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Brief summary of issue or topic of discussion:

The proposed cancellation of the 39 Spec Ed classes.

My daughter has a cognitive disability and autism, and she is in grade 5 in the GLP program at WE Gowling. Prior to the GLP she was in a PSN class. Both of these programs are slated to be cancelled. Before McKenna was in the specialized classes she struggled incredibly in school, and no wonder: she could not understand what was happening in the classroom, and the larger class size meant more noise and more overall stimulation, which for her was overwhelming. The result was incredible frustration and alienation— she threw chairs and other objects, and she regularly hurt herself as well. Her legs were covered in bruises from pushing her fingers into them when she was stressed, and she would often put her fingers down her throat.

When she got into the special class setting everything changed for the better. In the GLP program, the class size is manageable for her, and she is surrounded by peers— children with whom she feels a true connection. She understands instruction and the class conversation as a whole. In GLP she has belonging, the class setting gives her dignity— dignity that is her right to have as a human being and as a student in school. The Elementary Program Review Recommendations state that students like my daughter will be mainstreamed " with supports." It does not say what those supports will be. In actual fact, the support she needs is the small specialized class where others like her have similar cognitive capacities— that is the support. Being in a classroom where she understands nothing, with children she cannot connect with, will not be made " ok" for her even if there is an extra educator "explaining" to her what she doesn' t understand, or even if her classmates are good at " being nice" to her. That will only single her out further. " Being included" is not belonging.



Delegation 5.1.4

I'm not just speaking from my family' s experience. There is a long- established history of school boards making decisions to cut Special Education classrooms in the name of inclusion." It happened a few years ago in New Brunswick and the results were so dire that the Child Advocate had to step in to condemn schools for having forced hundreds of children to stay home. Peel Region made the same move a few years later and now it' s becoming the site of an additional set of horror stories.

Scholarly research, especially from the last five years or so. also indicates that cancelling these classes is devastating for students. The OCDSB has released the report on inclusive education from Dr. Parekh at York University, and I encourage you all to do a good critical reading of the results. I myself am a professor at the University of Ottawa, and with my access to research databases from the university library I was easily able to find several published peer-reviewed articles and books condemning the practise of cutting special education classes to supposedly promote research both from the education sector and the disability studies sector. Those of you who have my full delegation application will see a bibliography of some of this research, with quotations. Dr. Parekh' s report is desperately flawed for not including this important scholarship, and our parent community is left in the dark while the OCDSB, including at a Committee of the Whole meeting I attended late last fall, questions anyone who critiques the report, saying " but it was produced by a doctor expert." I encourage committee members here not to be so dismissive of good critical engagement with scholarly research. Those of us with PhDs want to foster exactly this— rigorous public dialogue. And am I not talking to a group of educators here? Isn' t that what public education is for? Vanderbilt University professor Douglas Fuchs notes that research reports on inclusion tend to conveniently exclude evidence-based research that does not support full mainstreaming of students with disabilities. Fuchs says: " To ignore such evidence and their implications for practice is to ignore science. It is to pretend— in the face of data indicating otherwise— that there is but one solution to educating all students with disabilities]; namely, placing them in general classrooms."



Even those without access to the full field of research on the issue know that a report like Dr. Parekh' s that stresses standardized test scores, relies on interviews with families whose children had not been in the specialized classes for long, and cites research that is either several years old (or by the author herself— she cites herself many times), is not rigorous, and is not something upon which to base such a major decision. In fact, to stay in the talk about

We can all see through this: the Board has decided to go against all established research, to go against lived experience from numerous other comparable Canadian Boards of Education, in order to hurt the most vulnerable children it serves under the false pretence of " inclusion." We have a large complicated Board, yes, and yes maybe cuts are necessary, but students with significant disabilities are not the ones who should suffer most.

Summary of key concerns about Dr. Gillian Parekh' s " Research Review: Special and Inclusive Education" for the OCDSB

- Emphasis on getting more students to post-secondary is ableist, particularly as there is no discussion of preparation for the variety of postsecondary placements that could be desirable to students with special needs (for example my daughter might be able to do a modified cooking program if she gets to develop those skills in high school). A high proportion of this report is devoted to post- secondary, with a traditional limited, non- inclusive) understanding of "academic."
- Emphasis on EQAO test scores and graduation completion times is ableist: it relies on regressive notions of " achievement" and is not " inclusive."
- Among the above listed and other success- measures explored in the report graduation rates and completion times, for example) none reference those that are paramount to a disability justice or properly inclusive model: there is no measure of pride in achievement, participation in group- based activities,

inclusive sporting initiatives, health and well-being, participation in field trips, completion of tasks (projects, presentations, etc.) engagement in community initiatives, or progress in developmental skills.

- There is almost a total lack of research outside of TDSB context. New Brunswick has also had inclusion models for a long time. As a " relevant research" report other articles should be acknowledged (see a few examples of other research below). At the SEAC meeting on October 9 Jesse Mark referred to Parekh' s report as a " literature review" but this would not qualify as a literature review in any academic setting (I' m also a tenured professor). A lot is missing (see below) and many of her citations are to her own research. See issues with New Brunswick here: [https:// www. cbc. ca/ news/ canada/ new-brunswick/ schools- denying education- advocate- 1. 7219933](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/schools-denying-education-advocate-1.7219933)
- Sensitivity about being labeled as having a " disability" is real— our kids feel different, and see their differences. In terms of the conclusion that this report comes to it' s also a red herring: these students, however they are labelled, still deserve to be in a peer environment should they choose this path, and will look less " different" when they are with peers. Congregated classes safeguard our children' s sense of dignity. Most of us don' t identify our kids as " disabled" but rather talk with them about their rights to dignity and access in their educational experience.
- I' m concerned about research that shows special needs students in mainstream classes having better academic achievement: what is considered " academic" here, and what about students allowed to go to school only for partial days (as happened in New Brunswick)? Are the tests from higher needs students actually included in the count? (How would they be if students are excluded for part days and likely not writing tests?) Why aren' t other markers of achievement that are actually " inclusive" Mentioned?
- What is " inclusion"? Dr. Parekh is considered an expert, but there is no information about what a good inclusion- based model entails. All the report speaks to is putting students with special needs in mainstream classes. There is



one very small mention of additional EAs not being enough, but nothing else. This report essentially paves the way for the elimination of congregated classes in the name of a superficial, so-called "inclusion" model. Research beyond Dr. Parekh's is much more nuanced and informative on "inclusion"—no matter the position the authors take (and usually it's a mix of positions).

- A good question was asked at the SEAC meeting on Oct. 9 about the research direction given to Dr. Parekh. The answer from Jesse Mark was that it was open-ended. Dr. Parekh has been champion "inclusion" for over 10 years. She was always going to recommend "inclusion" so there was no question as to whether or not she would do so here. I'd hoped, however, for more details on what "inclusion" looks like. Keep in mind that scholars worldwide recognize the co-optation of "inclusion" for neoliberal ends by governments and school boards (see three examples below).
- Parekh is mainly concerned with misdiagnoses of disability (this is stated at the beginning of the report). This is irrelevant to most families whose kids are in congregated classes in the OCDSB and have very identifiable exceptionalities/disabilities. Yet the entire report stems from this concern. What about families who want kids to stay in congregated classes? Is the implication that we are misinformed or wrong? Parekh is mainly concerned with the overrepresentation of racialized students being labelled as disabled." This is important, yet it did not really come up at the Committee of the Whole meeting this week in the presentation from the Special Education team. What are the OCDSB's overall plans to move toward racial justice via the remodelling of the Elementary Programs? If racialized students with special needs are put in mainstream classes against the will of them and their families, does that not in fact doubly disadvantage those in this overrepresented group?

1) pg. 5-6 of the report makes claims about student sensitivity to their classroom placement, but it really seems to be through the perspective of relatively able students—higher needs students are grateful to be in classes where their needs are



met. Many of them do not cognitively understand that they are in a specialized placement. It's when they are in a classroom of students who have average age-level capacities that they are extra sensitive about their own abilities (my daughter self-harms in mainstream, even with very kind fellow students and extra TA support).

3) According to the report, research shows that students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms have higher academic achievement than those in congregated classes. This was raised in the Committee of the Whole meeting. New Brunswick is Canada's flagship example of inclusive education, and it has been referenced in much of the international literature on the topic in the past decade. Yet it was discovered this year that hundreds of students with disabilities (estimated close to 500) are being asked to attend class for only part of the day, thus these students are more excluded now in the so-called "inclusion" model. It stands to reason that these students are not doing the tests that measure their academic success. How will the OCDSB acknowledge the mistakes of previous inclusion models and offer something that is better than what we have now? We cannot go forward at the OCDSB without talking about New Brunswick. See: [https:// www. cbc. cainews/canada/ new- brunswick/schools- denying- education- advocate-1.7219933](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/schools-denying-education-advocate-1.7219933)

4) pg. 6 Comment on bullying: our children have all been bullied in the regular classroom setting. It's the place where they are at the greatest risk.

5) pg. 7 The point that students in congregated classes don't identify as having a disability is a red herring. I don't encourage my daughter to identify as " disabled" but that doesn't have anything to do with whether or not she should be in a classroom with her peers.

6) pg. 13: " Currently, drawing on data from the TDSB, students with disability, either self or institutionally identified, make up over half of students not going on to postsecondary education and are therefore at heightened risk to encounter future barriers to employment and maintaining long-term health (Brown et al., 2024). As such, a focus on what happens to elementary students in relation to disability is of critical importance for informing potential interventions and planning." (13) This comment about postsecondary seems misplaced, and it's hard to hear as a parent



because my daughter has a significant cognitive disability and I'd like to see multiple possibilities for her future emphasized in elementary and secondary education. As a professor myself, I'm working towards making the university more inclusive, but I know it will be a very long time before someone like my daughter could attend. I find the emphasis in the report on post-secondary education ableist. It values the jobs and skills that post-secondary education offers over skills from other employment sectors that could be developed and valued in education. It should also be said that employers requiring post-secondary education in their new employees will not hire my daughter so it doesn't make sense to take opportunities for job training away from her. (Yet I understand that this is already happening at OCDSB). The report uses test score data as evidence for its inclusion arguments, yet tests like the EQAO are fundamentally ableist. In fact, among the numerous success-measures explored in the report (graduation rates and completion times, for example) none reference those that are paramount to a disability justice or properly inclusive model: there is no measure of pride in achievement, participation in group-based activities, inclusive sporting initiatives, health and well-being, participation in field trips, completion of tasks (projects, presentations, etc.) engagement in community initiatives, or progress in developmental skills. Why are " future academic options" apparently considered in the narrowest understanding of "academic."

7) The arguments linking racial justice with disability justice are so important and I'd like the Board to consider them. Yet even though this is at the core of Parekh's work, both the study for the OCDSB and other of her own publications that she cites, this was not addressed at the Committee of the Whole meeting. As a professor of Critical Race Theory at the University of Ottawa. I'd also like to highlight that critical race studies scholars have long abandoned the notion of " inclusion" as a framework that leads to racial justice (from Crenshaw, cited in Parekh's article, to Sara Ahmed's influential essay " On Being Included"). For example, in the 1989 article that Parekh cites, Crenshaw states: " These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism [I would



add ableism here] any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" 140). I would also like to highlight that there is much work on the intersections between disability and race, for example by Jasbir Puar, Mel Chen, and Y- Dang Treoung, to name just a few scholars. Scholarly "Critical Studies" approaches (whether Critical Disability Studies or Critical Race Theory, or those that combine aspects of the two) analyze, compare, and offer nuanced insights into the results of any given examples. The value in this work is in its rigour and complexity, its weighing of possible meanings and outcomes. Dr. Parekh's report does not provide this kind of critical thinking.

8) Dr. Parekh's report importantly points out (on pg. 22) that when the only form of support that is offered to students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom is an additional EA (or partial EA) that this is not sufficient, and does not count as "inclusion." What then will comprise "inclusive education" for students with special needs in the mainstream classroom in the future of OCDSB?

9) Any decent academic research study references studies on similar topics. The first few pages of Dr. Parekh's study reference numerous scholars on the general principles of the report. However, as the paper proceeds and gets into the research specific to the question of inclusion in classrooms Parekh most commonly cites herself (see pg. 17, 18, 19 and 24— and actually several pages after that also). While I appreciate that Parekh may be the only person who has conducted this research in the TDSB, there are studies on other school boards where inclusion has been in place for longer than at TDSB.

Concluding Point:

The report seems entirely focussed upon bringing Special Education students up to predetermined outcomes (graduation, test scores) rather than reinventing the system where their abilities have measurable value. While I appreciate Dr. Parekh's work, it's important to situate it alongside other work in its field. A question was asked at the Committee of the Whole meeting on October 8th about the report, and the answer



coming from someone on the Special Education team was that Dr. Parekh is a "doctor expert" as if this means her work cannot be queried. As a professor myself, I encourage Board staff to avoid the tendency to put professors on any sort of pillar. All academic work invites critique— that's what makes it robust, this is what knowledge entails. I'm sure Dr. Parekh would welcome a rigorous engagement with her work, especially when so much is at stake. I know I'm preaching to the crowd when I say that critical thinking is our primary goal as educators. Let's keep aiming for rigour in our discussions of the Elementary Program Review.

A few examples of other research conducted on inclusion- based programs outside of Canada:

On the significance of students having peers:

Pupils with SEN have the right to differentiated education according to their individual needs (Haug 2017b; McLeskey and Waldron 2011) and should thus be entitled to high quality education. However, pupils with SEN are also entitled to social participation by sharing experiences and activities with their peers. Whether the sense of belonging can be achieved while pupils receive SNE for limited periods in smaller groups is a question that deserves further investigation and discussion."

Sundqvist, C., & Hannas, B. M. (2020). Same vision — different approaches? Special needs education in light of inclusion in Finland and Norway. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(5), 686- 699.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1786911>

The Parekh report on pg. 11 points out that it is important for students with disabilities to be able to be together, but insists that this not happen in a classroom setting, but elsewhere/ at other times at school. I would like to know how that possibility is being envisioned at the OCDSB. I'm not sure that small amounts of peer-time in a day would actually offset the difficulties she would face being without her peers for the majority of the school day, and specifically for academic instruction time.



On pg. 24 the Parekh report states that "belonging with peers" is a key factor, and that students identified with a disability feel like they don't belong. Yet this not-belonging is not eradicated by placement in a mainstream class. In fact, it's not clear from the report what classrooms students with special needs were placed in. The logic that these students would feel more belonging with an "inclusion"-based model is flawed—there is no evidence in the report to suggest this would be the case. "Based on three overarching components, safety and acceptance in school, belonging and value in the classroom, and belonging with peers, students' experience of belonging is correlated to their identification through, and involvement in, special education. For instance, although over 60% of students, overall, reported an experience of belonging, this was true for 72% of students identified as gifted and 48% for students who had been identified with a learning disability or mild intellectual disability."

On detrimental effects of inclusion:

The results of this study suggest that the general education, as it is practised here, seems to lack a basic prerequisite that is emphasised both in a national (Ministry of Education and Research 1998; Nilsen 2017b) and international context (UNESCO 2009a) for realising an inclusive education: the ability to address diversity and develop communality for all pupils. On the one hand, it may reduce the opportunities all for pupils receiving a satisfactory learning outcome from the general education, thereby contributing to the need for more special education. On the other hand, it can also limit the outcome potential of pupils who already receive special education."

Nilsen, Sven. "Inside but Still on the Outside? Teachers' Experiences with the Inclusion of Pupils with Special Educational Needs in General Education."

International Journal of Inclusive Education, vol. 24, no. 9, 2020, pp. 980-96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1503348>.



On poor inclusion after "inclusive" classroom models:

The overall findings indicate that students who left school from a special education setting had better outcomes than those who completed their education in mainstream schools. This is considered to be due to the vocational curriculum and work experience they gained in their final years of special education, which those in mainstream schools did not receive. This suggests that a policy of full inclusion, with the closure of special classes and special schools, will result in less inclusion in their communities post-school for young people with moderate to severe levels of learning or behavioral difficulties."

Hornby, G. "Are Inclusive Education or Special Education Programs More Likely to Result in Inclusion Post- School?" *Educ. Sci.* 2021, 11, 304. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11060304>

See also: Fuchs, Douglas, et al. "Exploring the Truth of Michael Yudin's Claim: The More Time Students With Disabilities Spend in General Classrooms, the Better They Do Academically." *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2023, pp. 236-52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073221097713>.

And in the following article Fuchs is cited from a different essay stating that the majority of kids with disabilities "need intensive instruction, and we know how to provide intensive instruction. The evidence" he says "is overwhelming.": <https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-special-education-inclusion-research-flawed/>

Silence and censorship around real outcomes of inclusion:

The progress of the inclusion agenda has been relentless, but further progress is being thwarted by 'the elephant in the classroom' — that is silence about the real challenges faced by mainstream schools concerned with meeting the needs of an increasingly wide range, number and complexity of children with SEND. We sense that among teachers, academics and politicians, there has been an



unacknowledged censorship around the debate about inclusion that has gone on for too long. We consider how the way in which children are assessed and government statistics are presented, have given us an inaccurate picture of the true number and extent of the pupils who require special or additional support, and that this has been done for the sake of cost-cutting and expediency, justified by the philosophy of inclusion." (8)

Gordon- Gould, Philippa, and Garry Hornby. "International Views of Inclusion: Myths, Confusions and the Denial of Reality." *Inclusive Education at the Crossroads*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2023, pp. 28- 45, [https:// doi. org/ 10. 4324/9781003262701- 3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003262701-3).

Recent Peer-Reviewed Scholarship that addresses the co-optation of " inclusion" for neoliberal/ cost- cutting ends: Koutsoklenis, Athanasios, and Yiota Karagianni. " Neoliberal— Neoconservative Educational Reforms and the Inclusion in Education of Disabled Students in Greece: 8

The Case of the Institution of Special Assistant." *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, vol. 9, 2024, pp. 100863-, [https:// doi. org/ 10. 1016/ j. ssaho. 2024. 100863](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100863).

Done, Elizabeth J., and Helen Knowler, editors. *International Perspectives on Exclusionary Pressures in Education. How Inclusion Becomes Exclusion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, [https:// doi. org/ 10. 1007/ 978- 3- 031- 14113- 3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14113-3).

Kidman, Joanna. " Whither Decolonisation?: Indigenous Scholars and the Problem of Inclusion in the Neoliberal University." *Journal of Sociology (Melbourne, Vic.)*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2020, pp. 247- 62, [https:// doi. org/ 10.1177/ 1440783319835958](https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319835958).