

As parents of complex special-needs kids, we know inclusive education doesn't work

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Toronto-based parents Phil Richmond and Hayley Avruskin have two children with complex disabilities. They are part of the Congregated School Parent Network, which supports GTA-based congregated schools.

In our experience, inclusion - a system which seeks to include special needs students in regular classrooms - does not work for complex special-needs students (those, for example, with multiple disabilities or who are medically fragile); however, it can work for moderate special-needs students (for example, students with certain learning disabilities.) A congregated school is a special purpose school, specifically designed and staffed with willing educators to provide children who have complex disabilities with a safe place to learn, to develop community and to thrive.

The truth is that both camps have their place in education. They are not competing philosophies; they are complementary. And they just need to agree to get along.

A recent feature by The Globe and Mail asked “Are inclusive classrooms failing students?” The question was somewhat rhetorical, as the student at the centre of the article was excluded from his school. No one should be satisfied with a child, of any ability, being denied a place of belonging in education. Period.

Congregated schools have been derided as “segregated” and thought of as backward, by the inclusion camp. In May of 2017, the Special Education Advisory Committee tabled an incendiary resolution that all so-called segregated schools be discontinued.

After a well-reasoned response from the congregated camp, SEAC withdrew the resolution and reconciliation began. Educational debates are always lightning rods for opinion: The tide of opinion changed when the SEAC council heard real parents passionately and logically explaining that congregated schools were the best place for their children.

In Ontario, we use the term congregated – not segregated – classrooms. University of Western Ontario professor Jacqueline Specht, also the director of the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education, used the word “segregated” in The Globe’s report. This is problematic for complex-needs kids and their parents: The origin of this term seems to be from U.S. inclusion researchers who keep using this inflammatory word with its Deep South origins. It is an offensive term. “Segregated” should be shelved beside the word “retarded.” It should not be used in tenured ivory towers – or research.

We know that atypical families living with complex disability have a lot on their plates; if the school system is failing them, too, the plate gets even more crowded.

As our kids entered school, the board was pushing inclusion as a blanket feel-good policy – including for complex-needs kids. Their view was that our kids would function as a beacon of empathy for typical kids in regular classrooms. We didn’t see that as a priority for our children, and the research on which inclusion was built had its flaws.

We learned about congregated schools – where the necessary safety, support, accessibility and willing educators welcomed kids such as ours – from friends. Thankfully congregated schools continue to be a strong option for parents like us. For complex students such as our children, inclusive classrooms just don’t work. This is where congregated solutions can complement, and help situations facing families living with complex (and behavioural) disability.

Dr. Sprecht’s perspective that, for special-needs children, we should really be looking at “what’s causing that behaviour, and how [to] stop that behaviour” is also troubling to us. If only it were that simple. Autism is not simple – this comes from our first-hand experience. Inclusion camp researchers may need to adapt and accept that trying to push square (i.e. autism, and complex needs) pegs into their round inclusion holes might not be the proper model.

As Toronto District School Board director John Malloy said, “We want to serve each and every student in the most inclusive way possible ... there will always be a number who need a special program.” The TDSB Equity Plan and Strategic Plan continue to support a commitment to congregated schools – and inclusion. There is middle ground. For example, congregated schools practise “accessible inclusion,” in which students from other schools come to our schools and interact with our students on-site. This is necessary for the medical and accessibility safety of their students.

The Canadian Medical Association says it believes that bigger waves of atypical families are coming, and the children’s complexity is certainly increasing. Provincial ministries of education and health, school boards and academics will need to adapt, and to allocate proper resources to a wide range of solutions.

Congregated setting schools with proper supports, staff and accommodations seem to be the logical place to gain a true understanding into complex special-needs children. Rather than consider these schools outliers, we need to embrace them for the wealth of social research-and-development opportunity and learning that they contain.

Inclusion is still a dream that exists well outside of our children’s reality. We have come to respect that inclusion and congregation camps should co-exist and complement the ever-complex range of students in our education system. Preserving parental choice and doing what is best for our children continue to rule the day.