**LEAP Project Report**

**Kerry Sweeney October, 2011, Windsor Ontario**

**BACKGROUND:**

In 2011, I travelled to Canada and visited schools and institutions that support students and young people in Greater Essex and Niagara School Boards. I also attended professional learning opportunities. The Greater Essex County Board has 61 elementary schools and 16 secondary schools.

I visited the following educational settings:

* University of Windsor – This is the local university and spoke with a number of people from the Education team.
* Maryville – This is a Section 23 setting where children and young people can be admitted if there are behaviour or mental health concerns. It is a residential setting.
* RCC – A Regional Crisis Centre attached to the hospital. Neuropsychologists work with students and their families. There are 2 Section 23 classes.
* Glenberry Unit – 6 classrooms for students who cannot function in a regular school. Students remain in residences for 6 months and are then repatriated back to their home schools.
* Gainsborough Public School – A small rural school near Niagara Falls. The school celebrates its EQAO results.
* Beamsville Secondary School – This school had a range of support classes. Students can remain until they are 21. IEPs are developed in consultation with specialists.
* Western Secondary School – This school has a number of special education classes. It has a high number of exclusions and suspensions. Students have access to a youth guidance officer, youth workers and a student success teacher. They have established stricter guidelines for movement about the school and utilise youth workers and educational assistants to provide close supervision of students, monitor students and provide social skills training. They have modified the school day from 8:00am – 2:00pm. Period 1, breakfast, Period 2 and 3, lunch and then Period 4.
* John McGivney Childrens’ Centre – This is a section 68 school for students who need medical treatment as well as a school. Students access therapists on site. Some students had full time carers. Students who are medically fragile could stay there the whole of their school careers. Consultants support fragile students in mainstream schools.
* A.V. Graham School – This is a high school that has special education classes. I.E.P.s have curriculum focus. Students monitor their own learning through visual timetables and learning prompts. Some classes had 3 adults in them. The snoezlin room was very calming.
* Greater Essex County Board – I met with a huge number of support personnel: speech patholgists, occupational therapists, psychologists. They are based at the Board Office and provide support to schools.
* Pelee Island School – This school has 12 students K-12. The older students work on line and are supervised by teachers at the school.
* Vista School – This is a brand new K-12 school. There was a focus on building school culture and developing plans for student learning. Creative ways are found to release teachers during school time for professional learning and discussion.
* David Suzuki School – This school has been purpose built using sustainable principles. Classrooms were well resourced. Learning systems were not innovative. The teacher of the special needs classes uses her friends and the Internet to seek solutions for her students.
* Southwood school – This school has a GAINS class. There were 5 people in the room. One was a nurse who was there for a tube fed student. The class was very structured. Students had some responsibility with monitoring their learning. Each student had their own learning plan.
* Riverside School – This school has a GAINS class. Students use interactive technologies. This was the only class where I saw an IWB in use. Students have learning plans and are trained to be responsible for their own learning.

**The questions I asked when I visited educational settings were:**

Do School and District Board Improvement Plans have targets for Special Education students?

How do teachers plan and assess for learning for students with special needs?

How do teachers track and report student achievement over time?

How are teachers trained to support students with special needs?

**OBSERVATIONS:**

Most educators acknowledged my questions but gave me a standard response or evaded the questions.

Board and school plans have targets for EQAO results.

Teachers plan learning for special needs students in consultation with parents, health care professionals and educational assistants. I.E.P.s are completed three times per year. Parent’s sign off on the plan.

The Board provides educational assistants, nurses and access to psychologists, speech pathologists and social workers.

**Curriculum and Reporting**

There is a provincial Curriculum. County Boards develop alternative curriculum for special education students. Student Reports and Individual Education Plans are standardised across the province.

**EQAO Testing**

* In Ontario, all students sit the EQAO tests in grade 3,6,9 and 10.
* Board and School Plans set targets for students achievement in EQAO tests.
* Schools publish their students’ achievements in relation to the tests.
* Accommodations are made for students with special needs.
* Most students with significant special needs are exempted from the tests.
* The focus of the testing and its relationship to school improvement plans, is for regular students.

**Learning for All**

There is a strong focus on reaching every student through focussed intervention.

There is a goal to reach every student based on teachers:

* knowing their students,
* knowing where their students are in their learning,
* knowing where their students need to go in their learning, and
* knowing how to get them there.

Assessment is seen as pivotal to reaching every student. There are three processes of assessment:

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| * For learning | Teachers know “where students are” as they begin the learning cycle.  Teachers know if students are “getting it” while they are still learning and can take action to improve. | The purpose is to plan instruction, build collaborative learning partnerships, provide descriptive feedback and determine when students are ready to move on to new learning. |
| * As learning | Students know “where I am” as they begin the learning cycle.  Students know if they are “getting it”.  Students learn how to “get it” better. | The purpose is to ensure students know where to begin learning, learning is monitored and descriptive feedback is provided, learning goals and next steps are set. |
| * Of learning | All parties know if the student “got it”. | The purpose is to determine levels of student achievement and the next steps for learning as well as reporting student progress. |

**Teacher Training discussion at Windsor University**

Two lecturers reported that all teacher trainees are trained in assessing students, all students sit the EQAO tests, progress is tracked but students with special needs are exempted from the tests. Teacher trainees can do three special education modules on line. When I persisted with questioning about whether the courses covered assessment of, planning for and tracking student progress – there was some prevarication and I got a sense that they had not previously thought about the question.

**Special Education training provide through the Board**

Teachers engage in professional learning. This is part of their performance appraisal and included in their professional learning plans. Teachers can complete on-line courses through the local university. The Board also provides training.

**School Support Personnel provided from the Board**

Schools are supported by speech pathologists and language disorder specialists who assess students and support teachers. Speech pathologists work with teachers to track and plan growth.

The Board provides psychological services to the school. Psychologists are not teachers. They support schools with risk assessments, return to school plans, suspensions and expulsions and placement of students.

The Board provides social workers to schools. They are not teachers. They offer a team approach and help schools deal with threats to student learning and engagement.

High schools may have a resource officer and a police officer allocated to their schools.

Diversity officers support schools. The drop out rate and teen pregnancy has been significantly reduced. They run after school programs at local community centres.

The board provides schools with educational assistants based on the number of special needs students in the school. They are allocated to the school not to a specific student.

**Special Education programs**

A range of programs are offered including STEPS, GAINS and K Courses.

STEPS (Skills To Enhance Personal Success) classes are in secondary schools. They are full day self contained programs for students with profound and complex needs. There are 17 classes across 19 schools.

GAINS (Giving Attention to Individual Needs) classes are in elementary schools. They are full day self contained programs for students with profound and complex needs. There are 21 classes across 61 schools.

These programs operate in schools and provide individualised learning plans and pathways for students. I observed this happening in classrooms.

Character building is incorporated into I.E.P.s to encourage students to advocate for themselves.

**Assessment processes used for special education students**

DIBELLS – This assesses early literacy skills and can be administered by teachers. There are multiple forms and assessing over time using this kit was considered to be easy.

OPEA – This was an assessment project run by the board. It involved action research and the publication of a resource guide.

The Carolina Curriculum – This is an assessment and intervention program designed for use with young children from birth to five years who have mild to severe disabilities. It is a criterion-referenced system that links assessment with intervention.

F.I.S.H. – The Functional Independent Skills Handbook offers assessment and 421 specific behaviour plans for the domains of adaptive behaviour, sensorimotor, social development, speech and language.

HELP – The Hawaiian Early Years Learning Profile is a criterion referenced test used for curriculum planning.

**The Board is commitment to supporting students with special needs.**

There is a Superintendent of Special Education. She is supported by a Supervising Principal. Every school I visited talked with confidence about the level of support they received.

The Greater Essex County Board Web Site provides the following information: “We are committed to fulfilling our Board’s Mission statement of providing “learning opportunities which support, challenge, and inspire all students to achieve their full potential and enable them to participate meaningfully in their communities. We are also committed to the Ministry of Education’s three key priorities:

• Increased Student Achievement

• Reduced Gaps in Student Achievement

• Increased Confidence in Publicly Funded Education”.

Their focus “is to reduce the gaps in student achievement and our commitment to assisting our administrators in early identification and early interventions for students, impacts how the Special Education department will be deploying human resources. As our system moves to more differentiated learning for our students based on their individual needs, our tiered system of providing support, and more precise data on student achievement, we are carefully examining our delivery of programs and services within the Special Education department on an ongoing basis. By examining our delivery of service, it will ensure that we meet with new legislation requirements, will respond to shifts in the classroom “assessment for” learning model, and will maintain an intense focus on learning for all of our students.”

**Unions**

Principals are not members of the union. The union has brokered a collective agreement for 1 staff meeting a month for professional development. Schools get creative with how they can get people together during school time. Superintendents negotiate with union officials about introducing anything that a teacher could deem as increasing their work load.

**FINDINGS**

Students with profound and complex needs are catered for in mainstream school settings.

Principals reported a high degree of support from the Superintendent and the Supervising Principal.

The Board provides schools with Educational Assistants. These assistants co-teach and co-plan with classroom teacher.

Every teacher in every classroom talked positively about their class, their school and seemed confident about supporting their students.

The Greater Essex Board Plan for Growing Success has some elements that would be useful to think about. Specifically, the expectations for assessment and differentiation in planning for teaching.