



julia
farr
association

**Submission made by
Julia Farr Association 'Parent's
Forum'**

Activating Citizenship

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The Julia Farr Association 'Parent's Forum' wishes to make a submission to the Social Inclusion Board on 'Activating Citizenship' addressing the need for innovative and accessible education for all students living with disability.

The 'Parents Forum' is hosted by Julia Farr Association and provides an opportunity for parents of children (who are aged between 5-18) and who live with disability to access and share information about ideas and opportunities relating to their children getting a 'fair go' and where they can identify pathways towards helpful change.

Parents attending the forum have had experiences with a range of primary and secondary school settings, from mainstream and link, to annex unit and special schools, within the public and private systems. For these parents the 'Forum' is about taking action, social networking and support. It offers opportunity for them to work together towards shared vision; for their children to lead inclusive lives with access to the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers.

The Julia Farr Association's role is to provide a 'voice' on behalf of the 'Forum' and to represent the parents' views on what needs to happen. They fervently campaign that educational settings for their children are not always accessible and inclusive and cannot emphasize enough the need for widespread reform across the sector. The parents have told of their relentless challenges when it comes to securing what should be their child's natural rights. Regrettably, the hugest problems contended with are perhaps also those that are more masquerading; these are especially pertinent accessing curriculums that are inflexible to individual needs and uncreative in their approaches. Schools are ill-equipped with insufficient facilities, compelling parents and students with disability to contend with difficulties in accessing appropriate support, whilst some are even left to cope with its total absence. This is especially pertinent in terms of equipment/assistive technology and in the amount of School Service Officer (SSO) hours. There have been situations whereby special needs' funding has been spent in the interests of the school community at large, rather than adhering to its designated use. Similarly, access to specialists (physios, occupational and speech therapists) is substantially limited. There is an absence or lack of understanding around disability amongst educational staff, influencing cultures of unwelcome within schools; a reality perpetuated by hugely inadequate

practical training. This translates to children living with disability feeling socially and recreationally isolated from peers, experiencing bullying and hardship in forming friendships. Finally, these families have encountered prejudice and various forms of more explicit discrimination such as entry refusal to schools and no access to playgrounds.

Therefore the 'Parent's Forum' have addressed the following questions relating to 'Innovative and Accessible Education' and are keen not only to highlight these necessary approaches to education but also to see these approaches implemented for not only their children, but for all children.

Question 1. How can the current education system better help a student with disability or carer to achieve their study/education goals?

- **Recommendation 1** The introduction of Self-Managed Funding for students:

Self-managed is "public funding that is allocated to the individual based on his/her unique strengths and needs, and placed under the control of the individual to enable them to live in the community as a full citizen."¹ The introduction of self-managed funding for students would allow them to identify the nature of support that would provide the most beneficial assistance towards their study endeavour. Self managed funding would also provide parents with opportunity to arrange and administer their child's own support, in turn allowing them to gain control over their child's education rather than relying upon the system. For example, parents of the forum highlighted such examples where funding for their child has been spent on other school needs such as computers which were not available or accessible to the child who attracted the funding. The introduction of self-managed funding would allow parents to plan for their child's education and to purchase equipment or support hours individually tailored to their child's needs.

¹ Dowson and Salisbury, 1999, Individualized Funding: Emerging Policy Issues, viewed 20th October 2010

- **Recommendation 2.** Julia Farr Youth Mentor Program:

The Julia Farr Youth Mentor Program is a new initiative which came about in March 2009 by Julia Farr Youth and is hosted by Julia Farr Association. This volunteer Mentor Program is aimed at youth between 11-16 who live with disability and who will be mentored by young adults aged 16-30 who also live with disability. It provides a unique opportunity for young people to become a mentor and to offer their experiences and advice to another young person. The Mentor Program can assist with the transition between primary school, high school and with higher education with mentors having opportunity to utilize real life experiences with disability issues. They can offer mentees skills and advice to help them cope, through the selection of challenges associated with life as a student who lives with disability. For mentees such support will expand access to relevant information and resources, whilst also providing structure, broadened social networks, elevated self-esteem, confidence and motivation to be goal orientated, all of which are so pivotal to a person's wellbeing.

- **Recommendation 3.** Inclusive resource centre within schools:

The introduction of an inclusive resource centre within schools would allow access to useful, accessible resources for the benefit of teachers, students, administrators, parents and others in the school community. Relevant information such as up-to-date information on best practices, inclusive education and information on the variations between and within disabilities. The need for this initiative is substantiated in the report titled 'Inclusive Education: A review of programming and services in New Brunswick' where the expertise of Guidance counsellors means they can serve as an integral function in aiding with transitions in addition to supplying necessary supports around academic, social and psychological issues both at personal and school community level.²

- **Recommendation 4.** A review of the Education Act (1972:)

Within the 86 pages Education Act (1972)³ there are only two references to disability. The parents forum support a review of the Education Act to bring it in align with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which states that an inclusive education is provided at all levels and that

² Wayne MacKay, 2006, Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick, viewed 10th September 2010

³ Education Act, 1972, <http://www.legislation.sa.gov.au/LZ/C/A/EDUCATION%20ACT%201972/CURRENT/1972.154.UN.PDF>, viewed 29th September 2010

“persons with disabilities can access an inclusive quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live”⁴.

- **Recommendation 5.** Increased student support:

The Parent’s Forum support an increase in student support in the form of SSO’s to assist and support teachers in their role of teaching. Other examples of increasing student support could include study buddies, homework hotlines, homework clubs, and small group tutorials.

- **Recommendation 6.** A school social program:

For students who live with autism or aspergers syndrome the social environment at school can be confusing. It has been recommended by the parent’s forum that a social program be developed in schools that can assist with children living with autism and also children who may experience difficulties at school.

- **Recommendation 7.** The Implementation of ‘Circle of Friends’ within schools:

‘Circle of Friends is an innovative ‘child-centred’ concept that was originally developed in North America and Canada to encourage the social inclusion of students who live with disability in mainstream schools. Circles in schools seek to provide children who live with disability with a support network and serve as an opportunity for them to forge genuine friendships. A valuable resource that is perhaps not always apparent for its fullest potential are the natural supports that already exist in the classroom; circle of friends acknowledges the remarkable, immense capacity of the peer group⁵.

The process encompasses numerous steps but essentially children living with disability are introduced to a group of around 6-8 carefully selected peers of the same age and maybe others two or three year levels ahead. The group of peers formally come together with the “focus child” and an adult facilitator on a regular basis. Meetings are held for three purposes:

- To provide encouragement and acknowledgement of successes and progress;

⁴Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150>, United Nations Enable, viewed 30th September 2010

⁵ Inclusive Solutions’ <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circle%20bronagh.asp>, Circle of Friends, Children helping children, viewed 29th September 2010

- to identify difficulties, establish goals and devise strategies for accomplishing goals; and
- to facilitate these ideas into practice⁶.

The concept has been implemented throughout the United Kingdom, where a collection of support services have established circles of friends for children living with various disability and special needs. Preliminary programs have produced positive outcomes for:

- Children living with physical disabilities;
- children living with autism;
- children who are transitioning from a special school placement to a mainstream school placement;
- children who may be attending part-time at each; and
- children who are at risk of exclusion because of challenging behaviour⁷;

Circle of friends possesses potential to offer a broad array of benefits to all involved. These are explicit for the focus child but other children in the group can also experience substantial gains from their participation. Circles provides opportunity for them to demonstrate development in empathy, problem solving skills, listening skills, their capacity to detect and convey feelings, their ability to recognize the connection between feelings and behaviour and an heightened appreciation of an individual's capacity to change, giving them the opportunity, with adult support, to put this capability into practice through a manner that is safe.

The prime interest of circles of friends does not revolve around the differences between the focus child and their non-disabled peers; underpinned instead by the notion that acceptance is conducive towards producing change. Inclusive Solutions states that "a major advantage of the approach is that it does not involve a major commitment of time from teaching staff. This is because the true work is done by the peers themselves, not the adults."⁸ This approach is also promoted as not highly demanding upon additional resources. In the end, Circle of friends offers a positive example illustrating how things can be done for children and young people who live with disability.

⁶ Inclusive Solutions' <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circle%20bronagh.asp>, Circle of Friends, Children helping children, viewed 29th September 2010

⁷ Inclusive Solutions' <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circle%20bronagh.asp>, Circle of Friends, Children helping children, viewed 29th September 2010

⁸ Inclusive Solutions' <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circle%20bronagh.asp>, Circle of Friends, Children helping children, viewed 29th September 2010

- **Recommendation 8.** School choice for children and their parents:

A strong recommendation from the parent's forum is that children and parents should have a choice in which school their child attends. Parents have experienced constant struggle with the school system and school attitudes in regards to their child attending the school of their choice. Many parents have experienced schools not accepting their child due to their disability. Parents feel that they are not being listened to when they say that they would like their child to attend the same school as their sibling or to attend their local school. Instead parents are asked to travel up to an hour to a 'special school' which is not the choice of the parent. Parents are also concerned about the transition from Yr. 2 to Yr. 3. At this transition period children living with disability are assessed and may be told that there is no longer a space for their child at their current school and that they need to go to a special school. This process is taking away a person's choice about which school they would like to attend.

- **Recommendation 9.** Accountability:

Parents are requesting improved accountability from schools with respect to how they spend the funding that is designated to students living with disability. There have been accounts where the funding has been spent on computers for other students and the student themselves cannot actually use or access these computers. It is of prime importance that accountability applies at the chief rungs of the education system and of course on the lower levels of authority also. Endeavouring towards shared responsibility calls for a mutual decision making structure to operate in cooperation with this. Features of inclusive education must become an obligatory element of school improvement plans and reviews. Related to this are performance evaluations. It is important for performance evaluations to be well received with a focus on enhancing performance not penalties.

- **Recommendation 10.** An expansion of spaces and facilities for OSCH:

The parents' forum would like an increase in the number of spaces available at OSCH (Out of School Care Hours). Currently they believe there are limited spaces for student's living with disability and that an increase in numbers would allow students to be a part of their school environment and allow greater opportunity for families to access work opportunities'.

- **Recommendation 11.** Involvement from parents with teacher and SSO interviews:

Involvement from parents with teacher and SSO interviews would enable better screening of teachers and SSO's who will be spending time with students living with disability. Parents need to feel that teachers have an

understanding of their son/daughters needs and are willing to learn and be flexible in their teaching methods.

- **Recommendation 12.** Welcoming school environment

“Until everyone has an equal place in our schools and wider communities social justice does not exist⁹ “Equality demands both accommodation of differences and systemic changes to our existing structures¹⁰ ” so that progress can surpass the theoretical and instead resemble a reality where all students who live with disability and their parents can feel a sense of belonging and are provided the means to gain what they need, want and deserve from the education system. Furthermore, the parents’ forum advocates that the education system must shift its priorities from “the bottom line” towards dignified treatment, a child-centred methodology. They strongly believe that generating cultures of welcome involves a macro endeavour that depends on the entire education system at large; inclusive attitudes must flow through each and every rung of system and school organisational structures. At the micro level they acknowledge the valuable role of the school principal. As leaders within schools they consider principals to possess tremendous capacity in cultivating atmospheres conducive to inclusion, team work, cooperation, and positive attitude for all students within the school. Whilst the parent’s forum accept that it would be unrealistic and unreasonable to expect schools in isolation to shoulder complete responsibility for changing the way children are educated, as such a primary domain in the lives of students and their parents, schools do need to assume a function as a major contributor towards a societal culture of learning; Becoming a centre of community that illustrates tolerance for diversity and the acceptance of difference.

- **Recommendation 13.** Enhanced access to technical aids and communication equipment:

Greater access and time frames to technical aids and equipment such as communication boards, speech generating devices, hearing aids, furniture adaptations, walkers, computers, pointers, etc. enables students to a better education.

⁹ Inclusive Solutions’ <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circle%20bronagh.asp> Circle of Friends, Children helping children, viewed 29th September 2010

¹⁰ Wayne MacKay, 2006, Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick, viewed 10th September 2010

- **Recommendation 14.** Specific Teacher Role Descriptions:

It is important to have properly trained professionals performing well defined and well coordinated roles for successful education. It is essential to have teachers who have an understanding of disability and inclusive education and one way of achieving this is through a role description which includes specific knowledge and experience around disability.

Question 2: Can you provide examples of where a school or other learning institution has been successful in helping students with disability achieve positive outcomes? What made it successful?

- **Example.1.** Individual Plans

Flinders University and University of South Australia provides a free confidential service for students living with a disability. A Disability Advisor is able to coordinate services to allow students to access University study and provide advocacy to students on disability related issues. However this could be further improved by offering case management services to assist students particularly with more significant disabilities so that they do not drop out of University.

- **Example.2.** Flexible and understanding approach:

Parent's support an individual approach to teaching where teachers are flexible in their thinking and work with the child. For example; a child who found it difficult to sit in assembly for 45 minutes was able to gradually build up this length of time in increments of 5 minutes.

Question 3: What factors need to be considered when designing curriculum that is relevant for people with disability and their carers?

- **Recommendation 1:** A Flexible, Creative and Individual Approach:

The Parent's Forum are in agreement that a flexible and creative approach to teaching which looks at the student as an individual is required. It is important to address the whole child's needs including social, emotional, physical and academic needs in a supportive learning environment and addresses the learning of life skills in a fun manner. There is encouragement for teachers to "think outside of the square". The Report 'Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick highlights that "in setting the indicators for good and inclusive education that we go beyond academic

standards of literacy and numeracy to also include social skills, good citizenship, caring attitudes, tolerance and the value of diversity”.¹¹

A prime feature of curriculum creativity must take the form of integrating communication and other assistive technologies into lessons of the orthodox syllabus. Assistive technology (AT) is defined as any item, piece of equipment, or product, whether acquired commercially, off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals who live with disability¹². The time has long since come for the Australian education system to embrace the broader scale and scope by which the United Kingdom and USA have adopted assistive technology and communication devices into their learning environments, as they forge towards inclusion. Technology that supports students in accessing the curriculum does not need to be expensive or complicated to make a difference in learning. Both low tech and high tech applications such as AbleNet, AMDi, Crick, IntelliTools, Keytools, Maxess, Mayer Johnson, SoftTouch, Traxsys and Widgit have been used successfully to ensure students' success in the general education curriculum¹³. A varied collection of American empirical studies have produced results indicating that employing a web-based curriculum enhances literacy skill development and is conducive towards increased independence in learning. Positive outcomes have also been observed with respect to Woodward's approach for improving concept development in mathematics plus Zorfass' project ASSIST for boosting access to the science curriculum¹⁴.

- **Recommendation 2:** Teachers who are willing to listen and involve Parents:

There is consensus that the Parent's Forum often feels that they are not being heard by their child's teacher. There is a recommendation that teachers acknowledge the important role and the understanding that parent's have in how their child learns and for positive relationships to be developed between parents and teachers to assist with the student's learning.

¹¹ Wayne MacKay, 2006, Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick, viewed 10th September 2010

¹² Inclusive Technology UK, <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/about/index.shtml> viewed 26th October 2010

¹³ Inclusive Technology UK, <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/about/index.shtml> viewed 26th October 2010

¹⁴ Warger, Cynthia, August 1998, Integrating Assistive Technology into the Standard Curriculum, <http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-3/assistive.htm> viewed 26th October

- **Recommendation 3:** Class composition:

It is recommended by the parents' forum to reduce class sizes where there are diverse student requirements. A smaller class would allow teachers with the extra time required with planning and teaching a child with disability. A smaller class would also ensure that all students in the class have a positive educational experience.

- **Recommendation 4:** Extra teacher administration support:

Extra teacher assistance with paperwork, reporting, coordinating and other tasks would help teachers to better focus on doing their core jobs to the highest standard with less frustration and burnout.

- **Recommendation 5:** Increased Professional Development as related to disability:

To assist teachers with the role of developing curriculum then it is important to have an understanding and adequate training on disability. Having properly trained professionals who have sound knowledge on a range of teaching strategies is a key component to successfully developing suitable curriculum.

Question 4: What can be done to make buildings, playgrounds and other facilities within educational settings more accessible?

- **Recommendation 1:** Accessible playground equipment for all students:

To redevelop existing school playgrounds to enable all students access to equipment. For example, providing appropriate soft fall materials to allow access by students who use a wheelchair, walking frames or who have limited mobility, the installation of liberty swings (a swing which can accommodate a wheelchair) and access to play equipment via ramps and handrails.

- **Recommendation 2:** Parent consultation in the design of play equipment:

Consultation with parents, carers and children around the design and implementation of accessible equipment to ensure that the needs of their children are being met and to ensure that individual differences are considered.

- **Recommendation 3:** Legislation to ensure all school buildings/facilities comply with standards:

It is recommended that schools not only comply with the Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards and (the Premises Standards) that requires

all new buildings and modifications to be accessible to people with disability, but also proposes existing school buildings to be made accessible to people living with disability through consultation with parents, carers and people living with disability. Modifications such as ramps, rails, tactile ground surface indicators, hearing loops and vision dots would make buildings and playgrounds more accessible.

- **Recommendation 4:** Increased accessible parking:

The Parent's Forum recommends increased accessible parking for schools to enable better access to buildings. It is recommended that schools that currently do not provide accessible parking are legally required to do so.

- **Recommendation 5:** Better time frames to receive adaptive equipment and training on use of equipment:

Current time frames are lengthy when waiting for adapted or modified equipment (at times up to 1 ½ years). A student may be denied access to buildings, playgrounds and curriculum when equipment such as wheelchairs, hearing loops and computers are delayed. Teachers and support staff also need to be trained in the use of all equipment.

Question 5: What do our teachers and education staffs need to work more successfully with disability and carers?

- **Recommendation 1** Professional training at University: Teachers trained to respond to the diverse needs of children, including the development of competency within the area of disability.

The Parent's Forum have highlighted the importance for all teachers whilst at university to gain practical experience within classroom settings with students with disability, to participate in compulsory disability topics and to have ongoing up to date development training throughout their teaching careers. Currently for those undertaking general education studies there is only one semester long topic in some cases in the final semester of their degree that specifically covers special needs. This represents progress in the right direction but with an increasing proportion of students living with disability attending their local mainstream school studies in this domain must be more comprehensive, equipping them with skills and knowledge consistently in every stage of their degree rather than incorporated in a brief overview to provide educators with the means to produce their best work.

- **Recommendation 2.** Collaboration between teachers and unions:

Collaboration is needed between unions to assist teachers in balancing the demands placed upon them: adhering to the rights and expectations of the students with disability, the rights and expectations of their able-bodied peers and the expectations of school and education system management.

- **Recommendation 3** The design and Implementation of transition planning:

Planning processes for transition are a fundamental feature of early investment but they are just as pivotal to students nearing the end of their secondary school lives. The parents forum strongly agree with anecdotal and empirical research that has produced evidence indicating a great deal more needs to be done with respect to post-school transition planning. As it stands an absence exists in this domain for far too many higher secondary students and their families. Furthermore, where a planning process is active it is marred by inconsistencies. Above all, process or not, later education transition stages are currently characterized by uncertainty over what to expect. In their 2002 study involving 283 families of young people with intellectual disability aged between 13 and 25, researchers Ward, Mallet, Heslop and Simons¹⁵ found that a fifth of the young people who had completed secondary education did not have a transition plan. Whilst for those who did possess plans, the issues covered differed from what the families and youth regarded to be of prime importance. Such difficulties were observed as perpetuated further by insufficient easy access to information, especially around future options and possibilities. All this encapsulates the definite need for the development of a system approach that encompasses the involvement of all central contributors to the student's current and foreseeable future life.

- **Recommendation 4.** Teams of Independent Education Consultants:

The parent's forum proposes the need to expand both the scale and scope of Independent Education consultants to liaise with schools around disability. To disperse advice in partnership with parents' therapists and school staff to design and implement a manageable and flexible curriculum that best corresponds with individual learning needs and capabilities. Teams of Independent Education consultants possess potential to serve various integral functions. A resource for the professional development, their introduction would aid in direct awareness raising of the variations between and within

¹⁵ Ward, L, Mallet., R., Heslop, P. and Simons, K. 2003. Transition planning: how well does it work for young people with learning disabilities and their families? *British Journal of Special Education*. 30(3) pp.132-137.

disability and the holistic nature of its influence on private and community life. Equipped with proper skills training they could also guide and advise on strategies for the general implementation of inclusion and integrated service delivery.

- **Recommendation 5.** Regular technology/equipment training for all teachers and teacher's aides:

Regular training around the use of technology for teachers would enable students to effectively utilise equipment to their full potential. The parents forum have accentuated that effective use of the technology is dependent on more than one or two staff receiving training as in the event of staff turnover the resources are at risk of being wasted to the detriment of student welfare and a system already struggling to cope with a mismatch between demand and supply. An expedient model for training and consultancy of this nature is evident through inclusive technology UK, who is currently operating recurring training courses for those using technology to support learners with special needs, these courses provide lots of practical activities, hands-on sessions, information and advice. Congruently they also run product based programmes to correspond with individual learning environment needs¹⁶. Related to this, perhaps a valuable service could also involve intermittent check-ups that the technology is being used regularly and remains fit for purpose.

Question 6: How can we improve the education environment for teachers with disability?

- **Recommendation 1.** Self-Managed Funding for Teachers:

Self-managed funding would provide teachers living with disability the ability to decide what would be useful for them to fulfil their role as a teacher. This may include extra administration assistance, adaptive equipment, modifications to building environments or extra support with practical/fine motor skills.

- **Recommendation 2.** Accessibility:

To modify existing access to buildings, playgrounds and the surrounding areas so that areas are accessible to not only teachers living with disability, but also to students, parents and the general community. For example, ramps

¹⁶ Inclusive Technology, <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/training/index.shtml> viewed 26th October 2010

to access buildings, clear paths which do not have obstructions, classrooms which have good turning space and easy to open doors.

Recommendation 3. Flexible and creative work environment:

It is equally important 'to think outside the square' for teachers living with a disability as it is for students. Such ideas may include teachers working part time and role sharing their position with a person who compliments their skills. It may also include involving students with some of the programming of work such as writing on the blackboard for the teacher (which incorporates learning and develops an understanding of other people's needs).

The Julia Farr Association supports these recommendations made by the Parents' Forum and supports the Social Inclusion Board to address the need for innovative and accessible education for all students living with disability.