

## Chair's Report

March 28 2011

On Saturday, I spent the whole day with the members of the North Accommodation Review Committee touring all the high schools in the lower city from Sir John A. Macdonald to Orchard Park. We not only saw much of the facilities but were told about many of the programs at each school, described to us with pride. So we heard about drama and the arts, high skills majors and other special pathways into employment, community programs that support schools, a Mohawk dual credit program, and special academic, health and sports programs.

Our attention was drawn to all the supports and programs available in small classes throughout the north: special reading programs, proposed new intensive numeracy programs, programs for English Language learners who have little formal education, and supports for students with high needs. Two high school principals with the highest-needs students made a point of saying how they were integrated in the school and how protective all their students were of those in their special programs. All the schools offered clothing closets and subsidized and free food in the form of breakfasts and lunches. Some had extra social work and mentoring EAs. One could sense the progress being made in meeting vulnerable students' needs.

The desire for change in the delivery of our special education services at the secondary level has been discussed many times. The Special Education Advisory Committee's Concerns Report 2003 stressed the need for inclusion and equity and quoted

- *"All students can and will learn regardless of labels and differing abilities".*
- *"Special and general education should be viewed as a single merged or unified system rather than as two separate or parallel systems that emphasize the distinctive nature of student pathology, independent of the cultural and social circumstances of schools, their clients and their communities"*
- *"Design the system such that all educators take responsibility for all student learning and insist on a commitment to ensuring that all students will learn".*

(Sailor, 1991 in Sage, D.D. & Burello, L.C. (1994). Paradigms for restructuring. A Perspective for Special Education. In D.D. Sage & L.C. Burello Leadership in Educational Reform. An Administrator's Guide to Changes in Special Education, Paul H. Brookes: Baltimore, pp. 1-35.)

Comments to the Special Education Review of 2004 stressed the need for better planned transitions to the Secondary school for special education students. They noted that Down Syndrome students who have been in regular classes, and a part of their elementary schools, could not find an appropriate route in the secondary schools, as only self-contained classes, which are seen as isolated from the rest of the school, are their option. Many leave to attend the Catholic system at this point. This is also true for some other developmentally delayed students, and for autistic students who in elementary grades had been in the main stream but in Grade 9 were pressured to move into secondary self-contained classes or vocational schools without other choices being available. Better pathways were needed for special needs students that could lead to community, workplace or college.

Since these reports were written there have been strides made in meeting the needs of Special Education in HWDSB. The Ministry of Education "Learning for All" document has emphasized that all students can achieve and has been an

important instigator of change. Program and special education began working together. New programs have been introduced and inclusion has been increasing as we saw in our North ARC visit.

At the same time new research has emerged that has shown

*that grouping by ability can have adverse effects on students' attitudes towards schooling and their self-esteem.*

- *Studies on ability grouping show inequitable outcomes and social consequences:*
- *It is very difficult to distinguish 'ability' from 'prior achievement'.*
- *Use of grouping by ability is associated with worse overall student performance.*
- *Students placed in higher ability groups may perform better but students placed in lower ability groups typically perform worse than in mixed ability groups.*
- *There is a tendency for lower teacher expectation and lower quality of instruction in lower ability groups.*
- *For students assigned to low-ability groups, there are negative effects on their self-esteem, motivation and attitudes towards schooling.*

*Research suggests that students in non-grouped settings, especially for those with lower achievement, have more healthy and positive attitudes towards school than students in grouped settings.*

*Researchers advocate using mixed grouping and reducing ability grouping in schools, but more important is to focus on improving instruction and curriculum for students of all achievement levels.*

© Research Findings for Parents, (April, 2010). "What Does Research Say About Ability Grouping?"

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So it is exciting that the review of our facilities through the ARC process is taking place concurrently with a review of our programs. The new program strategy has five components:

- **All students learning:** the focus is about supporting ALL students in their learning
- **Personalized learning:** giving students choice about how they learn, when they learn and what they learn. ( Some choices for all students include apprenticeships, hands on learning, co-operative education, on line learning ( elearning) and self-paced learning)
- **All pathways in all schools:** all secondary schools will offer students the opportunity to fulfill the requirements for all pathways which include apprenticeship, college, community living, university and work
- **Schools with specializations :** all will offer some specializations
- **Board and community supports:** these integrated supports for student needs include special education programs and services, system supports, Community and Continuing Education, and community partnerships. ( Program Strategy Report January 2011)

This inclusive approach, which emphasizes equity of opportunity for all students, will be developed with new supports for special education students. In all schools there will continue to be learning resource rooms, but in addition there will be support services for those with mental health problems, and a program to provide intensive literacy and numeracy supports for a variety of students with different needs including English Language learners, the gifted and those who are struggling in this area. In each of the three school clusters of the Board there will be additional programs, some designed for the unique personal needs of students and others for those needing extensive or intensive support.

All the details of these new approaches will be provided in the coming months. We are promised that they will be developed within a framework of building on students' strengths, while addressing their identified needs.

This secondary program review with its special education reform has great promise. We heard of good news for students in the north ARC. These promised changes should bring more success for all our students.