LACK OF SUPPORT FOR THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Background
Ministerial Order 150/89 states that school boards must provide integrated programs to support an inclusionary philosophy unless the needs of students with special needs “should be provided otherwise.” In practice, this has led to a fully integrated neighbourhood schools as well as a range of other arrangements including the use of “resource rooms” (with varying amounts of time that students spend in such rooms), alternate programs, and separate facilities.

Inclusion reflects a principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning. It requires more than integrated placements, stressing academic and social participation in a regular school setting. Inclusion is a human rights issue, and there have been many court cases initiated by inclusionary advocates and organizations to access educational services or funding. Many parents of students with special needs in B.C. have consistently expressed concerns over adequacy of the services provided to their children.

B.C. teachers have consistently supported the philosophy of inclusion while arguing that resources and support for integration are inadequate. There is minimal pre-service training provided to support inclusive pedagogy, and BCTF surveys have found that 43% of respondents did not feel confident about teaching to the diverse needs in their classroom. The targeting of funds for “high incidence” students has been removed, as has all contract language, including teacher ratios, for special education. There are few limits to class size and none to class composition. There has been a considerable exodus of experienced teachers from the increasing difficult specialist roles, with more inexperienced teachers taking up these positions. With fewer specialist support teachers, the demands on classroom teachers have increased while the supports have declined. The focus on accountability measures such as the FSAs and provincial exams may further marginalize special needs students who do not participate in these assessments.

Some new approaches to meeting diverse needs (Differentiated Instruction, Universal Design) are being explored, yet there also exists widespread concern that some students’ needs are not being met, and that teachers are inadequately trained and supported to meet the wide range of students’ needs.

Teachers are sometimes caught between parents who are advocating for better services for their children with special needs, and school and district administrators who are trying to keep costs within budget.
Lack of support for the inclusion of students with special needs—DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are our professional rights in the context of an inclusionary policy and reduced support?

2. What are our professional responsibilities in meeting the needs of learners with special needs in our classrooms and schools? How do we balance what may be competing demands on time and resources among students with diverse needs? What are our professional responsibilities with respect to reporting to and communicating with parents of students with special needs?

3. What actions can/should you take if you do not feel that the students with special needs are getting enough support? As an individual teacher? As a department? As a school? As an LSA? As a local union?