child] was put on a three day week, he was home 68 days and I had to be available for him and then, as I said, for eight years he was on a half day schedule or less."

"I've been asked to miss work, I was a single parent for several years of my kids' education and I was called at work, I was called to leave work, daily."

"He only goes for two and half hours, then I have to pick him up, but if I'm on day shift then I don't have anybody to pick him up. He can't go to school then."

"When you use exclusionary practices with students who are already struggling, it sets them further behind and I know that the statistics show that people, that students with learning challenges are suspended and expelled at a way higher rate than the normal population but it only adds to their sense of not belonging and not having a place."

5 - The length of this school day was calculated by adding the mandatory 5 hours of instructional time that students must receive under O. Reg. 298 and an additional hour for lunch and recess.

Planning and **Communication**

There are many complex processes in the education system geared towards identifying children who have disabilities and supporting their educational needs. Parents reported in interviews that these processes are often bureaucratic and confusing, and discussed how they often did not feel well informed about the process. For example, approximately 40% reported that they were not told that they had a right to initiate an IPRC meeting to determine their child's identification and placement. Even more troubling, 34% of parents reported that the school had discouraged them from attending a scheduled IPRC meeting, despite the fact that the purpose of an IPRC is to make important decisions about their child's education.

The complexity of the process was often exacerbated by the fact that many parents reported that they did not feel that they had been provided with an opportunity to be involved in their child's education. For instance, although most respondents indicated that they had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), about 32% of parents reported that they did not feel that they had been involved in the development of their child's IEP. This is especially concerning given that school boards have a legal obligation to consult with parents with respect to the development of an accommodation plan for their child.

It is unsurprising that parents often reported high levels of conflict with the school over a variety of matters related to their child's education. As noted in the introduction, parents reported a high degree of conflict at all levels of our education system. They often felt that they did not have access to proper dispute resolution mechanisms. This feeling may be related to the fact that there are no formal and impartial dispute resolution mechanisms for accommodation issues under the *Education Act*. School boards are required to develop their own processes and they often fall short in the eyes of parents.

Overall, the experiences reported by parents suggest a greater need for outreach by schools to involve them in the education of their children. It also suggests a need to create a broader and impartial dispute resolution process with a simplified procedure that parents can access to resolve any complaints about accommodations for their child.

"I think kid's IEPs are, if we looked at them all collectively, I think they all kind of look the same, not very individual, kind of standard. You put goals in place, but it never, it's never shown if he's reached those goals or not."

"I think sometimes they thought I went in there enough that we talked about stuff that those things would be in the IEPs but they didn't plan meetings with families unless families specifically asked for them. Um so as he got older, his IEP got less and less, like there was very little on it."

"I would say the IEP as a whole, like I said because the bar is so low from the legal perspective, I think the school sets its bar pretty low in terms of what it needs to do. I can tell you up until last year, every comment I ever provided on an IEP was ignored."

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY: The *Education Act* and its Regulation sets out a process to identify children who have certain disabilities and to determine appropriate placements. Students who have disabilities are often identified and placed in a particular classroom setting by an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). Parent/guardians and students have a number of participatory rights at meetings of the IPRC Committee and can appeal its decision. Furthermore, once students have been identified by an IPRC, an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which outlines their child's learning needs and accommodations, must be developed for them in consultation with parents. Development and review of the IEP can be a very involved process. Human Rights law considers IEPs to be akin to accommodation plans.

✸ Conflict

A consistent and concerning theme that emerged from this study was the high level of conflict between families and their children's schools at various levels. The majority of parents reported that there had been conflict with the school over their child's education. Approximately 67% of parents reported conflict at the classroom level and 74% reported conflict with school administrators. Additionally, 56% of parents reported that they had been in conflict with their school board.

Parents expressed frustration that there was not an appropriate conflict resolution mechanism available to them when dealing with schools. Almost half of parents reported that they did not have access to a proper conflict resolution mechanism to deal with an accommodation issue. When parents did have access to a conflict resolution mechanism, it often appeared to fall short in many ways. For instance, 69% of parents involved in a conflict reported that they were not given access to necessary information during the process and 64% of parents reported that their knowledge of their own child was not recognized by decision-makers.

A theme that emerged from the interviews was parents having to take on a leadership role in the relationship with schools. Parents who had good relationships with their child's school, as well as parents in conflict with the school, discussed how it was often up to them to initiate communication and information sharing. Further, parents discussed how often the onus was on them to request meetings regarding academic accommodations and the development of IEPs.

"So they'll sit down and listen but they don't really listen and they don't follow through with anything."

"I tried speaking with the superintendent, I tried speaking with the associate director, tried contacting the director, I got no response. I had to contact lawyers."

"Well I had to go all the way up the school board, like right up to the top, I've had a lot of issues. I think I've had to do that twice. I started off internally, I went to the teachers, I went to the special education teacher, I went to the people that kind of float in and out of the schools and try to help. The principal was pretty nasty [laughs] so, yeah so I worked my way up the chain."

"Okay so what I found I had to do, I needed to make sure that I had more information about special needs and education than the educators had. I got my masters of science in education. I did that so that I could be a better advocate for my daughter."

"I guess because we constantly advocate for our son, we are sort of seen as trouble makers or as extremely demanding parents when we really aren't demanding anything extraordinary. We're just asking that he gets the support that he's entitled to, but we often run up against road blocks."

In light of the ubiquitous conflict with schools that parents reported, it is important to note that another consistent theme that emerged was the value that many parents placed on a good relationship with educators. While parents frequently expressed exhaustion and frustration with their school, many reported positive relationships or at least the desire to preserve these important relationships. Part of this desire stemmed from the recognition among parents that the educators they were meeting were going to be involved with their child for a long period of time and that it was a necessity to ensure that the relationship was productive. Despite these efforts, many parents (45%) reported that they often felt that they were not treated respectfully when they had a disagreement with the school.

Despite their negative experiences, many parents remained committed to ensuring a productive relationship with their school and reiterated the central role these relationships have regarding the delivery of education services. Indeed, without a good relationship, the coordination required to effectively educate students who have disabilities is essentially impossible.

"Every year was different, it just depended on the principal, who the EA was, who the teacher was. It was never a consistent thing."

"Being not adversarial but clear and direct and educated has been, you know, I do a lot of coaching with other parents and I said 'getting threatening is not going to get you what you want, they'll just circle the wagons and then there'll be no communication'. So communication, good communication has probably been the best."

"It's been a positive experience so far. They're a very upfront school and I find they're always leaving voice messages just saying, you know, this is happening at class this week and I don't know, I think it's pretty good actually."

"It's not rocket science at the end of the day it's how are we to treat each other right? You don't keep people on the fringes and then invite them in only when it's convenient and then you know, make them cross the stage and then leave."

"Went above the principal, called the school board, called meetings. I had professionals come in from to advocate with us, it's a different conversation when you bring someone in with you and just kept verbally telling them what my expectations of them were. If you rollover, you'll lose the game, so you really have to advocate."

Leadership

Leadership by school authorities was consistently identified by parents in interviews as being crucial to the quality of the education that students received. Parents frequently noted that school principals in particular could have an especially profound effect on the school culture and the quality of their child's education.

Indeed, the issue of shortened days provides an excellent example of the impact that school administration, both at the school level and the board level, can have on a student's education. For those children who had their day shortened, parents reported in 60% of cases that it was administration that broached the idea of shortening a child's day and in 62% of cases, it was administration who made the actual decision to shorten it. As described previously, the motives for these shortened days often related to administrative issues, such as staffing difficulties, rather than whether a shortened day was for the benefit of the child. This finding suggests a worrying tendency among school boards, in some cases, to prioritize administrative convenience over the right of a child to go to school.

Other examples of the role of leadership abounded among the interviews. It was clear from parental interviews that good leadership at the administrative level was often crucial in conflict resolution. Given the endemic nature of conflict between school and families in this area, the importance of positive leadership in this area cannot be understated.

Moving **forward...**

These results paint a stark picture of how the education system fails to serve students who have intellectual disabilities. While commitments to diversity and student excellence abound, students who have an intellectual disability are clearly not included.

The voices of parents provided crucial insights in terms of current practices. Moving forward, the data collected may provide a pathway for educators and systems to re-examine the quality of experiences that these students access during their school years.

Additional themes were raised by the results of this study. Set out below is a selection of those themes that shed further insight into the relationships and power dynamics that students and parents are confronted with when attempting to access appropriate education services.

Attitudes and **beliefs matter:**

A pervasive theme that emerged in the survey of parents and their interviews was related to the role of attitudinal barriers within the school system and the negative impact that these could have on students who have an intellectual disability. In the survey, many parents reported the existence of these attitudinal barriers within the school environment and in interviews discussed the countless ways that these could subvert student learning. Parents often suggested that low expectations for students who have intellectual disabilities and stereotypical beliefs about their abilities limited their success.

Parents reported that low expectations often contributed to a failure to provide students with academic opportunities because school staff did not believe that their sons or daughters could handle the additional expectations. The fact that almost two thirds of all parents surveyed reported that their child was being excluded from the appropriate curriculum for their level of learning is indicative of the impact of these low expectations and the widespread nature of this problem.

The presence of attitudinal barriers was one of the most prevalent themes in parental responses. Parents often cited attitudinal barriers as reasons for social isolation and bullying, in addition to limiting students academically. The overriding message from the data gathered in this study is that these barriers are a significant factor in the continuing marginalization of students who have intellectual disabilities in the school system and that systematic efforts are needed to address this issue.

"One of the courses that she took, she took applied science and she really enjoyed that because the teacher actually worked with me in coming up with concrete things that she could do."

Access matters:

It is clear that students who have intellectual disabilities are excluded physically, academically and socially. While some parents reported successful partnerships and inclusive practices that made their child's school experience robust and meaningful, this was not the case for most. Many parents reported that exclusion and lack of access creates barriers to

learning and relationship building. More importantly, it creates real hardship for families and students. Practically, financial disruptions in terms of missed work, intensified stress from unpredictable schedules, onus of problem solving on the shoulders of parents and multiple conflicts create exhaustion and frustration for families.

"She does feel welcome in her community but her community is almost this little dark hallway down the hall where nobody else goes right? But in that cluster, the teachers like her and they hang out with her and they seem to know her but as far as being part of the larger school community, like I really don't feel that. I've never been made to feel that, when we get letters or invitations to like school-wide events, there's never any kind of mention of how, of what kind of accommodations are going to be provided, never ever. It's like these students don't even exist."

Relationships matter:

Communication, planning and the provision of meaningful and robust educational and social experiences can all hinge on the quality of the relationships that are formed between families and educational providers. For some, these relationships are successful and contribute to an overall positive school experience for students. However, many parents report a pattern of poor communication and lack of follow through on the part of the school.

These types of relationships often lead to a more confrontational style of communication than a collaborative one.

> *"You know the dukes are up all the time, all the time, So you carry on again until the next time, until the next time and that's kind of where you're at, you leave no stone unturned and um and all of a sudden there's another boulder in the way and you think gosh I thought we already got through this but no there's something else. And that's kind of been the experience all along through school."*

Leadership matters:

Leadership can take many forms. Within this dataset, much of the discussion on leadership referred to the role of the principal and school board personnel. Despite this focus, there was also recognition that teachers and educational assistants can play a key leadership role in terms of success and inclusive practices. These key roles are important in the development of successful educational and social experiences for students who have intellectual disabilities in Ontario's school system.

> *"By the kids, I'd say yes [child was made to feel welcome], by the administration, I'd say no."*
>
> *"Our principal didn't go to bat for us, she batted against us, always. She did not want us there, she was not pleased."*

One area of concern certainly was the importance of personal belief systems and attitudes. Even to parents it was clear that whether a student had a successful experience or a negative one often came down to something as fundamental as attitude.

> *"One school is more welcoming than another. It all really depends on who the principal is."*

Belonging matters:

Responses to the survey indicated that, in many ways, parents were equally dissatisfied with many aspects of their children's education in both inclusive and segregated placements. However, despite the general dissatisfaction, there were some notable benefits that accrued to students in more inclusive settings.

For instance, students in inclusive settings were far more likely to be included in extracurricular and unstructured school activities, meaning that they had a much greater opportunity to socialize with their peers outside of the traditional classroom. Furthermore, it was evident among respondents that those students in an inclusive high school setting were far more likely to be enrolled in for-credit courses, allowing them to more fully reap the benefits of our education system.

In interviews, parents often spoke of the benefits of being in a welcoming and inclusive school environment, especially when it came to the morale of their child and their feelings about school generally. Inclusive environments were often seen to promote more engagement with school and provide opportunities to establish more meaningful relationships with peers.

These benefits strongly highlight the value of an inclusive approach to education and point to its potential to remediate some of the barriers described in our research. However, despite the value of an inclusive approach, the survey results suggest that deeper issues in our education system may be subverting the effectiveness of special education programs, whether they are inclusive or not.

"So the school must be very welcoming because he doesn't mind going to school, he's excited to go to school, the school counselor just called me right before you and she said he's doing fantastic. So I don't know what they're doing, I think they're including him in a lot of stuff, which I think is great because he's never had that before."

Conclusion

Overall, it is clear that students who have intellectual disabilities continue to experience overwhelming barriers when it comes to accessing their education. However, some important lessons can be gleaned from the experiences of families regarding the areas that might be targeted to address these barriers and improve the quality of special education programs for students who have disabilities. In particular, significant reforms to the *Education Act* are needed, as well as a new strong and responsive education standard pursuant to the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.*

The results of this study also make clear that further research is necessary to provide additional insight into many of the issues raised in this report. The authors of this report encourage the Provincial Government and local school boards to undertake similar efforts to better understand the experiences and challenges of students who have disabilities generally. Even rudimentary efforts to systematically track issues like the exclusion of students who have disabilities has the potential to improve both our knowledge of the practice and its use, and to implement appropriate policies to prevent unjustified instances of this practice.

The authors of this study are optimistic that improvements to the education system are possible, despite the daunting barriers that continue to exist. However, as parents throughout this study repeatedly emphasized, real leadership is necessary to address these barriers. This leadership needs to begin within schools and school boards and at the Provincial Government level. Without this sort of leadership we are doomed to perpetuate the type of systemic disadvantage that has plagued persons who have intellectual disabilities since the inception of our education system.

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