Are special needs really 'the problem'? Why class composition measures won't work and where we need to look instead

Dawn Steele, Vancouver Parents for Successful Inclusion • April 2011

A recent landmark decision by the BC courts, and the expulsion of a 6-year old Langley student deemed a threat to his teachers, have revived a debate over using "class composition" caps to limit the number of students with formal special needs labels in any class. The BCTF has fought for such caps for years and the BC government bought into this approach in 2008, with bipartisan support for former Education Minister Shirley Bond's Bill 33, the class size and composition act that's proved to be flawed and unworkable.

There are several problems with 'class composition" solutions, as outlined below

1. The math just doesn't work in the real world.

Incidence rates for formal special needs designations average around 10% in BC (that is less than international averages, so BC is under-diagnosing, if anything). In some BC communities (generally those with higher poverty & social challenges) that ratio can be 20% or more. At my son's high school, 16% of students have formal special needs labels (and 5-10% more have various "grey area" issues that don't get a formal ministry label). Almost 70% are from homes where English is not the first language. And 12% are kids in government care.

With an average class size of 25, even if those kids were perfectly distributed, the best our school could do with current funding is 4 formally-designated special needs kids per class, plus another 5 -10 challenging students (depending on how much the various categories overlap).

2. Prohibitive cost

Our school has just over 1,000 students. To comply with a fixed cap of 3 designated kids, we'd have to hire at least 13 more fulltime teachers at a cost of well over $1 million annually. (Again, this assumes our 160 designated kids are perfectly evenly distributed - in reality, "lumpy" distribution means we'd actually need more extra teachers than that to comply.) And this still doesn't address manageability issues posed by the ESL, kids in care, grey-area kids, bored kids etc (which can be considerable - many teachers have assured me the challenges posed by my child's ASD are the least of her worries!)

You don't need to multiply this out province-wide to see it would cost hundreds of millions for a fix that only addresses part of the class composition challenge. In some cases, the three labeled students might actually pose little or no extra challenge to a skilled teacher, so we'd be paying extra to reduce classes that were never unmanageable.

[Ironically, this issue may finally force the BC government to admit that special needs enrolment has actually been rising, not falling along with broader enrolment in the past decade, as they have misleadingly claimed. So while the courts have now rightfully ruled that as the former education minister, Christy Clark acted illegally when she unilaterally stripped the old BCTF contract limits of 2 designated students per class in 2002, the feasibility of reinstating those limits is now less than ever.]

3. Costs of inclusion vs. special classes

So why not remove the students with special needs and put them in special classes? In some limited situations, that's exactly what you should do because it makes sense for the student and everyone else. But if you're doing this at any scale with the intention of actually teaching them (as opposed to just warehousing them to cut costs) it's not going to provide any savings – indeed it's likely to increase overall costs.

Students with special needs are as different from each other as they are from typical students, so they will still need IEPs and individualized attention. Students with severe behavior often have complex and overlapping challenges that require intensive and personalized intervention, no matter where you place them. Place them together in a "special class" and they will distract and teach each other problem behaviours, so you're creating even more problems to fix. And because this also requires schools and boards to run two education systems in parallel instead of one, it adds further costs (e.g. bussing and admin). When I researched this some years ago, available studies indicated costs were about the same for separate vs. inclusive education.

4. Benefits and legal rights

Years of research support the benefits of inclusive education and of integrated placement for most students with special needs most of the time. While many BC districts, including Vancouver, do indeed segregate students with special needs in second-class special ed classes just to cut costs, these solutions cannot stand up to legal scrutiny, and only persist where parents and guardians don't have the resources or knowledge to challenge them. (BCACL has more information on the strong legal foundation for inclusion rights.)

Rising interest in programs like French Immersion, where classes rarely include students with special needs or ESL challenges, reflect a widespread conviction among parents (and some teachers) that typical kids achieve greater academic success in classrooms where teachers are not distracted by needy students. But there is no evidence that this is true. Indeed, a recent SFU study found no statistical difference in academic outcomes for "typical" students in integrated classes that included special needs vs. those who had no special needs students in their classes. While designated students usually do require more attention, the degree varies enormously. They also tend to bring more of a focus on alternate learning strategies to the classroom, which can result in net benefits for non-designated students as well.

Getting to the roots of the problem

So what's the answer? First, let's review what has happened to special education services over a decade of cuts, as challenging students have increasingly been targeted as "the problem."

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In Vancouver, caseloads for special education teachers have risen by 76% since 2001. Larger high schools like ours have a single special education resource teacher left, whose job it is to support all integrated classes (each designated student has up to 8 different teachers/classes, so this means hundreds of classes). Smaller schools now get by with a single resource teacher who's playing multiple roles, who writes IEPs off the side of her desk, files them away to satisfy ministry auditors and no longer has time to actually offer any support or intervention to the students on her caseload (which in some schools can be over 100). Often these resource teachers have no special education training – indeed, inexperienced teachers with no seniority rights are often the only ones willing to take these thankless jobs.

As a district, Vancouver used to have dozens of district specialists (inclusion consultants, literacy consultants, behavior support workers, psychologists and various therapists) who served schools and individual students/classrooms as needed. They have almost all been cut. When my child started 12 years ago, Vancouver had an entire multi-disciplinary team of specialists just for autism. We're now down to 2 inclusion consultants for all 5,000 special needs students district-wide.

At the provincial level, we have excellent resource programs like POPARD (Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders) which can provide advice and support for challenging students. But funding is so limited that most teachers don't even know these supports exist.

Solutions

1. Restore supports

Instead of hiring a small army of extra classroom teachers to make artificial class composition limits work, we need to accept that classrooms must reflect the underlying student demographics – as the mandate of public education requires – and instead invest a portion of that in restoring school, district and provincial specialists who can assist regular classroom teachers, as and where needed, to cope with all diverse needs and all challenging students.

2. Holistic responses

By offering learning supports to reasonably-sized inclusive classes, educators can now start looking holistically at all the unique needs of a particular classroom and invest in broad support strategies that help all vulnerable students in the class, vs. simply assigning a part- or full-time aide with no professional guidance or case management to shadow the kid with autism – which has come to typify the costly but not-very-effective-on-its-own special education response.

3. Training & mentoring

Invest in training, mentoring and collaboration time to better equip regular teachers with strategies to manage diverse classrooms. We need to finally challenge the universities to change their teacher training programs, after years or talk and no action. It's ludicrous in a province as diverse as ours that

the vast majority of teachers are graduated, certified and hired despite having ***no*** training in special education, ESL learning or even having taken a basic generic course on teaching to diverse classrooms.

4. Early assessment and intervention

Given rising incidence of issues like behaviour and learning disabilities, people are rightly questioning how much is being manufactured by our schools' failure of vulnerable but perfectly capable children in the early years. How much could we save in the long run by getting them on track from the start?

5. Cross-ministry integration

Former MCFD Minister Tom Christensen laid a strong foundation for leveraging the effectiveness of publicly-funded supports to vulnerable children based on functional assessment of needs and breaking down ministry silos to support more cross-ministry integration and collaboration. Many of the challenges in class composition relate to other ministry portfolios (social challenges of children growing up in poverty, kids in care and pre-school/out-of-school supports for families of students with special needs, mental health, diagnosis and assessment, immigrant settlement issues).

To date, much of the collaboration happening across ministries with regard to vulnerable children has been restricted to communication among senior level bureaucrats. What's lacking are investments in community-based mechanisms (and release time) to help classroom teachers, school or district administrators, social workers, mental health program staff, etc. to get together, pool resources and design collective responses to the challenges of vulnerable students, based on the unique needs of schools, classrooms and local communities.

Conclusion

A public school system has an obligation to address the educational needs of all students, not just the easy ones. Just like the healthcare system can't turn away complex patients in order to improve the quality of care for regular folks. And an effective system is designed around the reality of its client base. Instead of designing classrooms around the needs of some mythical "typical" student, which is the premise of the class composition cap approach, BC's education authorities have to come at this problem from an entirely different perspective and start confronting the reality of the student population we have and not the one we wish we had.

I don't have all the answers – no one does. But given the will and the opportunity, the solutions are within our collective reach.