

## **Pondering the Obstacles to Inclusive Schools** **Bendina Miller, President of CACL**



I retired as Superintendent of Schools in BC's Rocky Mountain School District in July 2010. In the months since, I've reflected on my 42 years in education and am struck by a number of questions. I had the good fortune of teaching students in grades 1 to 12 and in working in 4 provinces, both in school districts and with Ministries of Education.

Even before entering the profession I had a passion for inclusion and had the good fortune of working with and learning from colleagues and families who shared my passion. As such, I have been witness to outstanding educators, supported by dedicated families, who have enabled students to learn together and achieve tremendous success.

Thus, my questions –

- *If we know that inclusion can mean success for all students then why don't we include all students?*
- *Why do school districts continue to operate segregated schools, resource rooms and educational settings which exclude students who have been identified as having a disability?*
- *What can we do to make the difference?*

While my questions may seem pessimistic, I continue to feel great optimism about achieving an inclusive future. That optimism is based on Canada's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Canada ratified the Convention on March 11, 2010 and with that ratification 10 provinces, 3 territories and the federal government have stated their support for the Convention which includes Article 24, The Right to Education.

In agreeing to the Convention Canada has a moral obligation to 'ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning .... enabling persons with disabilities to participate in a free society.' Article 24 goes on to set expectations that children with disabilities have the right to attend school in the communities in which they live and that reasonable accommodations must be provided to ensure effective education. In addition, the Convention states that measures must be taken to employ educators who have appropriate qualifications and that continuing professional training must be provided to ensure support for persons with disabilities.

***So, with the powerful support of the UN Convention why do we still have school districts, supported by provincial/territorial governments, placing students in segregated environments?***

One explanation could be that school districts and possibly governments aren't even aware of the Convention and the moral obligation to inclusive education that it brings.

- I would suggest that we can make a difference by bringing the UN Convention - Article 24, to the attention of our governments, school districts and educators in our local schools.
- I would suggest that if inclusive education is a reality in our schools we could provide recognition that they are, in fact, meeting the expectations set out in the Convention.

If, on the other hand, inclusion has not been achieved it could support efforts to draw the district's attention to the rights outlined in Article 24. I firmly believe that, together, we can make the difference. I also firmly believe that we can only make the difference by continuing to be strong, active advocates in sharing the power of the UN Convention with our community partners. It's about shifting attitudes and building confidence that inclusive education is a right and that with the appropriate supports it is successful and results in improved education for all students.