Alternative Programming

First I want to thank Kris and Scott for this time tonight. What I want to discuss carries on from previous SEAC meetings regarding appropriate programming/planning for our students with disabilities. I will be focusing on our students with CP but as you know kids with CP often have more than a physical disability. They often share many of the disabilities represented around the table such as developmental disabilities, communication disabilities and vision and hearing problems to name a few. Although not exclusively, I am referring mostly to our students who have developmental disabilities along with their physical disabilities who are in congregate classes, namely DC classes. Many also have a communication disability as well.

When I considered what I wanted to speak about tonight, I realized that the topic of alternative programming is the tip of the iceberg. Alternative programming is what happens after an educator has identified goals, gathered resources and finally implements an activity with educational value. I wish to talk about the landscape, so to speak, or the mindset that an educator sits down with as she or he begins the planning process.

I am going to suggest to you tonight that we need to ask our educators to look closely at that landscape or the mindset because there are strong indications that there is a disturbing problem.

Over the years as a SEAC rep I have had the opportunity to speak and assist many parents. Recently a family I support told me of an incident that happened to their son. With the permission of the parent, I am going to basically give you a direct quote. The student and his class were going on a field trip.

“When I found out my son’s class was going on a trip to Chicopee Tube park (the morning of the trip and without my prior knowledge or consent) I phoned the school to express my concerns because my son uses a wheelchair, is non-verbal and is medically fragile. He can’t participate in such a high risk activity. I was told that there would be alternate programming there for those students who were not tubing. I was also lead to believe that there was an area where students could have their personal needs met. What I found out at the end of the day from the nurse who assists my son was that there was no alternative programming, my son was the only student not tubing and he sat all day in the chalet with nothing to do. On top of that there were no changing facilities so he was not changed for the entire time at the tube park.” WRDSB parent

There is so much to comment upon with this but first I must say that while this is one family’s story it echo many families experiences, that is, it is far from an isolated event…… now……let me summarize with five points

1. The parents were not aware of the trip until the morning of.
2. The class’s activity was such that it excluded the student from the very start.

3. The parents were misled through the use of language that there were other students not participating.

4. There was no alternative programming. Straight and simply...there was no alternative programming.

5. There was no place to toilet the student so the student was not changed for the entire time.

I have several more parent statements that I will share with you. I am going to again read them as direct quotes with permission from the parents.

“When the class goes on a trip to the theater, my child is never changed because there are no changing facilities.” WRDSB parent

“We keep our child at home when school trips are planned to places where they can’t be toileted. It is just easier that way.” WRDSB parent

“I have walked into my son’s class several times to find him in the class with only his nurse staring out the window while the other kids are out and about in the school.” WRDSB parent

“My son lies on a bed in the classroom for an hour each day for pressure relief. Yes, he needs a position change to prevent pressure sores, but he does not need to lie down for an entire hour each day.” WRDSB parent

“On school trips, the school never has the accessible bus and my son has to go by himself on a mobility plus bus. This is very isolating for him.” WRDSB parent

To further my request for us to ask our educators to give thought to the landscape wherein the planning begins let me read several statements from WRDSB staff to parents. Again I quote with permission from parents.

When a parent expressed concern about a field trip to a location without changing facilities the response from the – Spec. Ed. Consultant was “It is only for a few hours.”

Here’s are few more:

“We have never had a problem, in all the years that I have been a teacher” – said a teacher to a parent who asked a similar question about going on trips to places without changing facilities.
“Usually we just double diaper them when we go on field trips.” Said a WRDSB Staff person to a parent who also had concerns regarding participating in field trips where they are no change facilities.

“If he doesn’t go on the trip he won’t be changed until everyone comes back because all the EA’s are on the field trip” - Staff person to parent who was concerned about having her child’s personal needs met.

We could spend time talking these statements--surely the dignity factor of toileting promptly is alarming but on a broader scale...

1. Class trips and programming are planned that exclude some members of the class
2. Sometimes the exclusion begins with separating the student completely on route.
3. Parents are mislead about the trips.
4. There is a huge problem with communication. Some students are not able to come home and tell parents what happened at school or what’s coming up so parents depend on school to be open and honest. They are not being so.
5. Nurses are being left with students as if they were EA’s and implementing programs which they are not.
6. Class trips are planned to places where some students can’t be toileted for the duration of the trip.
7. Students are being double diapered as if this was a solution!

ok, I do wish to say a little more about these last two points...

*demonstration of double diapering (double briefing)

A class trip for a regular stream class would never be planned to a place that had no washroom facilities. It is not ok to sit in a soiled brief because it is only for a few hours. It is unfair that one group of students has access to toileting facilities that meet their needs while another group is not given access and is expected to sit in a soiled brief until they return to school

Human dignity, respect and more basically, health considerations, are being compromised.
• We need a policy that we don’t go on trips to places where students have no access to washrooms or a change area. (I have worked with the school in arranging areas for kids to be changed – this is something that can often be worked out).

• We need to make sure the activities of a trip includes activities for everyone. That is, that no student is left behind.

• We need to make sure trips don't segregate students. Students should not have to travel by themselves because they use a wheelchair. If there are no wheelchair accessible buses then a small group of students can travel with the individual on the mobility plus bus.

Programming in self-contained classes should reflect the needs of all the students. A DC class typically used to have students with only a developmental disability. The classes now have students with a wide variety of exceptionalities: behaviour, ASD, FASD, physical disabilities, multiple exceptionalities etc. yet the programming is not set up for such a range of abilities and needs. When an educator sits down to plan he/she must begin with the whole class in mind...challenge her/himself to find ways that meet the needs of every student. Start with a landscape that is inclusive of every member of the class. It may be that self-contained classes can no longer meet the needs of such a diverse group of abilities and the needs of the individual may be better met in a regular class, with support, this would almost reflect the typical world of a person with a disability (i.e., a small segment of the overall population).

It is a landscape of unthoughtful accepted discrimination that leads to such unacceptable outcomes. Some parents have said to me that they don't like feeling that their child is the problem...that he/she is to be blamed for ‘ruining’ it for others because of their needs.

I looked at this issue mainly in terms of trips but unfortunately, this issue is one that begins when the planning begins so encompasses all aspects of the learning environment.

We have to change the landscape to one that recognizes the needs of all students.

The solutions are there. We just need acknowledge the problem.

A normal fluid intake is between 1500-2000 cc's (50-70 oz.) per day, which should produce 1200-1500 cc's (40-50 oz.) of urine output. The normal bladder capacity before you feel any sensation of urge is about 300 cc's (10 oz.).